

More Problems with More Neighbors: Turkey's Relations with Russia

Wherever one looks, including Russia, Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" policy is encountering difficulties. Russo-Turkish relations encompass a multi-regional agenda from the Balkans to Central Asia, including the Caucasus and the Middle East, as well as their bilateral energy relations. The emerging trend exemplifies this policy's difficulties. Furthermore, those difficulties will probably increase.

Syria and Missile Defense

Turkey's demands that Syrian President Bashar Assad step down, because of his violent repression of political protests, clashes with Russia's support for him and staunch opposition to any foreign intervention in Syria.ⁱ Arguably the longer civil strife there continues, the more pressures will build for overt Turkish intervention. Indeed, on November 28, 2011, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu raised the military option only to be warned about it by Russia.ⁱⁱ If intervention occurs, it is as likely as not to be associated with or in the name of Europe and trigger further Russian ire. In the larger context, Turkey's converging posture with the West towards the Arab revolutions is an important factor drawing Turkey, Europe, and the United States closer together, while distancing Turkey from Russia and Iran.ⁱⁱⁱ

About the Atlantic Council: The Atlantic Council is a bipartisan, non-profit organization committed to renewing the transatlantic community for 21st century global challenges by promoting constructive and cooperative US and European leadership in the world. The Council's Program on Transatlantic Relations promotes dialogue on major issues affecting the transatlantic relationship and the ability of the United States and its European allies to respond to global challenges.

The recommendations presented in this issue brief were drawn from a Council workshop on December 14 and 15, 2011 in Washington, DC. Sponsored by the US Army War College and the Institute for Turkish Studies at Georgetown, the workshop brought together 60 top US, European and Turkish experts and policymakers to discuss Turkey's relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States, and the changing strategic context among them. We are grateful for the insights of the workshop participants, but they bear no responsibility for the content of this paper. The findings and conclusions presented in this paper are solely the views of the author.

Indeed, Turkey already competes strongly with Iran over Azerbaijan, which Iran is now openly threatening.^{iv} Iran's ambassador to Russia, Ali Akbar Salehi, recently expressed Iran's desire to be Russia's dependable ally and a leading pro-Iranian Russian analyst, Radzhab Safarov, Director of the Center for the Study of Modern Iran, followed up by saying that "the rapprochement of Tehran and Moscow will make it possible to hinder the shortsighted policy of Turkey, which is installing American missile defenses."^v Thus, to the degree that Turkey becomes a consistent advocate of democracy in its neighborhood, its relations with Russia will suffer. As one Turkish official put it,

Ankara came to a conclusion that as democracy is spreading around its neighborhood, Turkey only benefits from it. Countries like Bulgaria, Romania, and Georgia are testament(s) to this reality when we look at the great relations Turkey is having with these countries compared with the past. "Just like domino theory" said the official, --- "we see democracy as an unstoppable force of history and we arrived at its doorstep."^{vi}

Second, in September 2011, Turkey agreed to host a US radar as part of the developing missile defense system in Europe. It may have done so because NATO warned that if it bought Russian or Chinese air and missile defense systems that are incompatible with NATO's systems it would then operate without NATO's intelligence on incoming ballistic missiles.^{vii} Ankara also agreed that the United States would share this system's data and intelligence assessments with all allies, including Israel. According to US officials, this is "probably the biggest strategic decision between the United States and Turkey in the past 15 or 20 years."^{viii} But it also implicates Turkey in Russia's hostile

response to these missile defenses as announced by President Medvedev on November 23, 2011. Medvedev announced the following decisions,

First, I am instructing the Defence Ministry to immediately put the missile attack early warning radar station in Kaliningrad on combat alert. Second, protective cover of Russia's strategic nuclear weapons will be reinforced as a priority measure under the program to develop our air and space defenses. Third, the new strategic ballistic missiles commissioned by the Strategic Missile Forces and the Navy will be equipped with advanced missile defense penetration systems and new highly effective warheads. Fourth, I have instructed the Armed Forces to draw up measures for disabling missile defense system data and guidance systems if need be. These measures will be adequate, effective, and low-cost. Fifth, if the above measures prove insufficient, the Russian Federation will deploy modern offensive weapon systems in the west and south of the country, ensuring our ability to take out any part of the US missile defense system in Europe. One step in this process will be to deploy Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad Region. Other measures to counter the European missile defense system will be drawn up and implemented as necessary. Furthermore, if the situation continues to develop not to Russia's favor, we reserve the right to discontinue further disarmament and arms control

measures. Besides, given the intrinsic link between strategic offensive and defensive arms, conditions for our withdrawal from the New START Treaty could also arise, and this option is enshrined in the treaty. ix

