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Transformation of Turkish-Russian Relations: Rivalry and Cooperation in Eurasia and the Levant

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Abstract

Relations between Russia and Türkiye have developed considerably since the end of the Cold War. What began as energy trade in the late 1980s evolved into cooperation in business, energy, construction, tourism, politics and even security. Behind the ever-expanding cooperation lies a mistrust fueled by historical enmity and regional rivalry that occasionally leads to confrontation. As the two countries seek to shape their competitive cooperation beyond the current geopolitical challenges and constraints of regional security and alliances, the question of whether they could find ways to advance their partnership is of paramount importance and has regional and global implications. This paper seeks to understand how they have managed their conflict-ridden past to develop a modus operandi in the post-Cold War world by proposing a new conceptual model, namely "competitive cooperation" or "coopetition", to understand the relationship that developed over the last 30 years in different geographical regions.

Keywords: Turkish Foreign Policy, Competitive Cooperation, Coopetition, Black Sea, Mediterranean.

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Introduction

Türkiye and Russia have shared an extensive neighborhood and a long history of competition. The conflicting positions lasted for centuries, sometimes threatening their existence -for example, at the end of the First World War. They continue to characterize politics and provide historical stereotypes for decision-makers.

For the Ottomans and later the republican Turks, the tsarist Russian and later Soviet advances into the south posed an existential threat associated with territorial losses. Although there were periods of cooperation in the 1920s, 1930s, and late 1960s, Türkiye and the Soviet Union remained adversaries for most of the 20th century, having defined their relations in the context of East-West rivalry after the Second World War (Ramazani 1966). When the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the Cold War, Türkiye was relieved as it no longer shared a land border with its troubled northern neighbor (Aydın 1996: 157-160). The brief respite ended with the emergence of a circle of conflict around Türkiye (the Gulf War in the southeast,

the Nagorno-Karabakh war in the northeast, and the wars of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in the west) and the gradual intensification of the race for regional influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. As a result, Eurasia became an area of competition between Moscow and Ankara for most of the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the second half of the 2000s, however, Türkiye came to realize that the benefits of cooperation outweighed the dangers of intense competition for Eurasia (Aydın 2003: 136; Çelikpala 2019: 6), as the decline of the Russian threat at the end of the Cold War opened the possibility of Turkish-Russian cooperation (Aktürk 2006: 338). The completion of pipeline projects from the Caspian Basin passing through their respective territories reduced the intensity of competition. It allowed relations to move "from geopolitical rivalry to strategic cooperation" (İşeri 2010: 182-185). So much so that the then Secretary General of the Turkish National Security Council, General Tuncer Kılınç, described Russia as "potentially Türkiye's most strategic partner" at a conference of military academies in İstanbul on 6 March 2002 (Demir and Erdem 2002). Since then, relations between the two countries have developed into economic, political, and strategic cooperation, punctuated by periods of massive mistrust and opposing positions. Trade between the two countries reached more than 30 billion dollars per year in the 2010s, supplemented by growing revenues from construction, investment, and tourism, making it worthwhile for leaders to invest political capital in bilateral relations (Aydın 2021: 128).

Strategic mistrust and disenchantment with the West encouraged both countries to look for alternatives in their shared neighborhood during the same period (Hill and Taşpınar 2006; Balta, Filis, Aydın 2021: 8-9). What started as a tentative cooperation in the early 2000s developed into a full-fledged partnership by the mid-2010s, covering a broader range of issues. While some have labeled this a "strategic partnership" (Aktürk 2006: 338, 346), balancing Russia has remained essential to Turkish foreign policy. While Russia also became active from 2015 onwards, directly or through a private military company, the Wagner Group, in Türkiye's south, i.e., Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Libya, Türkiye increasingly confronted Russian positions in these regions.

Relations between the two countries in the post-Cold War period have been extensively analyzed from historical (Balta and Özkan 2016; Çelikpala 2019; Derman 2021; Aydın 2021; Hale 2023), military-strategic (Sezer 2000; Çelikpala and Erşen 2018; Aktürk 2019), economic (İşeri 2010; Öniş and Yılmaz 2016; Köstem 2018), and geostrategic (Druzhinin 2015) dimensions, liberal (Aktürk 2006), realist-balance of power (Didic and Kösebalan 2019) and regional security complex (Şahin and Sözen 2023) perspectives, with discourse analysis (Köremezli 2021; Hamilton and Mikulska 2021), systems analysis (Sezer 2000) and multilevel analysis (Erşen and Köstem 2020), and through idiosyncratic (Morozov and Rumelili 2012), ideational (Köstem 2016; Hill and Taşpınar 2006), and multicausal (Balta 2019) factors. Yet, despite noticeable differences, the phenomenal rise in cooperation (Mamedov and Lukyanov 2018) continues to baffle experts.

