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Relations with Russia in The Context of Turkey's Policy in Constructing its 'Strategic Autonomy'

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ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, the Turkish government has been seeking strategic autonomy in international relations by trying different foreign policy styles. Throughout that time, Turkey strongly prioritized its own interests in relations with other regional and global powers, and pursued a multilateral and balanced policy, seeing it as a window for more opportunities to maneuver in foreign policy. Part of Turkey's approach to strategic autonomy relied on hedging, even if it resulted in the emergence of asymmetric relations with others. For example, Turkey developed not always economically and politically symmetric relations with Russia that had strong implications for the Middle East, South Caucasus, Black Sea region and Central Asia. On 24 February 2022, after Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, Turkey did not join in with Western sanctions against Russia, and instead attempted to mediate between Kyiv and Moscow. This decision was not spontaneous, as it was premised on years of building and strengthening bilateral ties with Russia, despite some devastating incidents between the two. This article is an inquiry into the search for strategic autonomy in Turkey's foreign policy with a focus on its relations with Russia.

Keywords: AKP, Erdoğan, Eurasianism, hedging, role theory, strategic culture, Turkish foreign policy

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Introduction

In 2002, after the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rise to power, the concept of 'strategic autonomy' became a part of the heated debate on Turkey's positioning in the international system. The AKP's fondness for the idea had already been demonstrated in voting against the use of Turkey's airspace during the United States (US) invasion of Iraq, when it was put to the vote in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in 2003. It was then that traditionally strong relations between Ankara and Washington started to show cracks, as the Turkish political elite was not supportive of the US operation in Iraq. After

President Barack Obama's (2008-2016) time in office, the US and Turkey tried to mend their differences within the framework of the 'Model Partnership', but soon the states again found themselves polarized due to their conflicts of interest in the Middle East.

For the past two decades, Turkey has exhibited a clash of its national interests with the US-led NATO, especially in the Black Sea region, Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East, by how it positioned itself with regards to the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 and the Arab Spring. That caused problems in bilateral military cooperation. At first, Turkey tried to acquire US Patriot missile systems, and when unsuccessful, attempted to redirect its collaboration effort toward China, eventually purchasing Russia's S-400 defensive missile systems. Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government, various discourses of Turkey's foreign policy, such as 'Strategic Depth', 'zero problems with neighbors', 'the world is larger than five', 'Vision 2023-53-71', and the 'Century of Turkey' ambition to enter the list of top-10 economically developed nations – all that was developed under the grand discourse of a sovereign nation. In all those sub-discourses under their respective slogans and policies, a special place was given to Turkey's relations with its neighbors and within its sphere of geopolitical influence. Meanwhile, Turkey fought to earn a reputation as a state with an ability to make independent decisions in the regions where it operates.

The article hypothesizes that Russia has a role to play in defining 'strategic autonomy in Turkey's foreign policy, as the way Russia-Turkey relations have unfolded, provided Ankara with enough support to stand up for its interests vis-à-vis the West and at times even to join Russia in its anti-Western political orientation. The major research question is therefore if these relations indeed have played such a role in Turkey attaining strategic autonomy during AKP rule, or whether those were just unrelated ad hoc political accommodations.

In this research, we first outline the concepts of 'strategic culture', 'role theory', and 'strategic autonomy', from the perspective of the constructivist theory of International Relations. We suggest that for a better understanding of what 'strategic autonomy' is about, we need to look at it in the context of 'role theory' and 'strategic culture', because they are essentially intertwined. Accordingly, in the next section, the article explores how the Turkish political elite perceives the concept of 'strategic autonomy'. Finally, the authors explore the importance of Turkey's relations with Russia in constructing the 'strategic autonomy' discourse, with some attention given to Russia's position on the same concept, and its expression in foreign policy rhetoric. There is discussion of Russian-Turkish technological, trade, and defense cooperation, with a further focus on their interaction in the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Our major interest is to investigate what actual input Russia has had in the advancement of Turkey's strategic autonomy, and what effects it has had on regional and global levels of the international system, although establishing those connections remains a difficult task.

Development of 'Strategic Autonomy' and 'Strategic Culture': Debates in International Relations Literature

The constructivist theory of International Relations looks at the way that states establish a relationship between historical memory (knowledge) and current foreign policy, from the perspective of 'strategic culture'. In particular, countries with a historical background as great

powers tend to have the belief that they owe their privileged position of 'strategic culture' to the history of their relations with their immediate surroundings and the world at large.

In the process of formation of a state's foreign policy behavior, accumulation of knowledge from history, and the way of interpreting that history, experiences, beliefs, and the overall culture are important components.¹ Ghalehdar suggests that strategic culture rooted in these deep-seated convictions is the basis that provides information about the purpose and means of the outward behavior of the group (a nation in our case).² In international relations, it becomes meaningful for states to pursue strategic autonomy, when their interests and spheres of influence are acknowledged and respected by other states. They believe that their behavior and interests have a role to play in their foreign policy, which is formed based on their historical interest and along a cultural axis. These states act with a belief in their historical interests in foreign policy, and instead of collective interests, they emphasize self-centered ones. In order to realize these interests within the framework of 'strategic culture', states need to take on an active role in the international arena.