Thus, Turkey and its allies will become targets of Russia's nuclear and conventional missiles, should a new European arms race develop with the end of the START treaty, even though Russia sells military technology to Turkey, and has a substantial economic trade and reciprocal investment process with it.^x In the context of mounting frictions over other issues outlined here, this almost inevitably means that a cycle of recriminations and tension in Russo-Turkish relations will intensify and that Turkey will draw closer to its NATO allies and the United States than has been the case for many years.^{xi} Iran followed suit by announcing that it too would target the installations in Turkey if it is threatened, obviously counting on Russian diplomatic support in making this move.^{xii}

Energy

These are not the only issues roiling the waters of Russo-Turkish relations. On October 1, 2011, Turkey announced that it would not renew the purchase of Russian gas delivered through the Western Balkan pipeline route after 2012. The official reason was the high price of Russian gas. Since Gazprom would not grant the discounted prices it sought in a depressed market, Turkey annulled the agreement.^{xiii} Turkey's decision accords with the European and Chinese stance towards Russian gas demanding lower prices and an end to rigid, multi-year take or pay contracts.^{xiv} Russian media and business circles immediately and characteristically reacted by claiming that this was part of a concerted anti-Russian attack by Europe and Turkey on Russian gas policy.^{xv} The

truth is rather different and casts a critical light on both states' policies.

Turkey already imports about 60% of its gas from Russia and therefore, worries about strategic over-dependence. Second, Gazprom has rebuffed Turkey's requests for easing the onerous take or pay clauses in their contract that raises Turkish payments even as imports contract.^{xvi} Russia has also generally refused to accede to other customers' requests of price cuts. So, Turkey signaled that it would no longer depend exclusively on Russian gas and had other options. Ankara answered its domestic critics who complain about the primacy of the state company BOTAS, by allowing private importers to assume the contracts with Gazprom in search of better prices.^{xvii} Turkey also hopes for contracts with Egypt, Iraq, the ITGI interconnector from Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan through the projected Nabucco pipeline and possibly hopes to force its way into the newly discovered Eastern Mediterranean gas fields.

Turkey immediately turned to Azerbaijan and signed a major gas deal with it on October 25, 2011. This deal is very important and represents a complex of significant agreements. Turkey will get 6 billion cubic meters (BCM) of gas from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz-2 field, recovering what it lost from Russia, and serve as transit point for another 10 BCM to Europe through spare capacities in Turkey's pipelines. These accords also envisage building another pipeline for Azeri gas through Turkey while the first line's operation should go into effect by 2017 and send gas until 2043. These agreements ensure that Azeri gas can traverse a dedicated infrastructure to Turkey and then to Europe either through the Nabucco pipeline or through one of the many other alternative pipelines currently under consideration.^{xviii} These agreements also resolve all issues of gas transit between SOCAR, Azerbaijan's company, and BOTAS, Turkey's state-run energy

firm, that essentially replace Gazprom with Azerbaijan as a gas supplier to Turkey.

Finally, and worse for Russia, these accords open the way for Moscow's greatest fear, namely the southern corridor for gas that the EU is strongly campaigning for and by which Turkmen and Azeri gas (if not also Kazakh gas) will bypass Russia, flow directly to Europe, and strike a decisive blow at Gazprom and Moscow's power over Europe. Gazprom will lose significant income and Russia considerable political leverage as Azerbaijan is charging a significantly lower price to Turkey and got a side payment to make up the difference in 2012 between that and what Gazprom charged.

Furthermore, this deal is seen in the West as complementing the Nabucco pipeline, ensuring that Azeri gas reaches Europe, and cements an overall geopolitical reconciliation between Ankara and Baku. Not surprisingly, Washington also welcomed the deal.^{xix} BP is also proposing a new concept and system for transporting Azeri gas to Eastern Europe called the South-East Europe Pipeline (SEEP) that would use existing pipelines while leaving open for the future the option of Turkmen gas reaching Europe. This too would, if implemented, undermine Russia's South Stream pipeline grand design of dominating gas flows from Eurasia to Europe.^{xx} Ultimately this deal eliminates all legal and political barriers to transporting Azeri gas through Turkey to Europe through any of the potential pipeline alternatives. The consortium operating Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz -2 field can now go forward knowing it has a secure market and pipeline. Meanwhile, Turkey reduces its current account deficit by an estimated \$2 billion annually, the Southern Corridor championed by the United States and EU can now open without impediments, and the way is open for Turkmenistan to supply gas to Europe directly as it wants to do rather than through Russia. The EU is planning just such a pipeline that would link

Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan along the Caspian Sea's seabed.^{xxi}

