



RUSSIA AND TURKEY: 100 YEARS OF DIPLOMACY OR STAGNATION?

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The Russo-Turkish alliance celebrated its centennial of diplomatic relations in June 2020 against the backdrop of relatively troubled relations in recent years. The Russo-Turkish alliance is one which has been shaped by years of cooperation, trade, war, conflict, cultural influence and political unions. Despite bilateral relations dating back over five centuries, diplomatic relations only commenced in 1920 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (at the time Chairman of Turkey's Grand National Assembly) and the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, Georgy Chicherin. The inauguration of diplomatic relations marked a new beginning following the demise of both the Ottoman and Russian empires. 100 years later, bilateral relations have continued to develop. Nevertheless, the past 100 years bear witness to a multitude of complex issues, both testing and challenging the strength of the Russo-Turkish alliance. From the onset of diplomatic ties, the Russo-Turkish relationship has frequently been tested. Against this background, this paper will focus particularly on the post-Cold War era exploring three key areas of conflict for both powers which has served to shape their



relationship: relations in the Black Sea Region, Turkey's membership and involvement within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the impact upon bilateral relations, and the ongoing Syrian conflict. These three areas of divergence have been chosen as they provide a varied perspective which helps to determine whether 100 years of diplomatic relations have seen active diplomacy or rather years of managed stagnation. It will further assess to see if said diplomacy was instigated out of necessity rather than a natural progression of cooperative strategic relations.

One of the foremost areas in which we can assess to see whether Russo-Turkish relations has seen diplomacy flourish is in the Black Sea Region. As a cursory overview, the Black Sea Region has acted as an arena in which to test bilateral relations for many years. It has been the geopolitical space in which various regional conflicts have taken centre stage and set to define the terms of the Russo-Turkish alliance. Both Russia and Turkey have long seen the Black Sea Region as their area of influence and consequently points of conflict have gradually developed. Tensions in the Black Sea Region can mainly be attributed to two international developments: the 2008 Georgia War and the Crimea crisis of 2014. Both these events hastened the inevitable reality of Turkey becoming a subordinate power to Russia in the area, while Russia attained the status of a great power as a result of geopolitical shifts following both events. Turkey had a differing approach to Russia over the Georgian War predominantly due to the large Abkhaz¹ diaspora living in Turkey which resulted in the Turkish government having to support the sovereignty of Georgia. This caused diplomatic rifts between Moscow and Ankara, particularly given the subsequent creation of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Turkey's national interest directly clashed with that of Russia resulting in bilateral relations to deviate from an otherwise functioning partnership.

¹ The Abkhazian diaspora refers to an ethnic group of North-Western Caucasian descent with a large majority residing in Turkey.



2014 saw a radical shift in Eastern Europe particularly with the developments in Ukraine in 2014 perceived to be one of Russia's largest military undertakings, especially since Georgia 2008. Crimea, previously part of Ukrainian territory, which lies between the Sea of Azov and Black Sea became part of the Russian Federation following a highly contested referendum. By Crimea becoming part of Russian territory, Russia successfully reasserted regional maritime dominance. In contrast, Turkey continued to remain committed to its priority of maintaining stability across the Black Sea Region. However, with the development of events in Crimea, Turkey was fully aware its regional status would further decline. Russia proceeded to gain great power status across the Black Sea Region and thus consolidating further its regional dominance. Bilateral relations began to weaken when Turkish officials made clear they would not recognise the annexation of Crimea and labelled the actions of Russia as illegal. The issue of maritime balance shifting in favour of Russia indefinitely impacted Russo-Turkish relations. Turkey has long held a belief that only she can fulfil its obligation to maintain regional balance if she retains regional dominance. As such, Ankara was forced to rethink its policy in the Black Sea Region resulting in rifts between the two strategic powers. To that end, bilateral relations within the context of the Black Sea Region saw diplomatic channels deteriorate especially when focussing on the events of Georgia 2008 and Crimea 2014.

One of the other three key areas of conflict is Turkey's membership of NATO. This particular area has seen diplomatic relations resulting in brawls between Russia and Turkey which can be attributed to the role and influence of NATO. Turkey joined the alliance in 1952 against the backdrop of an impending Soviet threat and as Steven Cook states "we wanted Turkey in NATO because of the Cold War" (The Atlantic, 2019). Decades later, Turkey has earned its place as one of the most powerful powers in the transatlantic alliance including boasting the second largest



military army capability after the United States (US) (NATO, 2018) and contributing more than \$100 million to NATO in 2018 (The Atlantic, 2019).