In constructivist theories of International Relations, whether viewed from the perspective of systemic or societal debates, the concepts of 'strategic culture' and role theory are mutually endorsing. In the process of socialization in international relations, states adopt roles for themselves based on their internal social structures in different ways, such as that of a superpower, regional power, anti-imperialist state, defender of the faith, etc.³ According to role theory, they test validity of the adopted role through a relationship with others, legitimizing those relationships and their foreign policy behavior.⁴ At the same time, "perception of the national role provides a roadmap for decision-makers to understand and simplify complex political reality".⁵ Holsti, who applies role theory to foreign policy and state interests in international relations, emphasizes that the positioning that countries choose for themselves is informed by their social realities and national identities.⁶ Therefore, we tend to uphold the social view according to which a state already gets into the international arena through its own identity rather than, as per the structuralist approach, it getting this identity defined in the process of interacting with others.⁷

In addition to the discussions on 'strategic culture' and 'role theory', the more specific concept of 'strategic autonomy' has been gaining popularity in explaining foreign policy of individual states, while also being used as a practical framework for goal-setting by particular

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- 1 Jolyon Howorth, "Differentiation in Security and Defence Policy", *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 17, No 2, 2019, p. 264.
 - 2 Payam Ghalehdar. *Why a Common EU Strategic Culture is Neither Necessary nor Desirable*, London, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and LSE Ideas Europe Programme, 2021, p. 20.
 - 3 Kalevi J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in The Study of Foreign Policy". *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1970, p. 239.
 - 4 Ditmer Lowel, and Samuel S. Kim, "In Search of a Theory of National Identity", Ditmer Lowel and Samuel S. Kim (eds.), *China's Quest for National Identity*, Ithaca-NY, Cornell University Press, 1993. p. 15.
 - 5 Yücel Bozdağlıoğlu, "Konstruktivizm ve Rol Teorisi: Kimlik, Rol ve Dış Politika Analizi", Tayyar Arı (eds.), *Uluslararası İlişkilerde Postmodern Analizler-1, Kimlik, Kültür, Güvenlik ve Dış Politika*, Bursa, MKM Yayıncılık, 2012, p. 193.
 - 6 Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in The Study of Foreign Policy", p. 237.
 - 7 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 227.

states.⁸ In fact, the notions of ‘strategic culture’ or ‘strategic autonomy’ and ‘role theory’ are applied around the presumption that states bring their cultural background into foreign policy decision-making, and give ultimate priority to their own security interests rather than being oriented at collective interests of any kind.

The discourse on ‘strategic autonomy’ has been most developed in EU documents like the Global Strategy of 2016, and is initially known from the European context, since the EU started to include the term in its foreign policy concepts – at supranational and national levels of the member-states. Morrow defines autonomy as “a degree to which [a state] pursues desired changes in the status-quo”.⁹ This goes in contrast with security, which rather refers to the preservation of the status quo. We would like to rely on the broader definition of autonomy of states as their freedom to make foreign policy decisions at their own will and thereby ability to put resources at their own disposal,¹⁰ thus including preservation of the status-quo in the possible foreign policy choices [of a state], or simply as the “exercise of choice driven purely by sovereign considerations and interest”.¹¹

The discourse on ‘strategic autonomy’ might have different interpretations and genesis depending on the case in point. Asmolov and Solovev emphasize the need to consider the evolution and continuity of political ideas, when studying how the state exhibits its approach toward strategic autonomy,¹² which is an endorsement of our introduction to the strategic culture discourse.

One of the central components of the strategic autonomy approach is how a state looks at the possibility of alliances, or behaves in existing ones. For states that aim to achieve strategic autonomy, the approach to alliances might be extra-cautious. For example, for India, an alliance with the US might be seen more as a threat to the country’s strategic autonomy rather than as an expansion or a source of larger benefits.¹³ At the same time, there are proponents of the idea that alliances can enhance strategic autonomy when a country is facing serious threats.¹⁴

8 Özgür Özdamar, Burak Toygar Halistoprak and İsmail Erkam Sula, “From Good Neighbor to Model: Turkey’s Changing Roles in the Middle East in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 11, No 42, 2014, p. 98-100.

9 James D. Morrow, “Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances”, *American Journal of Political Science*, 1991, p. 908-909.

10 Sichen Li, *Security or Autonomy? Moral Hazard and Intra-Coalition Conflicts*, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Duke University, Department of Political Science, North Carolina, 2018, p. 5.

11 Sreemoy Talukdar, “Vladimir Putin in India: As Russian President Arrives with S-400 deal, New Delhi’s Strategic Autonomy Gets More Skin in Game”, 05 November 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/vladimir-putin-in-india-new-delhi-ready-to-get-more-skin-in-game-show-strategic-autonomy-not-just-moral-principle-5317641.html> (Accessed 27 July 2022).

12 Konstantin V. Asmolov, and Aleksandr V. Solovev, “Strategicheskaya Avtonomiya Respubliki Koreya: Intellektual’naya Khimera Ili Politicheskaya Realnost’?”, *Mezhdunarodnaya Analitika*, Vol. 12, No 2, 2021, p. 52-53.

13 Jeff Smith, “Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-Indian Relations”, 06 November 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/strategic-autonomy-and-u-s-indian-relations>. (Accessed 28 July 2022).

14 Rajesh Rajagopalan, “India’s Strategic Choices: China and the Balance of Power in Asia”, 14 September 2017, <https://carnegieindia.org/2017/09/14/india-s-strategic-choices-china-and-balance-of-power-in-asia-pub-73108> (Accessed 18 July 2022).

