

RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS IN THE NEW AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper provides an analysis of the current state of Russian-Turkish Relations within the framework of the ‘Age of Uncertainty’ concept coined by Harvard economist Ken Galbraith. It examines how Turkey is evolving its self-image as it seeks to achieve strategic autonomy through various foreign policy initiatives. The paper also delves into Turkey’s perceptions of Russia, highlighting both positive and negative views that shape their bilateral relations. By exploring the intricate dynamics of Russian-Turkish relations while taking into account historical context and geopolitical factors, the author provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of interactions of the two states. In conclusion, this paper argues for the necessity of cultivating a positive image and promoting cooperation between Russia and Turkey to effectively navigate the uncertainty of the contemporary world and ensure a more stable and peaceful coexistence in a constantly changing international landscape.

Keywords: Turkey, Russia, Russian-Turkish Relations, Image of State, Constructivism

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YENİ BELİRSİZLİK ÇAĞINDA RUSYA-TÜRKİYE İLİŞKİLERİ

ÖZ

Bu makale, Harvardlı ekonomist Ken Galbraith'in ortaya koyduğu 'Belirsizlik Çağı' kavramı çerçevesinde Rus-Türk ilişkilerinin mevcut durumunun bir analizini sunmaktadır. Türkiye'nin çeşitli dış politika girişimleriyle stratejik özerkliğe ulaşmaya çalışırken kendi imajını nasıl geliştirdiğini inceliyor. Makale ayrıca Türkiye'nin Rusya imajlarını da inceleyerek ikili ilişkilerini şekillendiren hem olumlu hem de olumsuz görüşlerin altını çiziyor. Yazar, tarihsel bağlamı ve jeopolitik faktörleri göz önünde bulundurarak Rus-Türk ilişkilerinin karmaşık dinamiklerini inceleyip, iki devletin etkileşimlerinin karmaşık doğası hakkında kapsamlı bir anlayış sağlar. Sonuç olarak, bu makale, çağdaş dünyanın belirsizliğini etkin bir şekilde yönlendirmek ve sürekli değişen bir uluslararası ortamda daha istikrarlı ve barış içinde bir arada yaşamayı sağlamak için olumlu bir imaj geliştirmenin ve Rusya ile Türkiye arasındaki işbirliğini teşvik etmenin gerekliliğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Rusya, Rus-Türk ilişkileri, Devlet İmajı, Yapılandırmacılık

INTRODUCTION

In 1977, renowned Harvard economist Ken Galbraith released his influential book ‘The Age of Uncertainty’ and popularized his ideas through an eponymous television series broadcast on the BBC. In this work, Galbraith contrasted the Golden Age of the 19th Century, when things were quite certain in economic matters, with the great uncertainty and instability of the 20th Century, brought by market system and individualism. We can productively apply this concept to the current system of international relations that is to claim the New Age of Uncertainty for states in their foreign affairs.

Looking back at the twentieth century, we can see that after the turmoil of the two World Wars, there was a period of long-lasting global peace. The Yalta and Potsdam Conferences in 1945 established a stable bipolar system of international relations. The new international order was based on the rule of law, with the United Nations serving as the primary platform for international cooperation.

However, the withdrawal from the global stage of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked not the new stability, but the ongoing collapse of this system, leading to a gradual disintegration of both the Yalta-Potsdam framework and the traditional Westphalian system that emphasized national sovereignty. As a result, we are now witnessing a shift towards increased turbulence, global competition and instability, with a rise in regional conflicts around the world.

Strategic uncertainty on a global scale is evident in various dimensions such as political, institutional, economic, and ideological ones. We can observe the emergence of rising powers and new regional hegemons, the formation of new groups of influence worldwide, the confrontation of values and visions of the future. The U.S.-led order built on the military and financial superiority of one state with economic sanctions as instrument of coercion and punishment provokes the rising voices of protest all over the world. As a result, the unipolar structure of the international system is visibly breaking.

Turkey, in particular, shows dissatisfaction with the current international order, exacerbated by the endless EU membership process, domination of ‘Big Five’ in U.N.’s Security Council and growing economic and political pressure from the United States. The discord between Turkey and this

unipolar world order began with the 2003 Iraq War. The invasion of Iraq marked a turning point, sparking discussions about challenges to the UN-centered world order (Thakur & Sidhu, 2006; Cockayne & Samii, 2004), the crisis of a disintegrating Global Order, where the rule of law is replaced by the rule of might (Comar, 2018), emergence of the post-American world (Zakaria 2008), non-polar world (Haass, 2008) and the post-Iraq War global world order, where one can see the decline of US hegemonic power (Koçak, 2022). But the real influence of the United States is now facing such challenges as the rise of new powers, the distrust from partners, the unification of many states on an anti-Western basis on the principle ‘the West and the Rest’, and economic challenges from global powers such as China.