Russia continues to have a troubled and complicated relationship with NATO with both oft-times on opposite ends of a policy matter. When looking at cooperation between Russia and Turkey, there have been various instances relating to security matters when differing views have been projected by both, in large part due to the influence of NATO. At the same time, Turkey has often struggled to find common ground with Western allies on key domestic matters namely on the Kurdish issue, a topic which has led to decades of frustration for Ankara. It is interesting to note here the opposing views adopted by Russia to the matter. The Turkish government categorised the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a terrorist organisation and expected its allies would support them on their policy and join in on their struggle against terrorism. As Weitz states "Turkey's frustration with the Russian government's reluctance to label the PKK organisation as a terrorist group" (Weitz, 2010: 62). To Turkey, this meant Russia was unwilling to cooperate in the fight against terrorism thus highlighting strife between the two countries. From a Turkish point of view, the very fact that the "Kremlin was eager to maintain working ties with Kurdish groups" (Winrow, 2009: 5) demonstrated to the policy-makers that Russia was not a loyal ally and indeed led to a need to revise their diplomatic strategy. By this token, we note diplomatic relations to have entered a stage of stagnation and for the relationship to wither on the vine.

While Turkey has often felt alone in their domestic fight against terrorism, there have been several occasions whereby Ankara has had to reevaluate its position with NATO, particularly seen under the AKP leadership. Continued regional conflicts have paved the way for Turkey to often distance itself from the policy position of NATO and rather project a view more aligned with Russia. To highlight this further, Turkey began the official full membership process with



the European Union (EU) in 1987 but to no avail. Yet at the same time nations from the former Soviet bloc have seen full membership granted by the EU with ease. Turkey to this day continues its extended journey for EU accession with little prospect of fulfilling its quest for full membership of the EU.

It is worth noting Turkey also began to feel alienated by its Western allies following various national crises. These include the Cyprus dispute² which many believe was the turning point for de-escalation in Turkey's bid for EU membership, subsequently losing momentum after Tayyip Erdogan assumed power. Barrinha posits that "the Cyprus issue remains a key obstacle in negotiations between Ankara and Brussels" (2014 :174) which has fuelled further estrangement between Turkey and the EU. In a similar vein, Turkey felt comparable disappointment with the US over its decision over the 2003 Iraq war. These frustrations were further solidified in 2016 following the failed coup attempt to oust President Erdogan. The episode underscored to Ankara the need to find a dependable ally outside of the Western bubble. President Putin was swift to offer his condolences to the Turkish President following the coup. Conversely, the EU was reluctant to offer a unified voice on the issue and further they were critical of the ongoing state of emergency following the coup. As such, the situation can be read as Turkey being placed in a position in which it felt isolated, alone and pushed to explore alternative allies on whom she could depend when support was needed both on domestic and international issues. In other words, Turkey did not turn to Russia due to a natural progression of the diplomatic course but rather because it saw no other alternative. With Russia offering continued support, albeit on selected issues, it seemed the most obvious path to take as an alternative to the diplomatic channels Turkey was already a part of.

² The Cyprus dispute refers to the 1974 military intervention by the Turkish Government to protect the Turkish Cypriots which resulted in the island divided in half: Northern Cyprus (Turkish) and Southern Cyprus (which remains Greek) with a line of control by the United Nations. The ongoing dispute is now commonly referred to as the 'Cyprus issue'.



There are a broad range of issues which can be analysed to determine how Russo-Turkish relations have developed post-Cold War. Nonetheless, one of the most contemporary and relevant of those cases pertains to the Syrian War. It is without a doubt that the Syrian War remains highly complex with a myriad of actors involved on the onset of the conflict. In essence, the Syrian crisis began in early 2011 with common view that it was a consequence of the events which had evolved in the region a few years earlier. As Aktürk states “Turkey is a key state pushing for the downfall of President Assad in Syria while Russia is the primary actor trying to keep the Assad regime in place” (2013: 4). From the Russian point of view, ensuring stability was vital given the importance of Tartus, the only Russian naval base in the Middle East located in Syria.