We should not underestimate the potency of this threat to Russia. Moscow has done everything it could to intimidate Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan from shipping gas directly to Europe and destroying its grand strategic design of monopolizing gas flows to Europe and thus controlling the CIS.^{xxii} On October 19, 2011, Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry blasted Russia's politicized objections to it participating in a Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP), stated that such a pipeline was an objective vital economic interest of Turkmenistan, rebuked Moscow for "distorting the essence and gist of Turkmenistan's energy policy," and announced that the discussions with Europe would continue.^{xxiii} Moscow's reply came soon. On November 15, 2011, Valery Yazev, Vice-Speaker of the Russian Duma and head of the Russian Gas Society, openly threatened Turkmenistan with the Russian incitement of an "Arab Spring" if it did not renounce its "neutrality" and independent sovereign foreign policy, including its desire to align with Nabucco. Yazev said that,

Given the instructive experience with UN resolutions on Libya and the political consequences of their being 'shielded from the air' by NATO forces, Turkmenistan will soon understand that only the principled positions of Russia and China in the UN Security Council and its involvement in regional international organizations – such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Eurasian Economic Union – can protect it from similar resolutions.^{xxiv}

Thus Russian and Turkish energy interests are now

visibly on a collision course. Turkey's moves against Gazprom and Moscow were apparently long-planned. Certainly, Turkish oil and gas deals with Moscow have not come to fruition with Turkey stalling on approval of South Stream and Moscow being reluctant to commit to an oil pipeline to Turkey because of Turkish tariffs.^{xxv} Russian sources see Russia's recent deals with European governments and firms over the projected South Stream pipeline and Turkey's desire to join the EU as driving this "anti-Russian" campaign, while actually the EU is very divided over South Stream.^{xxvi} It is clear that as Russian pressure on Ukraine to hand over its gas pipeline network to Moscow grows; Turkey's dependence on Russian gas becomes more of a liability and increases its one-sided dependence on Russia while Moscow thinks it can disregard Turkish economic interests as suggested above. Indeed, Gazprom's reluctance or even refusal to reduce its prices unless compelled to do so is clearly triggering resistance throughout Europe, including Turkey. Aiding this resistance, is the fact that European customers are relying on the appearance of Qatari and Algerian LNG or shale gas. Therefore, Moscow must hope to restore the cuts in deliveries by making deals with private Turkish importers who are ready to negotiate terms. But it is unlikely they will accept the onerous take or pay clauses and high prices that feature so prominently in Gazprom's contracts.

The Caucasus and Cyprus

Bilateral tensions are also now visible in the Caucasus. The Azeri-Turkish reconciliation precludes normalization with Armenia, which still receives Russian military assistance against the possibility of renewed fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh.^{xxvii} Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan told students in July, that future generations would and should undertake the task of reclaiming what was once Western Armenia, historically part of the

medieval Armenian kingdom, but part of Turkey ever since the Ottoman Empire. Ankara's response was predictable. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan immediately demanded an apology, but there has been no response. Worse, Sargsyan admitted that Armeno-Turkish relations are deadlocked and clearly no progress here is to be expected.^{xxviii}

Similarly, Armenian political scientist Arman Melikyan claims that in earlier tripartite negotiations in 2011 Russia ostensibly "brokered" a peace plan for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moscow was to arrange for the surrender of liberated territories, thereby ensuring its military presence in return and establishing a network of military bases in Azerbaijan to prevent any further cooperation between Azerbaijan and NATO. While Armenian authorities reportedly accepted this plan; Baku refused to do so and saved Armenia, which clearly wants to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh.^{xxix} Since recent Wiki leaks revelations show that Azerbaijan desires NATO's full cooperation and says it would even consider membership if not for implied Russian and Iranian opposition, its rejection of this transparent neo-imperialist Russian ploy is hardly surprising.^{xxx}

Moreover, these revelations show the danger in leaving the initiative in negotiating an end to the conflict in Russia's hands alone. Azeri officials like Elchin Gusseyinli of the Ministry of International Affairs have accused the OSCE of passivity and support for Armenia rather than Azerbaijan's just position. Gusseyinli rightly cited the Armeno-Russian military collaboration that underscores the conflict and reflects Moscow's unrelenting desire to recover some of its lost imperial heritage in the Caucasus. In response to Moscow and Yerevan, Turkish Defense Minister, Ismet Yilmaz, said in Baku that Turkey is ready to support and join with the Azeri army in defense production. Both states

have also signed an agreement on strategic cooperation and formed a high advisory council. Thus Azerbaijan has apparently decided to reject Moscow's demand that it subordinate its defense and security policy to Moscow.^{xxxii}

In another irritation, a Russian strike team of eight agents killed three Chechens in Istanbul, on September 16, execution-style in broad daylight. This obviously irritated Turkish officials, not just because there are many sympathizers with the Chechens and other North Caucasus insurgents in Turkey, but also because of the blatant disregard for Turkish sovereignty.

