



PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 80 (1151), 15 June 2018 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski ● Bartosz Wiśniewski ● Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka ● Anna Maria Dyrer ● Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
Sebastian Płóciennik ● Patrycja Sasnal ● Justyna Szczudlik ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Tomasz Żornaczuk

Perspectives on the Russia-Turkey Partnership

Agnieszka Legucka

Russia has declared it will cooperate with Turkey on armaments, in the joint fight against terrorism, and on common energy projects. However, the main goal of the Russian authorities is to weaken Turkey's links with NATO and the EU. The relations of the two countries are characterised by ad hoc cooperation, and Turkey's regional ambitions can hinder their partnership. The Russian-Turkish rapprochement is a challenge for Poland because it is contrary to the energy interests of Central Europe and complicates the security of NATO's Eastern Flank.

Russia's Goals. The Russian Federation has tightened relations with the Republic of Turkey. It seeks to reduce U.S. influence in the Middle East and to undermine NATO cohesion, pulling Turkey away from Euro-Atlantic cooperation. In addition, Russia wants to use Turkey as a transit point for sending energy resources to Europe as well as to monopolise its energy market. Russia also tries to increase its position in the region thanks to Turkey's involvement in the peace negotiations on Syria (Astana Process).¹ However, the competition between the two countries and Turkey's regional interests may stand in the way of Russia's goals.

The Russian-Turkish rapprochement was supported by a six-fold increase in trade (in 2002, \$5 billion; in 2014, \$31 billion). Their closer relations stem from differences between Turkey and the U.S. after the Iraq war, as well as Russia's involvement in Syria. Although these contacts deteriorated after the shooting down of a Russian fighter violating Turkish airspace in November 2015, when Russia imposed an embargo on Turkish agricultural products and stopped tourist departures, by August 2016, both countries had returned to cooperation after President Erdoğan apologised for the incident.

Economy. In 2017, the Russian-Turkish trade exchange reached \$22 billion, an increase of 40% compared to the previous year, but still not to its pre-embargo level. The reason for this was the slow elimination of restrictions on Turkish products destined for the Russian market. There was also a big disproportion in trade (in 2017, exports from Russia, mainly hydrocarbons, reached \$18 billion while imports to Russia, primarily food products, amounted to \$3.5 billion). At the same time, Russians constitute the largest group of travellers visiting Turkey (4.7 million people in 2017) and are an important part of Turkey's tourism industry.

In the energy sphere, the failure of the construction of the Southern Gas Pipeline (South Stream) has led Russia to undertake smaller projects also aimed at bypassing Ukraine, including Turkish Stream (TS). At the end of April, Gazprom completed the construction of the first branch of the TS pipeline, with a capacity of 15.75 billion m³ (bcm). The second branch, with the same capacity, is to be completed in 2020 and will transit Russian gas to the Balkans. Turkey is second after Germany in Russian gas consumption. It received about 46 bcm of gas in total in 2016, of which 24 bcm (53%) was imported from Russia, followed by Iran

¹ A.M. Dyrer, "The Political and Military Consequences of Russia Involvement in Syria," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 24 (1597), 9 February 2018.

(17%) and Azerbaijan (14%). After the construction of the TS, dependence on the Russian supplier will increase.

On 26 May, Gazprom and the Turkish government signed an agreement to extend TS to Europe. However, the Russian export plans may be negatively affected by alternative energy projects running through Turkey. In particular, the TANAP gas pipeline linking Azerbaijan with Europe is bypassing Russia. On 12 June, the Turkish and Azerbaijan authorities opened it with an initial capacity of 16 bcm annually, gradually increasing to 31 bcm. Thus, the Russian energy projects may turn out to be uncompetitive for the recipients in the Balkans. At the same time, Turkey will become one of the most important transit infrastructure sites for gas sent to Southern Europe. The Turkish authorities are counting on better conditions in subsequent contracts with Gazprom (the current ones end in 2021 and 2025).

Another joint energy project is the construction of the nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, Turkey. It is to be implemented by Russian state nuclear energy firm Rosatom (which has 51% of its shares) and Russian uranium will be used for fuel. For Turkey, the investment is important because of its need to change the structure of its energy mix. However, much depends on the Turkish investors (the remaining 49%), who have not yet agreed to start construction.

Security. Russia's military involvement in Turkey's neighbourhood is a challenge to Turkish security policy. The annexation and militarisation of Crimea have increased the threat in the Turkish Straits. That is why Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly confirmed his country respects the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

In the Middle East, Russia and Turkey have a different vision of the solution to the Syrian conflict. The Russian authorities support President Bashar al-Assad, who guarantees Russia's military presence in the region (with bases in Tartu and Khmeimim). Erdoğan and Turkey, though, do not accept Assad. That was why the Turkish president supported bombing carried out on 13–14 April by the coalition of the U.S., France and UK against Syria, but which were opposed by Russia.

Nevertheless, Russia and Turkey are able to benefit from tactical cooperation in Syria. For Erdoğan, it is important to fight separatists among Kurds in the northern part of Syria. He deems them a greater threat to Turkey than Assad's regime. With the silent acquiescence of Russia, the Turkish army carried out two military operations (*Euphrates Shield* and *Olive Branch*²), which prevented the merger of Kurdish cantons in northern Syria. At the same time, these actions strengthened support for the president in Turkey. This is important in the face of upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections planned for 24 June.

Russia and Turkey also exchange intelligence data on people from the North Caucasus suspected of terrorism. In addition, in July 2017, Turkey announced it would purchase Russian-made S-400 anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems.³ This worries the Allies (the U.S. even threatened Turkey with sanctions and withholding the sale of F-35 fighters). In turn, declarations by the presidents of both Russia and Turkey to accelerate the S-400 deliveries by 2020 confirmed the political nature of the transaction. Both countries want to demonstrate their independence from the U.S.; however, while Turkey still wants the S-400 technology, the Russians have so far not agreed to send it.

In the longer term, the cooperation between Russia and Turkey may become more difficult. Russia will want Assad to regain control over the entire territory of Syria but it is unlikely the Turks will withdraw from areas they already control. Although Russia balances the Iranian influence in Syria, tensions related to the control of individual security zones cannot be ruled out.

Conclusions. The regional rivalry reduces the prospects for a deeper partnership between Russia and Turkey. In the long term, one can expect a collision of their aspirations. Russia's increasing military presence in Turkey's neighbourhood is a challenge for the latter. In the short term, Russian-Turkish relations will focus on short-term benefits, such as the Syria operations and the fight against terrorism. Implementation of the Russian goals in Turkey will depend on the level of Turkish-U.S. and Turkish-EU relations. Turkey remains the second-largest army in NATO (with the Alliance's land forces command based in Izmir). Opinion polls from this year show that 70% of Turks favoured their country remaining in Alliance structures (compared to 52% in 2010).

The further rapprochement between Russia and Turkey will complicate relations within NATO. The use of Russian equipment (S-400) by the Turks is connected with the probable presence of Russians on Turkish soil and the risk the Russians will gain sensitive information from it. Relationships with a state recognised by NATO as a threat will negatively affect interoperability within the Alliance.

However, it is in Poland's interest to support such projects as the TANAP pipeline, with contribute to the real diversification of sources and routes of energy supplies to the European Union. They will also help the countries of the Southern Caucasus.

² P. Sasnal, K. Wasilewski, "Turkish Military Operation *Olive Branch* in Syria," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 5/2018, 22 January 2018.

³ K. Wasilewski, "Turkey's Purchase of the S-400 System: Prospects and Consequences," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 81 (1523), 1 September 2017.