While various academic approaches have been used to address specific aspects of the relationship, most analyses have struggled to conceptualize the sudden emergence of cooperation. In contrast, the assorted elements of competition and/or conflict remain constant. Thus, Sezer (2000: 62) referred to it as a "virtual rapprochement," emphasizing its ephemeral

qualities, while Baev and Kirişci (2017) labeled it as an "ambiguous partnership," arguing that both sides are reluctant to develop the relationship. Nevertheless, the relationship has developed despite contrary predilections.

The concept of "compartmentalization" has often been used to address what many saw as an anomaly, as the two countries seem to cooperate mainly on economic issues while disagreeing on many political aspects (Öniş and Yılmaz 2016; Hamilton and Mikulska 2021; Köstem 2020: 798). On the other hand, the lack of institutionalization (Balta 2019: 69), the power asymmetry in favor of Russia (Öniş and Yılmaz 2016: 84), mutual mistrust, and historical and geopolitical rivalries (Özcan, Balta, and Beşgül 2017; Aydın 2021) were seen as reasons for the unstable cooperation. Since several different geographical areas and topics have led to divergences, the "informal geopolitical alignment" that emerged between the two countries in terms of Syria remained "unlikely to transform into a lasting security partnership" (Köstem 2020: 795, 807).

Most of these studies offer theatre/theme-specific analyses of particular phases of the relationship. Although they are valuable and bring different theoretical approaches to international relations, none provides a conclusive and comprehensive framework for understanding the two countries' broader geopolitical (re)alignment and their persistent qualms over a vast geographical area. They mainly aim to analyze one (or more) aspect(s) of the relations in a given period rather than providing a conceptual basis that could be useful for understanding their overall contradictory relations. Without recognizing the complex dynamics and the unique case of simultaneous rivalry and cooperation, a holistic understanding of relations between the two countries would not be possible.

This paper proposes a new conceptual model, "competitive cooperation," to understand the relationship developed over the last 30 years in different geographical regions. The concept of competitive cooperation, or *coopetition*, has been used in business studies since the 1990s. It was introduced by Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) to understand when it is better for competitors to cooperate. Using game theory, they attempted to develop a strategy that moves competitors away from a zero-sum game, replacing it with a plus-sum game (Lutkevitch 2021). Later, Luo (2004) applied the same principle to the behavior of multinational companies in the international arena, referring to the simultaneous competition and cooperation between their geographically dispersed stakeholders, competitors, suppliers, distributors, partners, and various governments with whom they need to be in contact. These behaviors can also be observed outside the business world in human life and international relations. While cooperation between nations has been the preferred topic of liberal analysis, different versions of the realist paradigm have analyzed zero-sum game competition.

In this context, "cooperation implies that actors can only achieve their common goal when working together," and competition means that "competitors can only achieve their aim if others fail to do so" (Osganian 2022). In contrast to the sharp divergence between cooperative and competitive behavior, coopetition (or competitive-cooperative behavior) means "working with a competitor to achieve [or advance] a common goal" (Brandenburg and Nalebuff 2021). This assumes that competitors or rivals may have common goals.

In Russian-Turkish relations, most of their histories could be identified as competition, while short periods in the 20th century could be understood through the rhetoric of cooperation. However, these different types of explanations are insufficient to explain what emerged in the first quarter of the 21st century. This paper shows that a *sui generis* relationship model, a specific *modus operandi*, has emerged between the two, in which competition and cooperation coincide, sometimes even in the same theatre of operations. Without going into the various peculiarities of the relationship, this *modus operandi* includes reciprocal balancing (Glinski 2023; İldem 2022; Didic and Kösebalan 2019), compartmentalization (Öniş and Yılmaz 2016; Hamilton and Mikulska 2021; Köstem 2020), cooperation to contain the West (Balta, Filis, and Aydın 2021), and constant attention and bargaining at the highest level (Svarin 2015; Balta and Özkan 2016).

I first used the concept of competitive cooperation (*coopetition*) in 2008 to describe the emerging patterns of Turkish-Russian relations and expanded it in 2012 (Aydın 2008 and 2012). It helps to explain the continuation of the cooperative ties even as the two countries simultaneously entered a revisionist era in their foreign policies after 2010, confronting and competing in a broader geographical space from the Caucasus to North Africa (Balta and Özkan 2016: 19). This paper examines the process through which a coopetition model has evolved in Turkish-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War.