Asmolov and Soloviev propose several criteria to define if a state can claim it is strategically autonomous.¹⁵ The major factor, they argue, is cumulative power, ‘political weight’ sufficient to play an independent role in world politics. This weight is composed of military and non-military power (economic, cultural, scientific, communicational), overall authority in the international community, and representation in international institutions.¹⁶ They also suggest that such a characteristic only fits big powers, while for those like Turkey it might be about tactical rather than strategic autonomy. They offer a looser framework for states other than great powers to define if they can claim a degree of strategic autonomy. Among the indicators are: 1) situation when one of the parameters makes other actors reckon with the state (e.g. North Korea – due to possession of nuclear weapons); 2) skill of balancing between superpowers without losing own autonomy (e.g. North Korea between the USSR and China during the Cold War); 3) the unique position of a geopolitical buffer or neutrality decreasing the possibility of conflict.¹⁷

Sometimes, in literature the term ‘hedging’¹⁸ is used to describe situations similar to what might be considered under the term ‘strategic autonomy’ here; however, others would suggest that this strategy is more relevant to smaller states and not to middle powers, as Turkey tends to imagine itself.¹⁹ For example, Kuik defines ‘hedging’ as “insurance-seeking behavior with three attributes: (a) an insistence on not taking sides or being locked into a rigid alignment; (b) attempts to pursue opposite or contradicting measures to offset multiple risks across domains (security, political, and economic); and (c) an inclination to diversify and cultivate a fallback position”.²⁰ While the above as described by Kuik refers to the cases of smaller Southeast Asian states, we acknowledge that Turkey also deploys similar tactics that in turn shape its ‘strategic autonomy’ discourse.

Table 1. Turkey’s vision behind each theoretic construct

Strategic culture	unique ancient culture, part of Muslim and Turkish/Turkic civilization, old and experienced country located between West and East geographically and culturally
Role theory	special mission from history: leader of Muslim/Islamic Civilization
Strategic autonomy	particular interest at the global and regional level

Theorizing about ‘strategic autonomy’ remains in its early stages, and will probably remain a fairly loose concept due to the fluidity of the term and how various states interpret it. With the existing interdependency in the globalized world, despite opposite trends, it might be more prudent to talk about tactical and not strategic autonomy. Especially in what

15 Asmolov, and Solovev, “Strategicheskaya Avtonomiya Respubliki Koreya: Intellektual’naya Khimera Ili Politicheskaya Realnost” p. 54.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Duygu Dersan Orhan, “Strategic Hedging or Alignment? Qatar’s Foreign Policy Toward Iran in the Wake of the Blockade Crisis”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 2023, p. 2.

19 Igor V. Denisov, and Aleksandr Lukin, “Korrektsiya i Khedzhirovaniye”, *Rossiya v Globalnoy Politike*, Vol. 19, No 4, 2021, p. 169.

20 Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Getting Hedging Right: a Small-State Perspective”, *China International Strategy Review*, Vol. 3, No 2, 2021, p. 302.

concerns Turkey, which is eager to demonstrate sovereign decision-making but is bound to navigate through complicated relations with partners in order to cater to its national interests. The following part of our inquiry into Turkey’s strategic autonomy explores the origins and evolution of the discourse within the state. After that, more attention will be given to the role that Russia played in Turkey’s attainment of strategic autonomy.

‘Strategic Autonomy’ in Turkey’s Political Discourse

Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi define ‘strategic autonomy’ as the ability of a country to act freely and independently in the political arena.²¹ If ‘strategic autonomy’ is put here within the scope of the state’s strategic culture, states gain the capacity to act independently in the form of establishing relations with neighbors, and managing these relations in a way suitable to them. However, can we define the strategic culture of a particular country as static and all-embracing, or can there be developments and more compartmentalized definitions for it? There are also different dimensions in which strategic culture may exist, with, for example, a militarist or anti-militarist outlook, different opinions on geopolitical dilemmas such as whether to belong to or side with the East or West.²² In particular, the East-West dilemma is persistent in Turkey’s debate on strategic culture, with questions over expansionist aspirations and Neo-Ottomanism, and discussions over whether Turkey tends to be a European country with ambitions to become an EU member, or is a part of Eurasia.²³ The present-day vision of Turkish strategic culture includes four major currents – Pan-Islamism, Pan-Turkism, Westernism and Eurasianism, where all of them aim at Turkey attaining the status of a great power, at least on the regional scale. Eurasianism, as outlined by Aktürk, is indirectly opposed to integrational visions such as Pan-Islamism, Pan-Turkism, and Westernization, because it includes a pro-Russian vector.²⁴

Yavuz argues that under Erdoğan’s leadership, Turkish foreign policy has passed through three consecutive stages: Europeanization and a market-oriented foreign policy (2002-2010); the Arab Spring and Islamization of foreign policy (2011-2013); and the quest for autonomy and the militarization of foreign policy (2013-present).²⁵ We think that the major breaking point for the last period starts instead from around 2015, – after the coup attempt, the departure of Ahmet Davutoğlu from the forefront of Turkish politics in 2016, and the rupture in Russia-Turkey relations due to the downed airplane, with the subsequent reconciliation around the same time.

However, practically all the different geopolitical orientations still stem from the intellectual debates of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, Turkey’s early Republican period, and the Cold War. All of the four geopolitical approaches, along with Turkey’s

21 Murat Yeşiltaş, and Ferhat Pirinççi, *Türkiye’nin Savunma Politikaları*, Ankara, SETA Yayınları, 2021, p. 85.

22 Jeffrey S. Lantis, “Strategic Culture and National Security Policy”, 2002, p. 111.

23 Ayşe Ömür Atmaca, and Zerrin Torun, “Geopolitical Visions in Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2022, p. 116.