This strategic environment of uncertainty and multivariability brings new challenges and opportunities, as it is not clear what future holds for the upcoming international order. With the unwillingness of the great powers to provide an understandable and predictable global security architecture, regional actors are increasingly seeking ways to ensure their national security and pursue their interests, forming tactical alliances that may shift over time. Multipolarity in action does not seem yet as a *fait accompli*, and multipolar world order or polycentrism is still more potential than real.

Examining Russian-Turkish relations in this context offers new perspective. Today we are witnessing a significant rapprochement between Russia and Turkey cooperating in the economic, political, military spheres and even in the nuclear energy industry. While a strategic partnership between the two countries is on the agenda, the future of this relationship remains unpredictable. Navigating through this uncertain environment requires an understanding of both the broader strategic landscape and each state’s desired future, and the states’ self-images become a compass guiding their great journey.

This desired future is closely linked to a state’s self-image, which can be considered from the perspective of the constructivist theory of International Relations. In the following sections, we will see how Turkey constructs its image, and how this is complemented by Turkish images of Russia. By analysing these constructs, we can then use strategic thinking modelling for the potential development of Russian-Turkish relations.

TURKEY'S SELF-IMAGE IN TRANSITION

Experts point out that Turkey is actively pursuing the status of a global superpower by embracing the concept of 'Strategic Autonomy' and implementing it through various foreign policy strategies. These strategies include initiatives like advocating for UN Security Council reform with the slogan 'the world is bigger than five', as well as long-term visions such as 'Vision 2023', 'Vision 2053', and 'Vision 2071' (Gafarlı & Rognifard, 2023). The ambitious 'Century of Turkey' plan is also a part of this grand strategy.

The first step of Turkey on this way is to elevate its international standing by becoming an influential or decisive actor, regional leader, or even a multipower, leveraging its economic, political, and cultural influence. As a result, Turkey actively engages in foreign relations and strategic activities in its neighbourhood, positioning itself as a significant player state on the world stage (Ekinçi, 2010).

At the same time, geopolitical representations and the boundaries of this neighbourhood may change, expanding to include significant territories, such as the Balkans, Black Sea, and Caspian regions, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. This neighbourhood encompasses the Eurasian continent, or the Afro-Eurasian space, forming, according to Kardaş (2019), Turkey's own geopolitical vision, in which it is the one and only center power.

Turkey emphasizes its Ottoman heritage, rich history, linguistic and religious connections in order to enhance its role in the strategic neighbourhood, creating its own image as a legitimate regional hub of attraction. One of the key concepts is the 'civilization center' causing the leadership role of Turkey in the Islamic world as the defender of faith globally. Additionally, Turkey presents a special image as a stabilising power, defender of the underprivileged, prioritising moralist approach as an impartial and just force, or even an anti-imperialist state.

These idealistic, geopolitical, and civilizational approaches to defining its own identity as the central state is complemented in Turkey by a more pragmatic view of itself as a middle state. This pragmatic viewpoint, influenced by the so called Sèvres syndrome, allows Turkey to acknowledge not just its strengths and successes but also its limitations, guiding its choice of a cautious and balanced strategy.

Turkey's self-awareness has been deeply affected by the events of the First World War and the subsequent disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. This awareness of being economically, culturally, and politically on the periphery of 'Civilized World' has led Turkey to align itself towards the West and the great powers, recognising its dependence on them.

Despite setbacks and disappointments, Turkey remains a candidate for EU membership, a long-standing member of the Western bloc, and part of the Transatlantic Alliance (Erşen & Köstem, 2020; Öniş & Yılmaz, 2015). However, there is a growing dissatisfaction within Turkey regarding its current position, leading to a shift in self-image towards increasing its own importance on the global stage. This shift can be seen in terms such as 'promising power', 'emerging power', and 'rising power' (Dal & Gşk, 2014; Öniş & Yılmaz, 2015) being used to describe Turkey in a changing global order.