Competition in the Early Post-Cold War Era

Although Türkiye was relieved at the end of the Cold War that it no longer had to share a land border with its most challenging neighbor (Aydın 2000: 1), it did not take long to realize that Eurasian region would emerge as the scene of intense competition. As the countries of the former Soviet hinterland began to consider their economic, political, and geopolitical alignments in the post-Cold War world, Türkiye offered to link them to the West (Aydın 1996 and 2004). While the number of actors capable of influencing the future of Eurasia multiplied, Türkiye and Russia emerged as the most likely candidates to influence the regional countries' potential paths (Çelikpala 2019). This led to fierce competition between the two.

While Russia pursued a policy of re-establishing its control over Eurasia to maintain its great power status (Kasenov 1995), Türkiye attempted to link the region to the West (Aydın 2000: 58-67), whose fear that radical Islam would fill the power vacuum in the region, led its encouragement of the regional countries to adopt the Turkish model (Mango 1993; Aydın 2001). At a time when Türkiye began feeling the adverse effects of the end of the Cold War, this was a welcoming opening. Thus, Türkiye launched ambitious initiatives to expand its political, economic, and cultural relations, especially with the Turkic republics (Aydın 2011: 376-379), which led Türkiye's rivals, especially Russia, to ask whether Türkiye wanted to revive the idea of pan-Turkism (Aydın 1996).

As it gradually became clear that Türkiye's political and economic means were not adequate to respond to the needs of the Central Asians, Türkiye increasingly turned its attention to the Caucasus, where, in addition to geographical proximity, the lure of Caspian oil and gas resources incentivized closer engagement. This new focus made Russia and

Türkiye major rivals in the Caucasus, where the independence of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan had created a buffer zone. As Moscow increased pressure on the Caucasian countries to move closer to Russia by joining the political and security institutions it had created, Türkiye increasingly saw itself as Russia's opponent. Their divergent geopolitical perceptions intensified competition while the problems in bilateral relations grew longer and relations between the two countries deteriorated (Çelikpala 2007: 273, 269). Still, as Russian attempts to turn the region into a Russian protectorate failed, inducing only Armenia to join the Russian-dominated organizations, and the Tengiz-Novorossiysk, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines became operational, the rivalry between Türkiye and Russia gradually reduced in the early 2000s.

Meanwhile, the US began to gain a foothold in the region after the 9/11 attacks, forcing Türkiye and Russia to rethink their policies. While Russia actively resisted the US presence in the Caucasus and responded violently when the opportunity arose by invading Georgia in August 2008, Türkiye was effectively sidelined by the overwhelming presence of its ally. In the meantime, with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the EU also reached the shores of the Black Sea and began to refer to the Caucasus as the new "Southeast Europe," which annoyed Türkiye as much as Russia (Balta, Filis, and Aydın 2021).

This crowding of the region led to a gradual evaluation of Türkiye's positioning and brought Türkiye closer to Russia. As Türkiye increasingly rejected a dominant Western presence in the region, its position was based on a double logic. First, Turkish decision-makers assumed that an increased Western presence with their military perspectives would upset the post-Cold War balance between Türkiye and Russia in the Black Sea and the Caucasus, thus provoking Russia to pursue a more aggressive policy. Secondly, the arrival of Western actors in the region would negate the need for Türkiye to connect regional countries with the West, diminishing its importance and limiting its room for maneuver. This led to a reassessment and realization that the benefits of cooperating with Russia in the region could outweigh the advantages Türkiye had previously enjoyed through competition.

Cooperation through Economy and Energy

The backbone of the intensified relations between the two countries was a shared understanding of the benefits of compartmentalizing their relations (Öniş and Yılmaz 2016: 72) and expanding their economic ties even as they competed for political influence in Eurasia. The decision to separate economics from political issues, including security concerns, was evident in their earlier cooperation in multilateral, regional organizations such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).

The initial area of cooperation between Russia and Türkiye was energy trade (Erşen 2017: 148; Erşen 2011: 264-265). Although the two countries were competitors rather than partners in connecting the Caspian energy resources to Europe, they simultaneously expanded their direct natural gas connection. Türkiye and Russia signed an agreement in 1987 that allowed the purchase of Russian gas in exchange for Turkish products and contractual services. The delivery of 6 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas in 1987 through a pipeline that

crossed Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria increased to 27.6 bcm by the end of 2017, with two further pipelines (Blue Stream I and II) connecting them under the Black Sea. Another direct connection, the TurkStream pipeline, which would transport 31.5 bcm of natural gas through its two pipelines under the Black Sea to Türkiye and Europe, was inaugurated on 8 January 2020 (Anadolu Agency 2020).

Although many questioned Türkiye's almost 65 percent dependence on Russian natural gas (Bilgin 2010; Kaynak 2018; Hale 2022), successive Turkish governments chose to increase gas imports from Russia in response to rising demand (Kardaş 2012). Furthermore, in May 2010, Türkiye commissioned the Russian company Rosatom to build its first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, Mersin, at an estimated cost of 25 billion dollars. The fact that the nuclear power plant, a strategic asset, will be built, owned, and operated by Russia shows the extent to which the two countries have moved within the cooperative mode.