24 Şener Aktürk, “The Fourth Style of Politics: Eurasianism as a Pro-Russian Rethinking of Turkey’s Geopolitical Identity” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 16, No 1, 2015, p. 54-55.

25 Hakan M. Yavuz, “The Motives Behind the AKP’s Foreign Policy: Neo-Ottomanism and Strategic Autonomy”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 23, No 5, 2022, p. 8.

imagination of playing a role of great power in them, are based on differing geographical and geopolitical integration presuppositions – where Pan-Islamism means facing the Muslim world, Pan-Turkism: dealing with the Turkic-speaking world, with Europeanism: staking a claim in the West and Westernization, and Eurasianism: counting on establishing relations with Russia as an ally, and embracing the anti-Western vector of foreign policy.²⁶ Eurasianism as a component of identity, in turn, was a convenient card to play in relations with Russia – based on common history, partial convergence of interests, and mutual respect for sovereignty.²⁷ The former prime minister and foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, talking about ‘strategic depth’ underlined how important this type of multiple projection was in developing good multilateral diplomatic, economic, political, and cultural relations with multiple partners.²⁸ Reflection of this debate on the strategic culture exhibited by Turkey’s government invigorates the search for strategic autonomy in foreign policy.

During the first decade of the AKP being in power (from 2002-2010), interdependence, ‘zero problems with neighbors’ and integration with the EU were the main paradigms and objectives in Turkey’s foreign policy.²⁹ In those years, the political elite that supported Westernization attempted democratization and political liberalization, ending the military tutelage in Turkey and maintained ‘strategic autonomy’ on par with all other priorities.³⁰ In all of its projections, be it the ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy, the Great Turkish Strategy in the Balkans, Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia, evaluation of the region’s cultural background, and a civilizational perspective were always present. Between 2010-2015, Turkey attempted to play the role of mediator or promoter of peace along the regional faultlines – between Israel and Palestine, Israel and Syria, the Iraqi central government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan – all these to establish Turkey’s role as a regional power to reckon with in the respective regions. Erdoğan wanted Turkey’s significance in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia to be recognized by its allies.³¹

The civil war that broke out in the Syrian leg of the Arab Spring in 2011, the arrival of Syrian refugees in large numbers in Turkey, differences of opinion between the West and Ankara over the course of action in the conflict, and the unsuccessful coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, further deepened the dilemmas in its strategic culture. Even while still maintaining a security alliance with the West within NATO, the emergence of serious differences in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, and the attempts by the West to limit Turkey’s leeway of exerting sovereignty in its foreign policy, undermined proponents of the Europeanization stream, and pushed Ankara toward a multi-vector foreign policy.

26 Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, Washington, Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, p.193.

27 Şener Aktürk, “The Fourth Style of Politics”, p. 55.

28 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, İstanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2009, p. 221-224.

29 Yücel Bozdağhoğlu, “Modernity, Identity and Turkey’s Foreign Policy”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 20, No 1, 2008, p. 69.

30 Mustafa Kutlay, and Ziya Öniş, “Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order: ‘Strategic Autonomy’ or New Forms of Dependence?”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 97, No 4, 2021, p. 1097.

31 Ömer Kurtbağ, “Obama Döneminde Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri: Model Ortaklıktan Eksen Kaymasına İniş Çıktılar ve Ayrışan Çıkarlar”, *Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Yönetim Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Vol. 3, No 2, 2015, p. 190.

During the Arab Spring, Turkey tried to present itself to its neighbors as an example of successful democratization and modernization, even with a conservative Islamist government in charge.³² Furthermore, it was doing so from the position of a ‘big brother’,³³ a model Middle Eastern democracy,³⁴ appealing to its ability to act as a bridge between the West and the East. So, by 2011, the rupture between the West and Turkey, and Ankara’s enhanced choice in favor of a multilateral policy, while considering itself a solid middle power, became more evident.

The approach to what is beneficial for Turkey’s strategic autonomy changed after the Arab Spring. If before it was seen through the lens of partnership and interdependency with the West, from 2011 to 2015 the accent was on the Islamization of foreign policy and political hedging, where none of the vectors has supremacy over the others. The relations of the center of the former Ottoman Empire with the peoples that were part of it were built on reliance on the common identity of the Muslim ummah and religious brotherhood³⁵ and that found its projection in Turkey’s approach in the independent era where Ankara evoked religion, language, and the past when building relations with the Turkic and Muslim world.

Expansion of studies on the concept of Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey’s foreign policy, and sympathy toward it in political circles went along with the instruments deemed necessary for building strategic autonomy. This point of view was also desired to be seen as partly to fill the power vacuum that was to occur in the Middle East in the process of The US’s re-orientation toward East Asia.³⁶ There was an expectation that Turkey would not only fill the power vacuum but also promote Western values, and become a sort of a ‘bridge’ country between East and West.³⁷

After the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, the overthrowing of the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule in Egypt by a military coup in 2013, and the civil war in Libya, Turkey’s relations with its Western allies changed due to the drastic divergence of interests. Kurdish groupings, such as the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), initially associated with the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), and the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria – both of them being supported by the Western forces – were at the center of those differences, with other clashes of interest between the West and Turkey, especially on the perception of terrorist threats. It was then that this limitation of Ankara deepening its strategic autonomy was mitigated by turning its hedging effort in foreign policy toward geopolitical cooperation along the axis of Iran and Russia. The style of Turkish foreign policy has shifted toward establishing a balanced game in the West-East axis. Since 2016, cooperation between Turkey, Russia, and Iran has emerged within the scope of the ‘Astana process’, directed at the resolution of the conflict in Syria.

