


TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS: THE FLUCTUATIONS BETWEEN HISTORICAL HOSTILITY AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Mokhmad Akhiyadov



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The five centuries-old Turkish-Russian relations are on the one hand filled with a history of war, on the other, full of intense trade and cultural relations. While the disagreements between the two countries stem from the geopolitical competition in certain regions, the economy and trade, especially the energy sector, continue to be the main areas of cooperation.

However, it cannot be said that the governments of the two countries make a clear distinction between their political and economic interests. Because while the deepening of economic cooperation brings positive results in bilateral relations, various regional disagreements between the two countries may cause their economic ties to break. The most obvious example of this was experienced in the Turkey's downing of a Russian military plane in 2015. Given the political and economic instability in the regions around Russia and Turkey, as well

as the relations between these two countries in regions such as Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, and Libya, it becomes clear that relations between Turkey and Russia will have to pass important tests in the coming period.

Since its establishment, Turkish-Russian relations have gone through many obstacles. One of them emerged at the end of the 20th century when the USSR collapsed. During this period, rapid changes began in the relations between the two countries. In the 1990s, the transformation of Turkish-Russian relations was inevitable. Because with the collapse of the USSR, new regional opportunities arose for Turkish foreign policy and consequently Turkey began to pursue an active foreign policy towards the newly independent countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Thus, in the 1990s, Turkey-Russia relations were evaluated on their activities in these two regions.

This naturally led to new geopolitical competition and tension in relations between Turkey and Russia. Because Russia, which believes that it has vital interests in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, is an actor that historically had a political, military, and economic influence on these regions.

Yet by the end of the 1990s, the leadership of the two countries, despite the existing mutual rivalry in many issues, began to develop their relations in areas where their interests coincide. This was undoubtedly an area of the economy in general, especially in the energy sector. In this context, the early 2000s - when Vladimir Putin was elected president in Russia and the Justice and Development Party won the elections in Turkey - can be defined as a period of accelerating the transition from competition to a multifaceted partnership in relations between the two countries. Since that date, issues of bilateral relations considered to have a negative impact (the struggle for the independence of Chechnya, the Kurdish issue, and Turkey's policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus) were removed from the agenda, instead, they began to discuss such issues as the security of the Black Sea and the construction of energy pipelines.

As a result of these and similar events, by the 2010s, both Turkey and Russia agreed that they could move from a multifaceted partnership to a strategic partnership in their bilateral relations. The most important step in this direction was the *Joint Declaration on Progress towards a New Stage in Relations between Russia and Turkey and Continued Development of Friendship and Multifaceted Partnership* signed by both countries in 2009 during Turkish President Abdullah Gül's visit to Moscow.

But Turkey and Russia found themselves on opposite sides of each other in the Syrian and Libyan crises. And in 2014, Crimea was annexed by Russia; hence the relations between the two countries began to deteriorate rapidly. However, it is safe to say that the Russian plane downing in 2015 caused the bilateral relations to deteriorate completely. Following intense contacts between the two sides, relations entered

into a normalization process as of mid-2016, the political dialogue was re-established, and various energy projects that were previously frozen began to be implemented gradually.

Despite the developing relations, economic data shows that bilateral trade between the two countries is far below its real potential. For example, the total foreign trade volume between the two countries, which was around 38 billion dollars in 2008, decreased to approximately 26 billion dollars in 2019. Claims that the biggest break of Turkey-Russia economic relations was due to the downing of the Russian plane in 2015 seem to be unfounded. Because of the foreign trade volume, which was 24 billion dollars before the plane crisis, only reached 25 billion dollars by 2020.

However, there is a sharp asymmetry in Turkey-Russia's economic and commercial relations. Turkey, which imports natural resources from Russia, exports goods such as textiles and food. Also, the fact that Russia is investing in Turkey's strategic sectors gives it an edge in any political dispute between the two countries.

Therefore, since 2015, Turkey has made various efforts to reduce its dependence on Russia in the energy sector. Since then, it has rapidly increased its liquefied natural gas purchases and reduced natural gas imports from Russia. For example, Turkey's imports of Russian gas amount in the first half of 2020 have decreased by around 40%. This may lead to a reconsideration of agreements between Russian and Turkish energy companies in the upcoming period. All these events could affect the basis of Turkish-Russian relations. The fact that various geopolitical issues between the two countries over the past few years have prevented cooperation in the energy field should be read in this context. Thus, while common energy projects were at the center of Russian-Turkish relations until 2015, in recent years the two countries have begun to face political and military challenges in regions such as the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, Caucasus, and the Black Sea regions. As a matter of fact, this change has clearly emerged in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which started on

September 27 and lasted until November 10, although it seems to have been settled.