Turkish-Russian trade relations also expanded. Even in the 1990s, when the two states competed for influence in Eurasia, the economic dimension of the relationship was managed separately and grew steadily. The early institutionalization of economic relations through establishing the Turkish-Russian Business Council in 1991 and signing the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation in 1992 contributed to trade growth. They helped to separate economic relations from political ties (Kelkitli 2017: 105-6). The establishment of the High-Level Cooperation Council in 2010 marked the point at which cooperation rather than competition began to characterize relations (Svarin 2015: 384; Balta and Özkan 2016: 17), pushing the volume of trade from 22.7 billion dollars in 2009 to 33 billion dollars in 2021. Trade volume further increased in 2022 due to the diversion of part of Russia's trade to Türkiye in response to Western sanctions against Russia, making it Türkiye's largest import partner, with 58.85 billion dollars at the end of 2022, bringing total trade to 68 billion dollars (Konarzewska, 2023). While the trade deficit heavily favoring Russia was somewhat compensated earlier with informal trade in goods transported by Russian travelers, reaching an estimated 8.5 billion dollars in 2014 (Kelkitli 2017: 109), this later lost importance due to the restrictive measures imposed by Moscow.

Beyond trade, by the end of 2017, Turkish contractors had executed contracts worth over 65 billion dollars and invested around 10 billion dollars in Russia. Russian investments in Türkiye, excluding the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, equaled this. The investment for the Akkuyu plant was estimated at 20 billion dollars (Anadolu Agency 2022). At the end of 2016, more than 2000 Russian companies were operating in Türkiye, and around 3000 Turkish companies were in Russia. Meanwhile, 8000 Russian citizens have settled in Türkiye and purchased real estate. The number of Russian tourists visiting Türkiye reached 4.4 million in 2014, then declined due to restrictions imposed by Russia on charter planes after the shooting down of a Russian jet in November 2015 and rose again to 7 million by the end of 2019. Although the number declined rapidly with the travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it increased again to over 5 million in 2022 and 6.2 million by the end of 2023 (Public Agency 2024), benefitting from Türkiye's non-compliance with restrictions on Russian flights to European countries due to the war in Ukraine (Bechev 2024).

Uneasy Balance and Russian-Turkish Condominium in the Black Sea

Similar positions against the presence of non-littoral states in the Black Sea, reflecting their compatible understanding of balance in the region, helped to create what critics labeled a Russian-Turkish condominium in the region (Ananicz 2014; Isachenko and Swistek 2023). Mutual port visits, establishing the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Force (BlackSeaFor) in 2001, launching Operation Black Sea Harmony in 2004, joint search and rescue operations, and naval exercises are all part of the informal regional security system that emerged in the Black Sea. These institutions were put to the test during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and later severely damaged by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. While Russia suspended its membership in BlackSeaFor after Türkiye shot down its plane over the Turkish-Syrian border in 2015 (Tass 2015), Türkiye abandoned its efforts after Russia invaded Ukraine, as no other country in the region was willing to cooperate with Russia in any form (Interfax 2023).

The central pillar of the Russian-Turkish understanding of the Black Sea has been the common position against the excessive presence of non-coastal naval forces in the region. From Türkiye's perspective, the delicate balance that emerged in the region at the end of the Cold War was valuable and must be protected. It allowed the two countries to work together on non-political issues within the framework of regional initiatives. Türkiye preferred Russia to integrate into multilateral frameworks through institutional arrangements rather than engaging it in bilateral negotiations, where it had an advantage over all coastal states. Türkiye wanted to avoid alienating and cornering Russia with the additional presence of extra-regional powers. The means Türkiye most often used to ensure this was strict adherence to the 1936 Montreux Convention, even after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. With its restrictions on non-littoral fleets in the Black Sea, the convention has been the cornerstone of the security structure in the region. It stabilized the Black Sea after centuries of international confrontation (Oral 2017; Baldıran, Bayer, Gençer 2022).

This meant that Türkiye's position in the region sometimes differed from that of its NATO allies (especially the US, Romania, and Bulgaria) and its regional partners (Georgia and Ukraine). The acrimony between Türkiye and its allies/partners in the region became noticeable after the 9/11 attacks, as they accused Türkiye of preventing the democratization of the region through its cooperation with Russia. These accusations diminished over time, especially after 2007, when the US decided to reduce its activities and presence in the region and announced that it had no intention of challenging the Montreux Convention (Aydın 2011: 526).