32 Hakan M. Yavuz, “The Motives Behind the AKP’s Foreign Policy: neo-Ottomanism and Strategic Autonomy”, p. 12.

33 Zafer Yörük and Panteli Vatikiotis, “Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera ‘Colonialism’”, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 7, 2013, p. 2376

34 Hakkı Taş, “Erdoğan and the Muslim Brotherhood: An Outside-in Approach to Turkish Foreign Policy in The Middle East”, *Turkish Studies*, 2022, p. 1-2.

35 Ipek Z. Ruacan, “Fear, Superiority, Self-Identification, and Rejection: Turks’ Different Attitudes to Europe since the Late Ottoman Era”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 22, No 5, 2020, p. 689

36 Fawaz Gerges, “The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America’s Moment?”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No 2, 2013, p. 317.

37 Joshua Walker, “Turkey and Israel’s Relationship in the Middle East”, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No 4, 2006, p. 86.

Therefore, we can distinguish three major periods within the AKP's rule: 2002-2010 – the time of heightened hopes for Europeanization; 2011-2015 – a shift toward Islamization of foreign policy, along with Pan-Turkism sentiments; and 2016-present day – a policy of multi-vector balancing. Currently, the latter presents a background and provides tools for Turkey to gain strategic autonomy. In its dedication to this goal, Ankara is able to compartmentalize between the points of disagreement and where it can gain from the potential alliances, like the one that it is forging with Russia. It is remarkable how neither Turkey's downing of the Russian plane in 2015 nor the murder of the Russian ambassador Andrei Karlov in Ankara in 2016 became an insurmountable roadblock on their path to cooperation.

Russia's Role in Turkey's Project of Strategic Autonomy

In the process of transition to a multipolar order in International Relations, and the fading of the unipolar world centered on the US, there were opportunities for strategic cooperation between Russia and global and regional powers. Russia wants to see (or at least tries to demonstrate that it would like it to be so), a world where regional players make strategically autonomous decisions in their foreign policy, and where these decisions would not be interfered with by the US. To encourage the transformation of the hegemonic West-centered international order, Russia supports international actors, especially within the transatlantic family, in their national interests, rather than seeking cohesion for an abstract grand agenda. Within the framework of Russia's relations with the EU, their foreign policy has been aimed at creating interdependence in economic, energy, and political sectors between itself and the countries of Europe, especially Germany. Russia is supportive of the aspirations of others to gain strategic autonomy, as it poses as a reliable partner that stays away from interference, unlike its nemesis – the US. In this context, serious steps have been taken to develop bilateral relations with Turkey, especially since the Cold War period.

After Vladimir Putin ascended to power in Russia in 2001, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey in 2002, the two looked for further opportunities for expanding cooperation, despite their differences on various regional issues. At the time, Turkey adhered to neoliberal economic policy, and aspired to integration in the European institutional system. In its relations with Russia, however, it had this orientation of compartmentalizing different settings of interaction, that is addressing each situation of its interaction with Russia separately, while Russia, in opposition to that outlook, looked at the relations holistically and preferred to keep it harmonious on all fronts.

After 2013, changes in the configuration of the international system, and the deterioration of Turkey's relations with the EU and the US, pushed Turkey and Russia toward each other, especially on resolving regional issues in the Caucasus, the Middle East and Ukraine. In those regions, Ankara foresaw more understanding on the part of Moscow rather than from the Western capitals, who in Turkey's view are insensitive to Ankara's regional interests and security concerns (like the views on terrorism, for example). This mutual agreement between Turkey and Russia on foreign policy, and Russia's aspiration to strengthening its standing in the international arena with the background of uncertainty in international relations, served as a nurturing ground for the two to forge closer ties. The most effective way of maintaining this

mutually beneficial relationship was to support each other's aspirations. For Turkey, it was the attainment of strategic autonomy, for which it appreciated Russia's support. For Russia, it was necessary to maintain an image of a globally connected power that managed to navigate a way out of isolation, despite deteriorating relations with the West.

Russian Grand Return to the Middle East and Turkey's Strategic Autonomy

Russia's grand 'return' to the Middle East, with the start of its Syria campaign and by invitation of the incumbent Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2015, was deemed to position Moscow not only as powerful and in demand, or welcomed by the regional players, but also as a strictly pragmatic actor, neutral in relation to the respective domestic issues, and sometimes even foreign priorities of any of the regional states. "Local actors have habitually preferred to have multiple external powers present so as to maximize their strategic autonomy by playing off and manipulating these external forces."³⁸ Armed with this understanding, Russia positioned itself well as a balancer, as it encouraged strategic autonomy envisioned by some of the regional players, starting with Turkey. Not coincidentally, strategic autonomy in many cases meant independence from the US.

After Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter jet in Syria on 24 November 2015, and after the normalization of relations with Turkey, bringing with them apologies on 27 June 2016, relations between Ankara and Moscow improved, and the parties began to look for a new common geopolitical ground. Russia-Turkey cooperation might not yet be called a strategic partnership, but it is a relatively stable marriage of convenience, spiced up by personal affection between the incumbent leaders. They treat their differences over geopolitical issues with understanding, while expanding their economic interdependency. Russia, turning the problems between Turkey and the West into an opportunity for itself, tried to capture Ankara's attention. Moscow was working on creating the impression that it takes into account the geopolitical interests of others, and is ready to have discussions about them. "Russia's idea, unlike that of the U.S., who aspires to rebuild the world in its image, is to remain unique and acknowledge the right of others to be unique culturally, politically, and sovereign in conducting their policy", argues Ivan Safranchuk.³⁹ Divergence of interests over geopolitical issues remains contained, and the overall cooperation is successfully compartmentalized. Nevertheless, Syria became one of the points of contention, despite Russia forming the "Astana Format" in 2016 together with Turkey and Iran, and the Sochi meeting series format between Turkey and Russia.

Russia pursues broader goals in Syria than just supporting Bashar al-Assad's government, or catering to other regional actors like Iran or Turkey.⁴⁰ In that regard, while Russia, in fact, maintains its own strategic autonomy, it may be irritating to Turkey, in particular with its support of the Kurds in Rojava/northeastern Syria (and earlier in history – even the PKK, whose strengthened autonomy has always been especially disturbing for Turkey, informing

38 Roland Dannreuther, "Understanding Russia's Return to the Middle East", *International Politics*, Vol. 56, No 6, 2019, p. 728.

39 Ivan Safranchuk, "Mejdunarodnoe Obozreniye" Interview with Fyodor Lyukyanov, 15 July 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNto4yLvnmc&t=721s> (Accessed 15 July 2022).

40 Aben Dauren Abenuli, "Politika Rossii v otnoshenii Siriyskix kurdov", 20 August 2017, <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/politika-rossi-v/?lang=ru> (Accessed 10 July 2020).

its ongoing operations on the Syrian territory.) Russia also disapproved of Turkey giving up any attempts to resolve the issue and engaging in military action against the PKK. On that front, Moscow's position might be seen by Ankara as undermining its interests in Syria, and might be reminiscent of the threat coming from the US support provided to the PYD and YPG in the fight against ISIS. In the course of the Syrian conflict, Russia, however, took Turkey's concerns into consideration, and the latter became more lenient toward the idea of Assad staying in power, which it mostly opposed before 2016.

With the expansion of cooperation between Turkey and Russia, and the consideration of Ankara's security problems after the meetings held within the framework of the Astana format, the Turkish Armed Forces were able to conduct their first military operation in Syria. On 24 August 2016, the Turkish Armed Forces began a direct military intervention into Syria by declaring Operation Euphrates Shield, mainly targeting ISIS, followed by the 2018 Operation Olive Branch, 2019 Operation Peace Spring, and 2020 Operation Spring Shield. That is not to say that Russia outwardly supported the operations, but the way it expressed concerns over them was very mild.⁴¹

It can be argued that cooperation and coordination on the Syrian issue fostered further understanding of how strategic autonomy is important for both states, and demonstrated their ability to compromise when it would eventually reinforce strategic autonomy of the other. For Ankara, platforms like 'Astana' or negotiations over the Libya conflict worked out productively, in allowing it to conduct military operations or create a buffer zone, as happened on the Syrian front. The Sochi platform, and personal meetings between Putin and Erdoğan yielded results on the Libyan front as well.

For Turkey, Libya has been a key outpost in promoting its interests in North Africa and the Mediterranean. The confrontation of Turkey with Egypt, Israel and Greece over their interests in the Eastern Mediterranean (where the latter two also cooperate with the Republic of Cyprus on the sensitive to Turkey issue of gas transit to Europe) emphasized the geopolitical importance of Libya in preserving Turkey's interests. Turkey's very reason for military intervention in Libya was to secure its agreement with the Government of National Accord of 2019 about border demarcation that would allow it to proceed with advancing its oil and gas interests. The economic and logistical importance of Libya for Turkey cannot be overestimated as well. Turkey's businesses have more than USD 30 billion investment in Libya, and bilateral trade turnover between the two amounts to USD 4 billion.⁴² The geopolitical and economic importance of Libya in Turkish foreign policy contributed to negotiation processes with Russia. In turn, Russia's acknowledgement of Turkey's interests in Libya and Syria allowed Turkey to mitigate the pressure on the part of Israel, Egypt and Greece, aligning against its interests in the East Mediterranean. This understanding on the part of Russia is remarkable in the context of allowing some leeway for Ankara's support for the GNA, while Moscow itself stood with General Haftar, that is on the other side of the intra-Libyan political divide.

41 Commentary by the Department of Information and print press of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia on Turkey engaging military forces in Syria's northeast, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 20 January 2018.

42 "Türk-Libya İş Adamları Derneği Başkanı Murtaza Karanfil, Libya'da On Milyarlarca Dolarlık Yatırım Potansiyeli Türkleri Bekliyor", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 08 April 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/libyada-on-milyarlarca-dolarlik-yatirim-potansiyeli-turkleri-bekliyor/2202472> (Accessed 11 July 2022).