The simultaneous focus on Turkey's growth can lead to considerations of balancing between a small power and a middle power status (Baba & Önsoy, 2016), or the effectiveness of a 'restrained middle power' concept (Oğuzlu, 2023). These two strategic lines of self-identification are united by a hybrid option – the perception of Turkey as a re-emerging power, seeking to restore its importance on the world stage.

This view, rooted in imperial legacy and post-imperial nostalgia, can lead to expectations that surpass Turkey's actual capabilities, resulting in a mismatch between expectations and capacity (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2015). Additionally, Turkey's geopolitical aspirations are met with a critical self-perception, with some viewing Turkey as a revisionist state or even a 'kingmaker' (Özpek & Demirağ, 2014). On the other hand, due to this revisionism Turkey has been successful in activating its foreign policy and taking on the role of a peacemaker and a mediator in regional crises and conflicts.

TURKISH IMAGES OF RUSSIA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS

The perception of Russia in Turkey is as varied as Turkey's own self-image. While Russia is often viewed as a powerful force in the region and on the global stage, it is not classified as a great power. In the regional context, both Russia and Turkey are seen as significant powerhouses in Eurasia (Koçak, 2022), leading to a sense of competition for influence and the need to negotiate and divide spheres of interest.

Another common perception of Russia is that of a ‘defeated hegemon’, a great power that has lost some of its dominance (Sümer, 2021). These views are shaped by the historical context of the region, including events like the Cold War and the rise of China as a global power.

The conflict subject for Russia and Turkey is the challenge of defining their extensive shared neighborhood (Dilmaç, 2018). Turkey sees Russia as the most important and powerful state in its immediate vicinity (Aktürk, 2014), but does not recognize the ‘Near Abroad Doctrine’ of Russia. The latter asserts Russia’s natural interest in or privileged position on the post-Soviet space due to political, economic, and cultural ties, as well as the large number of compatriots still residing in the territories of newly formed post-Soviet states (Koçak, 2022; Aktürk, 2013). This discrepancy is further complicated by the Turkish idea of ‘yakın çevre’ (Özkan, 2010), that includes many, if not all post-Soviet states in imagined geography of Turkey’s near space.

Despite these tensions, there is also a positive and friendly image of Russia in Turkey, driven by pragmatic considerations of economic and political benefits. This rapport is bolstered by a shared desire for a multipolar world, similar traditional values, and a conservative orientation among political elites in both countries, which leads to both ideological and political-economic conflicts with the collective West.

An alliance between Russia and Turkey, based on anti-Western sentiments and the counter-hegemonic discourse of the “Club of Unrepresented”, serves to overcome the ongoing isolation of both countries (Balta, 2019; Gafarlı & Roknifard, 2023). The ideological aspect of relationship between the two states plays a significant role, enabling Turkey to maintain friendly ties with Russia while still remaining part of NATO. However, this provokes concerns about the potential damage to Turkey’s relations with Western countries due to its closeness with Russia.

The alliance between Russia and Turkey is seen by Turkish experts as a tactical move to counterbalance US influence (Kardaş, 2022; Ersen & Köstem 2020). Yet, the cost of this friendship has become a point of contention, with fears that Turkey could be pulled away from its Western partners by Russian influence, particularly in military-technical cooperation (Yılmaz, 2021; Kirişçi & Köstem, 2018).

Russia is also seen in Turkey as a dominant force, which poses a source of concern. There is a popular image of Russia as an energy superpower and energy giant (Ersen & Köstem, 2020; Tiftikçigil & Yesevi, 2014) leveraging its economic strength in political negotiations. Additionally, as a nuclear power with a military presence, Russia is perceived as a dangerous entity. Furthermore, Russia's active involvement in the United Nations Security Council, which Turkish leadership has suggested should be disbanded as a 'Club of Privileged', adds to the complexities of its image in Turkey. Turkey views the economic cooperation as asymmetric in Russia's favour (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2015; Kardaş, 2019; Köstem, 2018), leading to a growing energy dependence and a trade deficit for Turkey, highlighting Russia's strategic advantages (Örmeci, 2019).

The main concern in Turkey is the perceived political influence of Russia in its strategic neighbourhood, which is seen as revisionist, aggressive, and expansionist (Kardaş, 2022; Koçak, 2023). This perception is shaped by the experience of the Cold War rather than historical context, leading to Russia being viewed as a primary enemy threatening national security and even territorial integrity of Turkey (Çelikpala, 2015).