However, when Russia invaded Georgian territory in August 2008, Türkiye mildly condemned it as the geopolitical landscape had changed in the previous decade, and its rivalry with Russia was coming to an end. While there was no strong, coordinated response from the West either, Türkiye appeared to distance itself further from its allies, reaffirming the primacy of the Montreux Convention. Türkiye's diverging interests in the Caucasus (and, to a lesser extent, in the Black Sea) led to its distancing from the West and softened response to the Russian advance.

When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Türkiye's reaction was again restrained, though its displeasure was evident. While it did not recognize the Russian annexation and rebuked

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov when he complained about the excessive presence of US warships in the Black Sea (MFA 2014a and 2014b), Türkiye chose occasions to voice its objections to the annexation in line with the ups and downs of Turkish-Russian relations. For example, Türkiye strongly condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine during the period of strained relations following the downing of a Russian fighter jet for violating Turkish airspace, while at other times, it expressed its displeasure in more diplomatic terms (Rüma and Çelikpala 2019).

Türkiye, recognizing the geopolitical changes in the region since 9/11 and assessing the Russian position on NATO's expansion to its borders, has taken a middle position between its allies and its regional partner. As Türkiye's EU membership process and relations with the US increasingly became problematic, Türkiye and Russia formed an "axis of the excluded" (Hill and Taşpınar 2006; Balta, Filis, Aydın 2021). Since the annexation of Crimea, however, Russia has exceeded most expectations by restoring its Black Sea Fleet (BSF) and militarizing the region. Within a few years of the annexation, Russia became the most decisive naval power in the Black Sea, replacing Türkiye (Çelikpala and Erşen 2018). In addition to controlling several exclusion zones (Anti-Access/Area Denial, AD/A2) around the Black Sea and the Caucasus, Russia built a naval base in Syria and established a permanent maritime presence in the Mediterranean. The fact that the BSF, based in annexed Crimea, provided logistical support to Russian forces in Syria until Türkiye closed the Straits in 2022 testifies to the complicated relations between the two countries.

The strategic impact of Türkiye's effective encirclement from the Caucasus to the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant was significant and led to a recalibration of its stance toward Russia (Cheterian 2023). While Russia became a revisionist power in the Black Sea from August 2008 on, Türkiye had yet to develop an appropriate response to the changing geopolitical equation in the region by 2020. While an imperfect and, at times, an uneasy balance had emerged in the Caucasus after August 2008, the new lines drawn by Crimea in 2014 required a reassessment of Türkiye's position at a time when its focus shifted to the Levant, where the Russian presence created opportunities for further cooperation and new challenges for Turkish security and political positioning.

The outbreak of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in September 2020 and the roles played by Russia and Türkiye before, during, and after the war brought the question of an increased Russian presence in Türkiye's neighborhood back to the table. The fact that the war ended with a Russian-brokered ceasefire and Russian peacekeepers returned to Azerbaijan 30 years after their withdrawal increased the urgency of reaching a *modus vivendi* with Russia in the region. Nevertheless, Türkiye seemed satisfied with the role it was granted after the ceasefire: a solid political comeback, military presence in Azerbaijan, and heightened expectations regarding the possible creation of a land corridor to Azerbaijan that would ensure Türkiye's land connection to Central Asia (Neset et al. 2023).

Although it has so far avoided directly challenging Russia's hegemonic position in the Caucasus, Türkiye's unique relations with Azerbaijan, reflected in the 15 June 2021 Shusha Declaration (Resmi Gazete 2022), and temporarily restored its military presence in the region after more than a century, indicated to a more robust and willing position to take a stronger stance against Russia or its interests when deemed necessary. Türkiye also expressed

satisfaction with the role played by Turkish military equipment and recently developed tactics of using drones in cooperation with land and air forces against the Russian-built -and in some cases operated- defense systems previously tested with repeated success in Syria and Libya (Kasapoğlu 2022; Witt 2022).

The withdrawal of the Russian peacekeeping contingent from Azerbaijan, completed by June 2024, continuing peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the former's gradual shift away from the Russian orbit, recent changes in Georgia's domestic politics positioning further away from its EU vocation, and continuing Azerbaijan-Iran strains, all add new layers to the Russian-Turkish balance in the Caucasus. These developments leave Türkiye as the only nearby actor with broader regional experience and influence to shape its future. Whether Türkiye will use this unique position further to challenge Russia's overall interests in the region must be analyzed in connection with their overall relationship and *coopetitive* balances.