Finally, Turkey's threats against Cyprus and Israel due to their exploration and drilling for gas in the Eastern Mediterranean caused concern in Russia. Moscow recently organized a large loan to Cyprus to sustain it against a crisis should Greece default because so many Russian accounts are held in Cyprus' banks and then reinvested in Russia or used to launder the elite's money by cycling it out of Russia into the global banking system. Clearly Moscow cannot allow Cyprus to go under; but Turkish threats deeply disturb both Cyprus and Russia. Indeed, once Turkey's navy openly threatened Cyprus, for signing an agreement with the Texas based firm, Noble Energy that is a partner with Israel in developing Israel's maritime gas fields, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly backed Cyprus' right to develop its Mediterranean gas. Cyprus in turn labeled Moscow, "a shield against any threats by Turkey."^{xxxiii} Furthermore, Russia dispatched an aircraft carrier with fighter planes, and at least one submarine to Cyprus as a show of support for an open example of gunboat diplomacy.^{xxxiii}

Consequently, some Russian media, like Pravda, now accuse Ankara of a neo-Ottoman policy to revive the Ottoman empire. Other writers note that Russia attacked Turkey's quest for influence

among the Bosnians, a point that inflames Russia due to its strong support for the Orthodox Serbs.^{xxxiv} In fact, Moscow's flamboyant ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, recently proposed giving the Kosovar Serbs Russian citizenship (making them eligible for military defense by Russia).^{xxxv} According to Israel's former UN ambassador, Dore Gold, when Russia looks at Turkey it sees signs of a pan-Islamic policy aiming at support from the Arab and Muslim communities in the Balkans. This naturally is antipathetic to Moscow's courtship of the Orthodox Serbs, let alone Russia's anxiety regarding the political loyalty of its own growing Muslim population, many of whom speak Turkish and are more attuned to Sunni-based organizations in Turkey than to Iranian Shiism.^{xxxvi}

Conclusions

These developments are part of a larger theme. The idea of "zero problems with neighbors," while Turkey serenely navigates along the complex shoals of Mediterranean Europe, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, and gains leverage throughout these zones, has proven unsustainable. There are too many issues that preclude upholding this posture while everyone else is pursuing their own national interests and Turkey cannot stop them. The failure of neighboring governments like Syria, Russia, and Iran to heed Turkish interests clearly betokens the failure of Turkey's policy to increase Turkey's standing and leverage among its neighbors, especially when the issues involved are central to those governments' economic, defense, and political objectives. This failure could then translate as well into domestic opposition.

Consequently, the failure of the "zero problems with neighbors" policy could lead to serious domestic political costs. Turkey's recent foreign policy moves have estranged Israel, Syria, Cyprus, Greece, Russia, and Iran, and caused major

headaches for US policymakers trying to tamp down the angry rhetoric against Israel, Turkey's erstwhile ally. Although Russian threats in the Caucasus and bullying tactics regarding energy in Southeastern Europe demonstrate Moscow's unregenerate neo-imperialism and traditional outlook towards these areas, the fundamental concept of Turkish foreign policy has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Not surprisingly, Turkey is now lashing out trying to assert itself in forceful rhetoric, which cannot be sustained by equally forceful deeds.

It remains to be seen how Ankara will extricate itself from its largely self-made difficulties. Turkey possesses considerable assets and strategic importance. Nonetheless, it has clearly overreached and based its foreign policy on unwarranted and unsustainable presuppositions. Since greater powers than Turkey have failed to secure lasting influence in their Southeastern European and Middle Eastern policies, Ankara should have realized that it could not supplant them and aimed at more modest objectives. Certainly, Turkey cannot resist Russian encroachments in the Caucasus and Europe, resolve the Israel-Arab conflict, ensure good governance in Syria, and defend itself against Iran all by itself.

Hopefully, upon sober reflection, Ankara will realize its need for democratic friends and partners, if not allies, as in the case of missile defense. This might even mean a return in the direction of the historic Kemalist orientation towards Europe that has been so antithetical to the AKP Party's ideology (though not necessarily all of its practice). Although the quest for partnership within Europe has run aground in the past, a carefully prepared and more targeted, even modest, objective may be within reach, especially on energy policy and missile defenses if Ankara can draw the appropriate lessons from its current predicament.

Hopefully, Ankara can learn from these sobering and disappointing experiences lest it experience even more and possibly greater rebuffs in the future.

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Notes

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