One of the results of the Karabakh war is the likelihood of a new highway between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, thanks to which Turkey will directly connect with Central Asia. And this greatly worries Russia, for which these regions are important from its security perspective. Indeed, as soon as the topic of the corridor connecting Turkey and Central Asia appeared on the agenda, the Russian public began to discuss the Great Turanian Union, supposedly Turkey's plan. After that Moscow took an important step towards securing its presence in the region.

As a result, a meeting was held between the foreign ministers of Russia and the five states of Central Asia on October 15, 2020, and a declaration was adopted stating that the existing strategic cooperation between these states, especially in the military field, will be further developed. Therefore, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh is a much broader geopolitical struggle than a territorial dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In this context, it should be seen as a power struggle in the Caucasus and Central Asia between regional powers such as Turkey and Russia.

Ukraine: A New Crisis Of Turkey-Russia Relations

Before the end of the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh, signals of a new crisis began to emerge in Turkish-Russian relations. These signals began to come from Ukraine. Russia perceives the steady strengthening of the Turkish-Ukrainian strategic partnership as a threat because it also has important national interests in the Black Sea region. In other words, Russia sees the deepening of the cooperation between these two countries as NATO'S expansion. However, the main reason for including Turkish-Ukrainian cooperation in Moscow's agenda is the Turkish Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV).

Ukraine, having made sure of the success of the Turkish UCAVs, especially after the operations in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, has already

purchased six UCAVs of the Bayraktar TB2 type. It is stated that it plans to increase this number to 50 in a short time. Ukraine has gone even further and plans to create a joint venture with Turkey to produce UCAVs. Turkey and Ukraine, which are rapidly strengthening their military alliance, signed a Framework Agreement on Military Cooperation on October 16, 2020. And Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkey considers Ukraine a key country for ensuring stability, peace, and prosperity in the Black Sea region.

However, what's most important of all is that Ukraine has already signaled that it will use the Turkish-made UCAVs against the Russian-backed separatists in the eastern regions of the country. Moscow perceives the deepening military alliance between Ankara and Kyiv as a challenge to itself. Because this time, after Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkish UCAs have come very close to the Russian borders. In this context, in recent years, Turkey's success in developing its industry for the production of military unmanned aerial vehicles is already an element of the rebalancing between Turkey and Russia.

At the beginning of the 18th century, with the acceleration of Russia's expansion towards the south, the biggest conflicts in Turkish-Russian relations emerged over the Caucasus and the Black Sea regions. A veiled struggle is still being carried out between the two countries in these regions. However, the two states share their views in some aspects. For example, both Turkey and Russia approach the current world order in the same way. The biggest similarities here are that they do not want to renounce their sovereignty - as in the EU example - and accordingly try to strengthen their state as an independent actor of the world system. It should also be noted that due to this similarity, the bilateral relations of these two states are based on mistrust of each other.

All this from time to time leads to significant constructive cooperation, and sometimes causes a hard struggle between the two countries. Therefore, within the Turkish-Russian bilateral

relations, on the one hand, we see such crises as the annexation of Crimea, a downed plane, wars in Syria and Libya; on the other, close cooperation in areas such as energy (Akkuyu NPP and the Turkish Stream pipeline) and military defense (purchase of S-400).

Turkish-American relations are defined by the idea that they are “allies, but cannot be strategic partners.” But Russia-Turkey relations are that of “strategic partners, but they are unlikely to be allies.” When assessing Turkish-Russian relations in an interview, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Russia has never considered Turkey as an ally and that it is only a strategic partner.

This contradictory nature of Turkey-Russia relations actually makes it possible for both sides to keep their relation flexible. As a result of this pragmatism, Turkish-Russian relations oscillate between “historical hostility” and “strategic partnership”.

Although the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War seems to have ended thanks to the cooperation between Ankara and Moscow, the risk of breaking the “geopolitical fault lines” between

the two states in different regions, especially in the Caucasus and the Black Sea basin, is still high. Russia sees the deepening of the strategic partnership between Turkey and Ukraine over the past two years as a continuation of NATO’s eastward expansion. In this context, it is likely that Russia will start provoking Turkey in other crisis regions. For example, there is already news that Russia is closely cooperating with such terrorist groups as the YPG in northern Syria. And then the fact that after the Nagorno-Karabakh War, Turkey’s plan to multiply work to strengthen relations with Central Asian countries quite annoys Russia, which has great interests in this region. On the other hand, the fact that Russia is behaving more and more aggressively towards neighboring countries in the Caucasus and the Black Sea regions (Ukraine and Georgia) is also perceived as a threat by Turkey, which is an important power in the region. As a result, it should be noted that there is a high probability that Turkey and Russia, which managed to establish cooperation in various formats in places such as Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, will soon face various problems on the Eurasian continent, especially in the Black Sea region.