Russian Presence in the Levant and Türkiye

Historically, the Ottoman State was the obstacle preventing the Russian Empire from reaching the warm waters to the south since Peter the Great had defined this as his strategic goal in the late 17th century. One of the great naval battles of the First World War was fought at Gallipoli over the opening of the Turkish Straits to Russia's allies in the Mediterranean so that they could establish a direct link. The Soviet demand at the end of the Second World War for joint control of the Straits was one of the reasons why Türkiye joined the emerging Western alliance system. During the Cold War, Soviet relations with the Mediterranean and the Middle East remained sporadic. With the end of the Cold War and the decline of Russian influence, the US assumed complete control of the region. However, the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and subsequent developments allowed Russia to return to the region, affecting its relations with Türkiye.

The developments that led to Russia's presence in the regions surrounding Türkiye began on the Black Sea with its annexation of Crimea. With it came the control of Sevastopol, the home port of the BSF, which later served as a logistical link for Russian operations in the Mediterranean. With an increased focus on modernization and expansion, Russia quickly achieved a balance of naval forces in the Black Sea by the end of 2015 and was set to achieve supremacy in a few years (Delanoë 2014; Schneider 2017). Thus, its naval forces in the north appeared secure, and Russia could now look confidently beyond the Black Sea.

Russia's advances in, and the militarization of, the Black Sea worried Türkiye. With the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent occupation of eastern Ukraine, the two countries now share almost the same maritime border as during the Cold War. Although the Russian Navy, by 2020, surpassed the Turkish Navy in the Black Sea in terms of power projection capability, the ongoing war and the closure of the Straits have compromised its maritime supremacy. As it is sealed off in the region due to Türkiye's closure of the Straits, Russian naval forces have been weakening due to attrition and lack of rotational capability (Güvenç and Aydın 2023; Delanoë 2024). While Russia's success in creating an AD/A2 zone around Crimea has not alone worried Türkiye much, it was more concerned about the combined impact of the AD/A2 zones around Crimea to the north, Armenia to the northeast, and Syria to the south.

In parallel to the developments in the north, Russia established a permanent naval task force for the Mediterranean in 2012 to play a similar role to the Russian 5th Fleet in the Cold War. This new force has been reinforced by additional ships from the BSF, conducted various exercises in the eastern Mediterranean, and supported operations in Syria (Johnson 2015; Delanoë, 2024). The fact that the BSF has played a central role in providing logistical support to the Russian presence in Syria and the Mediterranean links the two regions into a unique geopolitical structure. With the development of a naval base and an airbase in Syria, Russia deployed semi-permanent forces on both sides of Türkiye in the northeast and south for the first time. Although Ankara's concerns about the presence of Russian troops in Syria were eventually alleviated, the downing of the Russian jet by the Turkish Air Force in November 2015 was evidence of the unease at the time about Russian presence in the region.

Türkiye's exasperation with US policy in Syria, however, drove Ankara until the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, thus making the Russian position tenuous, to work closely with Russia in the Syrian theatre. Focusing primarily on the emergence of the PKK-affiliated Kurdish group PYD (Democratic Union Party, *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* in Kurdish) as a player in Syria (Rumelili and Çelik 2017) and its connection with the US, Türkiye has avoided considering the long-term impact of Russia's presence in the Mediterranean and Levant. It has, for example, chosen to downplay Russia's role in the killing of 34 Turkish soldiers in northern Syria on 27 February 2020 through sustained airstrikes. Ignoring that Russia controls Syrian airspace west of the Euphrates and that the Syrian Air Force is unable to coordinate such an action without Russian intelligence (Kemal 2021), Türkiye responded by firing on more than 200 Syrian targets, quickly destroying the Syrian air defense systems provided by Russia and halting its advance on Idlib (BBC 2020).

While these attacks led to a stalemate in Syria, Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine and the need to withdraw some of its forces from Syria led to a decline in confrontational positions and trilateral contacts in late 2022 between Türkiye, Russia, and Syria. Initially proposed by Putin and rejected by Türkiye, direct talks between Syria and Türkiye with Russian mediation became palatable to Türkiye after it decided to accelerate the normalization processes in its foreign policy with the countries in the region. As a result, Turkish President Erdoğan called for a trilateral meeting at the presidential level at the end of 2022 (HDN 2022).

In contrast, relations with the US deteriorated further due to the continued US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The fact that the SDF's connection to the PKK, which is classified as a terrorist organization by the US, is deliberately ignored by the US leads to a 'sense of betrayal' in Türkiye (Neset et al. 2021: 12). The alienating effect of this connection continued to fuel Türkiye's attempt to utilize Russia presence in Syria as a counterweight to the US until the end of the Assad regime in December 2024. The change of regime in Syria and the current control of the government apparatus in Damascus by groups willing to limit Russian presence in the region increases Türkiye's standing against Russian maneuvers in the Levant and the Mediterranean. The fact that it removed Russia as a counterbalance to the US in the Syrian theater -while also negatively affecting Türkiye's ability to resist US pressures and might force it to look for a compromise- effectively diminishes Russia's usefulness to Türkiye, thus cooperation pillar in their *competitive* relations.