Russia-Turkey Relations with Regards to Ukraine and the South Caucasus

The potential clash of interests for Russia and Turkey lies at the place where historically geopolitical rivalry was rampant – in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region, over such territories as the Crimean Peninsula, Eastern Ukraine, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

A series of new developments have taken place, with frictions flaring between Russia and the West since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russia's 'special operation' in Ukraine, starting from February 24, 2022. Turkey expressed the need to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity and the rights of the Crimean Tatars in the period post the 2014 annexation of the peninsula by Russia. Turkey supplying Bayraktar unmanned combat aerial vehicles to the Ukrainian side, and providing military cooperation in the course of the conflict has not prevented it from liaising with Russia on several matters, and even offering itself as a mediator between Kyiv and Moscow to stop the active war phase (and for instance, settling the issue with the export of Ukrainian grain and accessibility of its ports) since the early stages of the unfolding events. The outlook of the 'collective West' from Ankara's view, has helped it take this special stance where it has tried to play a positive role while holding parties other than Russian accountable for the war, the US in particular. At the same time, it refused to support the anti-Russian sanctions which caused tension in its relations with the EU and the US. Furthermore, in response to those sanctions, Turkey extended a helping hand to the sanctioned Russia, offering them food supplies – meat, fish, fruits and vegetables, among others.

During and after the 44 days of the Karabakh War in 2020, relations and the tone of voice between Russia and Turkey have changed. Turkey did not want to stand in the crossfire between the West and Russia, and Ankara began to actively cooperate with Moscow toward conflict resolution. After the peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Ankara advocated cooperation between the three regional players – Iran, Turkey, and Russia – and even deeper cooperation with the three states of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Despite Turkey essentially being Russia's major regional rival in the South Caucasus, Moscow allowed Ankara to play an active role and take credit as a regional player, and supported the initiative. Russia even created, along with Turkey, a joint monitoring center in Karabakh, while supporting Erdogan's participation in a symbolic military parade in Azerbaijan that marked the ceasefire with Armenia. "Azerbaijan can choose allies in a way it deems suitable, who can deny them that? ... We agreed that upon Azerbaijan's request, Turkey will be monitoring the ceasefire," stated Vladimir Putin on Russian state TV.⁴³ Russia supported Turkey's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue on the side of Azerbaijan, as it strengthened Turkey's position in the Caucasus. As a result of this understanding between Russia and Turkey on the latter's involvement in Azerbaijan, it was the Minsk group under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) that found themselves on the losing end, France and the US in particular. Analysts even argued that this

43 Anna Yuranets, "Turetskoye vliyaniye rastet»: kak izmenilsya rasklad sil v Zakavkaz'ye", *Gazeta Ru*, 14 December 2020, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/12/14_a_13399123.shtml (Accessed 29 July 2022).

kind of influence boost that Turkey received after playing its role in the war, could be extended to the region as a whole.⁴⁴

Economic and Energy Cooperation in the Context of Strategic Autonomy

It can be argued that these relations significantly have been institutionalized since the Cold War, by the virtue of creation of the Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation in 1992, the Cooperation Council between the two countries in 2010, their bilateral cooperation in the energy and financial sectors, and the expansion of the visa-free agreements with stays of up to 60 days in 2012⁴⁵. Turkey benefits significantly from receiving a steady flow of Russian tourists, which was once again demonstrated by 4.7 million of them visiting Turkey in 2021, despite the Covid-19 pandemic not having completely subsided at the time.⁴⁶ The major areas of bilateral cooperation, in fact, are focused on trade, investment, and tourism; however, their trade relations are highly asymmetrical in favor of Russia. Trade turnover has kept growing, compared to 2020, and it reached USD 33 billion in 2021 (a 57% increase compared to 2020), even though this still meant bringing it back up to the levels of 2013,⁴⁷ but Russia's share of exports to Turkey makes a sizeable USD 26.5 billion, which leaves Turkey with only USD 6.5 billion⁴⁸. A large part of the trade deficit on the Turkish side lies in energy supplies, which makes Turkey vulnerable if relations with Russia were to be undermined. Economically, Turkey is the 7th trading partner for Russia, with trade exchanges, as of recently accommodated by the shift to using national currencies, and Turkish construction companies undertaking projects in Russia.

After the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Western sanctions against Russia did not negatively affect its relations with Turkey. Quite the opposite in fact: Turkey was among the few that increased their trade turnover with Russia, by a staggering 198 per cent.⁴⁹ This dedication on the part of Turkey is not dictated by an abstract desire to support the Russian stance against the West. Turkey pragmatically calculates that Russia's input into Ankara's economic wellbeing will help maintain its strategic autonomy. That is why it grabbed the chance to benefit economically from the attempt at a global boycott of Russian goods. To support a diminution of Russia's economy in this case would rather be to Turkey's detriment than otherwise.

Energy cooperation is another important area for the two. In this area, Turkey is securing an opportunity to become a gas transit hub, which is a step up from its current role of gas

44 Ibid.

45 Alimusa G. Ibragimov, "Turtsiya i Rossiya: Vozmozhno Li Strategicheskoye Partnerstvo?", *Post Sovetskiye Issledovaniya*, Vol. 1, No 3, 2018, p. 298.

46 "ATOR Başkanı Maya Lomidze: Rusya'dan Türkiye'ye Gelecek Turist Sayısı 2 Milyona Düşebilir", *Dünya*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.dunya.com/sectorler/turizm/ator-baskani-maya-lomidze-rusyadan-turkiyeye-gelecek-turist-sayisi-2-milyona-dusebilir-haberi-654855> (Accessed 4 November 2022).

47 *Tovarooborot Rossii s Turtsiyey*. 27 December 2021. Podgotovlen saytom Vneshnyaya Torgovlya Rossii. <https://russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2016-02/torgovlya-mezhdu-rossiy-i-turtsiyey-v-2012-g/> (Accessed 15 July 2022).