There is a belief that Russia seeks to surround and eliminate Turkey, creating a sense of a besieged fortress and an enhanced security threat. In this view, the Black Sea, Caucasus region, Balkans, and Eastern Europe become a stage for conflicts due to Russia's expansive ambitions. It has been stated that Russia employs hybrid warfare techniques in Ukraine and South Ossetia, and also waged a proxy war against Turkey and its strategic allies during armed conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria (Teifukova & Erol, 2017; Aktürk, 2014; Öniş & Yılmaz, 2015).

However, Russian-Turkish joint diplomatic initiatives and a commitment to peaceful resolutions suggest otherwise. Russia does not view its presence in the Middle East as a threat to Turkey's interests and has worked with Turkey on various regional issues (Mamedov&Lukyanov, 2018). Russia remains committed to the principles of a peaceful resolution of the conflicts in the Caucasus. Since 2020, Russia has been working with Turkey in this regard. The joint Russian-Turkish center for monitoring the ceasefire regime and all military operations in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone is worthy of mention in this context.

As for the Black Sea, it has always been of strategic significance to Russia, as it is the only Russian year-round shipping route to the world markets. The

Black Sea's strategic significance to Russia and its dependence on Turkey for access through the narrow straits further highlight the complexities and interdependence of the Russian-Turkish relationship.

Russia's foreign policy strategy follows a defensive approach, notably in response to NATO's expansion towards its border. The so-called eastern enlargements of 1999 and 2004 turned the Black Sea region into a zone of conflict between Russia and NATO, and with the ongoing accession of Finland and Sweden to the Trans-Atlantic Partnership, the situation has further deteriorated in the Baltic Sea also.

The more harmful aspect in terms of consequences is the persistent perception in Turkey since the Cold War regarding Turkey as a NATO shield and the frontline of Western struggle against Russia. In this framework, Turkey gets the role as a state that can slow down, hinder, and stop the expansion of Russian influence (Aktürk, 2014). This situation deprives Turkey of desired strategic autonomy and relegates it to the position of a US satellite and the periphery of the West, where political decisions are made. Such a position also hinders Turkey's ability to implement its plans for achieving strategic autonomy, as well as its tactics of 'multi-vector balancing' (Gafarlı & Roknifard, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The inconsistencies in the Turkish self-images and its perceptions of Russia contribute to the unpredictable and sometimes unstable nature of Russian-Turkish relations. Although sometimes in our minds and hearts we can look better than in our deeds, the shared image we present and our partner's perception of us determine the nature of our relationship.

The role Turkey plays in shaping the future of bilateral relations with Russia, given Russia's traditionally reactive, not proactive foreign policy, is crucial. This role can potentially influence Russia's foreign policy positively, paving the way for a strategic partnership or multidimensional partnership to overcome uncertainties. The shared neighborhood between the two states necessitates finding optimal ways to interact, considering the historical ups and downs in bilateral relations and the calculation of potential risks and future effects.

Whether it will be a global Eurasian partnership, cooperation of Turkey with Russia and China in structures like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Turkey's participation in the BRICS, or perhaps a special

joint Russian-Turkish structure for managing the regional agenda, is determined by the constructed images of our states. The establishment of the Russian-Turkish high-level cooperation council in 2010 and common diplomatic negotiation platforms in recent years can serve as far-reaching examples of successful cooperation and signs of an emerging strategic shift.

Turkey and Russia can maintain strategic or multidimensional partnership and cooperation to overcome the New Age of Uncertainty, or an alliance for solutions to regional and security challenges. In both cases it is essential to create an accurate but positive image of the neighbour with whom we can be friends during times of strength and weakness. Otherwise, as the international system changes, Russia and Turkey could find themselves once again on opposite sides in a conflict caused by values and interests that are foreign to both parties.

To prevent potential geopolitical rivalries and conflicts between the two states in the future, it is necessary to conduct further analysis of Russia's and Turkey's self-images and their role-models. We also need to answer the question of whether a geopolitical rivalry between these two strong neighbour countries is unavoidable, and if so, to what extent.

We can state that it is essential for both Russia and Turkey to cultivate a positive image of each other to build a more stable and peaceful future. By promoting conflict resolution, and respect for sovereignty, both countries can work towards a more harmonious and secure world for all, as the Great Uncertainty can be overcome just by Great Cooperation.

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