Russia and Turkey were traditionally on opposing sides of the conflict which resulted in numerous cases of strife between both nations. Nevertheless, diplomatic relations took an abrupt turn in November 2015 following the downing of a Russian SU-24 fighter jet by Turkish forces in response to Russia allegedly violating Turkish airspace close to Syria’s border. This particular event sparked a crisis for Russo-Turkish relations resulting in relations being frozen for a period of over six months. Following the SU-24 incident, President Putin stated that the downing was “a stab in the back delivered by the terrorist’s accomplices” and further asserted the episode would have “significant consequences” for Russo-Turkish relations (BBC News, 2015). Both diplomatic relations and channels were suspended with trust deeply damaged between both countries. This can be noted as a single most significant episode of Russo-Turkish diplomacy relations to have witnessed the worsening of relations so severely during the last 100 years.

The period following the SU-24 incident, conversely, saw Russo-Turkish relations thriving once again. As part of rapprochement, Turkey agreed to purchase the S-400 missile system from Russia despite NATO policy clearly prohibiting something of this scale. The S-400 deal was estimated to be worth \$2.5 billion with Russian



providing loans for up to 55% of the total amount (Köstem, 2020). The decision by Ankara to align their air defence system with the Russian military technology can be interpreted as part of a wider geopolitical realignment towards Russia, largely as a result of the Syrian conflict. The regional imbalances caused by the Syrian War has pushed Turkey to reassess her policies and subsequently resulted in Russo-Turkish relations entering a new phase in relations.

Be that as it may, Turkey is also reluctant to lose its positioning with the sphere of its Western allies. Turkey always has, and will remain, a crucial geopolitical power for the West, oft-times serving as a bridge between Europe and Asia. The US and NATO are fully aware they cannot lose the strategic support of Turkey as it enables them to maintain a direct line of communication with Moscow. Similarly, Turkey values its position as a mediator and it is unwilling to sacrifice its bargaining power upon the political stage simply to satisfy Moscow's demands. Thus, a more appropriate mode of analysis would focus on the period since the revival of bilateral relations; the Kremlin has been successful in luring Ankara to its side and ensuring a level of dependency while pitting it against its Western allies. Turkey on the other hand, after decades of frustration with the West on a broad range of issues, finally found an ally ready to offer support (broadly speaking) on key issues has caused controversy within NATO and its members. This is to a large extent due to the close personal ties enjoyed by both Presidents again underscoring their importance in the development in Russo-Turkish relations.

To conclude, this paper has assessed three case studies to determine if Russo-Turkish relations have displayed active diplomatic relations over the past 100 years or rather seen decades of diplomatic stagnation. What is most evident, however, is that post-Cold War relations most definitely took a different turn. In line with developments in the region as well as broader political changes, Turkey appears to have moved closer to Russia



particularly when looking at the period under the leadership of President Erdogan. Remaining a staunch proponent of the Transatlantic order has undoubtedly exerted pressure on contemporary Russo-Turkish relations while also contributing to the advancement of diplomatic relations with Russia. This has at times caused room for ruptures to occur with conflicting viewpoints espoused by both countries, especially noted over the Syrian War which is a central point of disagreement between Ankara and Moscow. Similarly, it appears that Turkey has often found itself unable to sit on the same side as its Western allies when looking at political conflicts. As a result, it can be stated that Turkey has turned to Russia for support out of necessity. This is a crucial point to underscore: *The Russo-Turkish alliance revived bilateral relations not due to a gradual development but rather because Turkey has too often felt alienated and let-down by its Western allies and sought support from a partner who has offered dependability and support when needed.* In other words, diplomacy has progressed because it works in the interest of both countries, not because of a historic partnership binding both together. Russia continues its perennial quest for a strong state, something Turkey has had to accept with a price, particularly when looking at the Black Sea Region. Therefore, while both countries have often been on the opposing sides of a dispute, the asymmetric interdependence in which the Russo-Turkish alliance advances allows diplomatic relations to evolve. Within this understanding, Turkey has firmly accepted its role as an important regional power, however, also accepts Russia to retain its great power status. For how long this asymmetric interdependence can continue will be interesting to monitor, but for as long as Turkey feels frozen out by Western allies, Russia will only continue to exploit its position and to pull Turkey further into its orbit of power and influence. With the centennial of diplomacy celebrated earlier this year, we must be circumspect when looking to determine if bilateral relations have seen a vast improvement or rather just a continual of the same course under a different arrangement. This will be vital in laying the foundations of the next 100 years of diplomacy.



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