While the situation in Syria was heading towards a stalemate in 2020, Türkiye's military support for the Government of National Accord in Libya against the Libyan National Army backed by Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates also ended in a stalemate after Turkish drones destroyed Russian-supplied air defense systems. So, even while Russia acted as a valuable counterweight to the US positions in Syria, enabling Türkiye to set up security zones inside its border with Syria and claim a place in the debate about Syria's future, Türkiye has not shied away from confronting Russian-backed forces from Syria and Libya to the Caucasus and Ukraine.

Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War

While the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War ended with a restored balance between Russia and Türkiye and the exclusion of the Western actors from the Caucasus (Neset et al. 2023), the invasion of Ukraine and especially the continuation of the war after two years gradually prompted Türkiye to reassess its position. Although earlier expectation that Russian aggression in the region might force Türkiye to rethink its policy and thus bring it speedily closer to the West (Economist 2022) was not realized, Türkiye found itself in double jeopardy between Russia and Ukraine and between Russia and the West. Although criticized by its Allies, Türkiye's policy of supporting Ukraine with weapons systems and condemning Russia while not participating in Western sanctions allowed it to be a potential mediator between the warring parties and increase its regional influence (Bechev 2024).

Türkiye's first reaction in the face of aggression was to resort to its age-old instrument -the Montreux Convention- to prevent the war from expanding and endangering the security in the Black Sea. Demonstrating its strict adherence to the Convention, Türkiye declared on 27 February, ahead of other countries, that the developments amounted to a "war", justifying the closure of the Straits to warships of the warring parties per Article 19 of the Convention (Malsin 2023). Türkiye also called on other states to refrain from sending warships to the Black Sea, signaling its primary concern was regional security.

More surprisingly, Türkiye asked Russia not to recall the ships of its BSF that remained outside the Black Sea, although Russia had the right to do so under the Montreux Convention (Delanoë 2024: 7). Türkiye reasoned that this "would be seen as an escalation and would not be conducive to regional security" (Yinanç 2023). It is estimated that between 20 and 30 ships that belong to the BSF are not in the Black Sea (Güvenç 2023). Although Türkiye has not activated Article 21 of the Convention, allowing it to declare being "under the threat of war", thus preventing the passage of all warships through the Straits, its position made clear to all interested countries, and no country has contested Türkiye's request for an injunction.

In contrast to the immediate closure of the Straits, Türkiye avoided joining the Western sanctions against Russia, which enabled it to capitalize on increased trade with Russia, its heightened profile as a producer of successful UAVs, and its role as a successful broker of the "grain deal" (Jenkins 2023; İldem 2022). However, it has increasingly become clear that the continuation of the war and Russia's inability to subdue Ukraine are impacting Türkiye's assessment of Russia's value to its regional policy and the broader Turkish strategy of

"strategic autonomy" vis-à-vis its Allies (Gafarlı and Roknifard 2023). Though it is early to speculate on the impact of the war on Türkiye's broader foreign policy, it has already reached out to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Greece, Armenia, and the West in general - in most cases accelerated after February 2022 - to normalize its relations with them (Altunışık 2021; Kardaş 2022).

In this context, Türkiye has endorsed all resolutions adopted by NATO since the invasion, particularly the 2022 Strategic Concept, which declares that "the Russian Federation poses the most significant and immediate threat to the security of the Allies" (NATO 2022). Although the ratifications of Finland's and especially Sweden's accession to NATO were delayed, this was more for national and intra-Alliance reasons than to please Russia (Fraser 2023). Also, Türkiye took command of the maritime component of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force in June 2022 and its Rapid Deployable Corps in December 2022, positioning itself to defend NATO territory when the only conceivable threat was perceived from Russia.

In addition, the Turkish Navy conducts a 24/7 maritime reconnaissance in the Black Sea to provide NATO with 67 percent of the maritime picture of the region it receives. It has been sharing this information with Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea (Yinanç 2023). Türkiyer also supported NATO's forward presence in the region, contributing to the NATO battlegroup in Bulgaria and deploying four F16 aircraft from December 2023 to March 2024 to Romania as part of NATO's Enhanced Air Policing Mission against possible Russian incursions (NATO 2023). Finally, at Türkiye's initiative, an agreement was signed with Romania and Bulgaria on 11 January 2024 to establish the Mine Countermeasures Naval Group in the Black Sea (Euronews 2024).