48 Novak: RF I Turtsiya Dogovorilis' O Sozdanii Usloviy Priyema Karty "Mir" V Turetskikh Otelyakh, TASS, 18 May 2022, https://tass.ru/ekonomika/14661583?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com (Accessed 15 July 2022).

49 "How Russia Pays for War", *New York Times*, 30 October 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/10/30/business/economy/russia-trade-ukraine-war.html> (Accessed 04 November 2022).

importer. Turkey is already cooperating with Russia on the Blue Stream and Turkish Stream (since 2016), while Russia's South Stream project was shelved in 2014. The cumulative volume of the Turkish Stream's two lines is 31.5 million cubic meters, with half of it supplying Turkish consumers and half being delivered to the EU via Bulgaria. After the EU reassessed its energy cooperation with Russia with regards to Nord Stream 1 and 2, as well as the disruptive incident involving both pipelines, Moscow decided to reorient its geoenergy projects in favor of Turkey – Vladimir Putin himself in the meeting with his Turkish counterpart in October 2022 suggested that Turkey should become a hub for exporting gas to Europe with the power to dictate prices itself⁵⁰. Turkey enthusiastically confirmed in early November that it is considering construction of an additional line of TurkStream.⁵¹ Such statements, if backed by the construction of actual infrastructure, strengthen Turkey's position vis-a-vis Europe, in particular strengthening Turkey's hand in its negotiations with Greece over the existing disputes in the Mediterranean. By this means, Turkey would create diversification and even competition in the gas market. With a grateful understanding of the strategic importance of this cooperation, Turkey responds to Russia by maintaining steady and ever-growing ties, as well as keeping the doors of economic cooperation wide open.

Russian Rosatom continues to work on the Turkish nuclear power plant Akkuyu, which was approved by the Turkish parliament in 2010, and the plan to have launched the first unit by 2023 is under way – construction of the third block was launched personally by Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2021. During the realization of the project, Russia's boast is to have trained over 200 Turkish specialists in its universities, to be able to operate the plant.⁵² The construction might encounter other delays and problems with equipment supply due to the sanctions. The fact the plan is set to be funded, built, and then owned and operated by Russia for the first 25 years after construction is complete, constitutes one of the dependence points of Turkey on Russia. At the same time, the input of the completed Akkuyu nuclear power plant to reduce Turkey's dependence on energy import is a part of Erdoğan's 'Vision 2023' and hence is seen as a step toward further strategic autonomy. Not to discount the fact, however, that a gain in independence significantly mitigates concerns over reinforced dependence on Russia.

Conclusion

Finally, there is convergence on the personal level, where Erdoğan is an understandable counterpart to Putin, despite their diverging interests at the state level. Both Turkey and Russia under the leadership of Erdoğan and Putin are similar in giving priority to the national interest (in the way that they understand it themselves). As a member of NATO, Ankara has had more constraints, but also more opportunities to hedge in its foreign policy strategy.

50 "Putin Suggests Turkey Become Regional 'Gas Hub' To Europe", *Asia Nikkei*, 14 October 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Energy/Putin-suggests-Turkey-become-regional-gas-hub-to-Europe> (Accessed 1 November 2022).

51 *Ankara ne isklyuchayet vozmozhnosti stroitel'stva yeshche odnogo truboprovoda dlya «Turetskogo potoka»* BFM Ru, 4 November 2022 <https://www.bfm.ru/news/512272> (Accessed 4 November 2022).

52 *Basemat of Turkey's Akkuyu 1 Completed*, World Nuclear News, 14 March 2019, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/Basemat-of-Turkeys-Akkuyu-1-completed> (Accessed 17 July 2022).

Due to the complex nature of Russia-Turkey cooperation, it is hard to state unequivocally what role Russia plays in Turkey's project of building strategic autonomy. On the one hand, economic interdependence is reassuring, but not when we remember the profound trade deficit to Turkey's disadvantage or further energy dependency, even after the completion and launch of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, while the latter will still be owned by Russia, as well. On the other hand, despite significant differences in how to address geopolitical issues in the region, the parties find understanding based exactly at that meeting point – allowing each other to pursue their interests while limiting the intervention of external actors like the US. That makes some observers argue that with all its flaws, Turkey sees cooperation with Russia as supporting its strategic autonomy, not something that chips away at it.⁵³ At the same time, the asymmetry in these relations, vividly demonstrated in the economic and energy fields, restrain Ankara's pursuit of strategic autonomy or equal partnership between Turkey and Russia. As we suggested at the beginning of this article, when it concerns Turkey's relations with Russia, they might aid tactical autonomy only for now. Mostly, Russia remains that pillar of support when Turkey pursues strategic autonomy *from* the West, in particular the U.S. That is probably the component that forms a mutual ideological basis, the face of Turkey's state identity that it turns to Russia – both countries standing up together to Western interference in regional affairs.

The answer to the main question of this article would be that relations with Russia advance Turkey's strategic autonomy in what amounts to its relations with the West, but the asymmetric relations with Russia make it premature to speak of any kind of absolute strategic autonomy. It is exactly the hedging that allows Turkey to gain more strategic autonomy at different times on different fronts.

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53 Ivan Starodubtsev, "Bolshaya Strategiya Turchii", 26 April 2021, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=76852> (Accessed 20 July 2022).

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