Likewise, Türkiye remained steadfast in its decision to keep the Straits closed, even though this has become increasingly detrimental to Russia as the war progressed due to the attrition of its naval forces in the Black Sea (Güvenç and Aydın 2023). This became particularly important after the flagship of the Russian BSF, the missile cruiser Moskva, was sunk by Ukrainian forces on 14 April 2022 (Dilanian, Kube, and Lee 2022), followed by damage to up to 80 ships of all types since then (Frias 2024), further weakening Russian naval power in the region (Delanoë 2024). As Türkiye applies the Montreux Convention with additional restrictions, Russia cannot bring new ships into the region or take the damaged ships out for repair or rotation.

Finally, Türkiye continued to provide Ukraine with military aid. In addition to the contract to build 4 corvettes for the Ukrainian Navy, Türkiye supplied various types of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), precision-guided missiles, guided multiple rocket launchers, mine-resistant armored personnel carriers, wheeled armored vehicles, ground and airborne electronic warfare equipment, various types of personal military equipment and ammunition (Güvenç and Aydın 2023). These are all signs that Türkiye has recognized the geopolitical value of an independent Ukraine in the Black Sea as a counterweight to Russia. The war's end will significantly alter the balance of naval power in the Black Sea and the geopolitical picture in the broader region. Although it is still too early to assess the combined impact of all these on Turkish-Russian relations, there is no doubt that they will have an effect.

Conclusion

After centuries of confrontation, Türkiye and Russia have developed closer ties since the end of the Cold War. They added economic, political, and strategic aspects to their earlier energy cooperation. The relationship has been driven by mutual financial benefits and the emergence of economic and political interdependence, albeit asymmetrically.

However, the emerging interdependence and cooperative environment have not prevented them from competing for regional influence, power, and dominance in Eurasia, the Levant, and the Mediterranean. Neither the continuation of the Russian presence nor Türkiye's lasting cooperation with the Kremlin in the south is a foregone conclusion.

Until the regime change in December 2024, the two countries handled their cooperation well in Syria, separating it most of the time from other aspects of the relationship, which is characterized more by differences than similarities. The aircraft incident in 2015 and the ambush on Turkish soldiers in northern Syria in 2020 have shown that compartmentalizing does not always prevent escalation. While the fact that the two countries were able to contain the crises in both cases showed the value they place on each other, they also highlighted how easily they can descend into conflict despite compartmentalization and the benefits of cooperation.

In Libya, the two countries supported opposing parties in the civil war while staying out of direct conflict and drawing a line of demarcation between the groups they supported. However, as in Syria, they have failed to find common ground for the endgame, as the two countries' long-term interests are not aligned, and they push for divergent solutions.

Although a common ground was found regarding the future of Nagorno-Karabakh, there is no guarantee that the current amicable mood between them will outlast the changing balances in the Black Sea region and when it comes to Armenia finally removing itself from Russia's orbit and normalizing its relations with Türkiye along the way, undermining the Russian presence in the Caucasus altogether.

Finally, while the interests of the two countries in the wider Black Sea region still appear to be aligned when it comes to keeping non-regional countries out of the region, it is clear that Türkiye is playing both sides of the equation and could just as quickly move to strengthen its ties with the West in the post-Ukraine war environment if the mood in Türkiye-EU and Türkiye-US relations improves.

Part of the explanation for Russian-Turkish cooperation in different regions lies in both countries' conflict-ridden relations with the West. While Russia's fractured relationship with the West has encouraged it to cultivate closer ties with Türkiye to sow rifts within NATO, growing disenchantment with the West has contributed to Türkiye's policy towards Russia. Although their antipathy towards and alienation from the West continue to drive them towards each other, the limits of this cooperation would be significantly tested if Türkiye's relations with the West improve. The war in Ukraine is already pushing these limits. While Türkiye has not fully participated in Western sanctions against Russia, it is increasingly complying with them and openly siding with Ukraine.

Compartmentalization works when the two countries prioritize the cooperative side of their relationship and are willing to overlook the irritations from the other side. Similarly, both countries have shown that they would stand up to the other side's encroachments if their interests required it. Otherwise, cooperative relationships have not eradicated their relations' competitive and sometimes conflictual nature. While self-restraint concerning their conflicting interests has kept open criticism under wraps, the list of issues where competition is evident is quite long, and adversarial rhetoric suddenly overshadows cooperative silence when crises arise.

Under these circumstances, *coopetition* is still the best label for the seemingly contradictory and simultaneously cooperative and competitive relationship between the two states. The unique relationship model, i.e., "competitive cooperation," and the newly expanded geography of engagement emerged as the two countries moved away from their historical antagonism and towards an expanded cooperation circle. However, rapid global geopolitical changes and regional balances are testing their relationship. Whether they can overcome potential complications depends on how they understand the possibilities of their shared geography, how they assess the geopolitical realities of Eurasia and the Levant with their internationalized conflicts, and how their domestic political developments unfold.

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Notes

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