

## Russian–Turkish Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2000–2012

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### Abstract

Russian–Turkish relations improved significantly after the end of the Cold War, against a background of centuries of fierce geopolitical rivalry and conflict. By the early 2000s, some observers even began speaking about a possible Russian–Turkish alliance, but the late 2000s witnessed serious Russian–Turkish disputes, even bordering on proxy wars, over Georgia and Syria. Nonetheless, Russia and Turkey are bound together by a large and growing trade volume, jointly founded international organizations, a nuclear reactor project, and cooperation against international and domestic ethnic separatist terrorism.

### Russian–Turkish Relations Before 1992: Archrivals Since Time Immemorial?

Russia and Turkey have been archrivals since their first encounter about four hundred years ago. Russia did more to hasten the collapse of the Ottoman Empire than any other great power, and it certainly fought more, and far bloodier, wars with the Ottoman Empire than any other state. Russian armies almost reached Istanbul twice, in the wars of 1829 and 1877–78. In the latter, they erected the famous St. Stefanos monument in the outskirts of Istanbul to mark their furthest advance into Turkey. In the First World War, Russian armies took Trabzon and Erzurum, advancing as far as Tirebolu on the Black Sea Coast and Erzincan in East-Central Anatolia. With the notable exception of the Kemalist–Bolshevik alliance during Turkey’s War of Liberation (1919–1922), which continued into the following decade, the Soviet Union also had hostile relations with Turkey throughout the Cold War, including before and during the Second World War because of Turkey’s relatively good economic and political relationship with Nazi Germany. Therefore, economic, political, military and cultural relations between the Soviet Union and Turkey remained at a minimum. Taking this into account, Turkey is among the countries that has witnessed the most radical improvement in its relations with the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War.

### Russian–Turkish “Alliance” Against the West?

Against this background of four centuries of almost uninterrupted rivalry and warfare, the Secretary General of Turkey’s powerful National Security Council, General Tuncer Kılıç, declared in a public speech in March 2002 that Turkey should seek a military alliance with Russia and Iran against the European Union. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia has become the second largest trading partner of Turkey (after Germany) and the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey was second only to the German tourists. Thousands of Russian–Turkish marriages created a new hybrid identity in many Russian and Turkish cities. Thousands of Turks began learn-

ing Russian, both in Turkish universities and in Russia, whereas in the past it was only the very few committed Communists who had learned Russian. More strikingly, Russia and Turkey explored opportunities for military cooperation at a time when Turkey’s European and American allies were reluctant to provide Turkey with what Ankara considered the necessary military technology and equipment, especially at the height of Turkey’s fight against the Kurdish separatist terrorist organization PKK in the 1990s. Indeed, within a decade of the end of the Cold War, Russia and Turkey were described even at the official level as “strategic partners” and some key decision-makers even speculated forming an “alliance” against Europe. Furthermore, a new intellectual movement advocating the alliance and future union of Russia and Turkey, “Turkish Eurasianism,” linked to its Russian counterpart, emerged in Turkey, competing against Islamism, Turkism, and Westernism, the three traditional supranational ideologies in Turkey’s intellectual landscape. What were the factors that brought about such a dramatic change in Russian–Turkish relations, and do they still persist more than a decade later, in 2013?

### Changes in Russian–Turkish Strategic Balance and Threat Perceptions

The two most notable changes in Russian–Turkish relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union have been the radical reduction in Russia’s economic and military strategic advantage over Turkey, and the disappearance of a common border between the two states due to the independence of Georgia. While Turkish GDP was only about one-tenth of Soviet GDP in 1990, Turkish GDP had reached 80% of post-Soviet Russia’s GDP by 1999, and remained above two-thirds of the Russian GDP for the next five years. Likewise, while the Turkish army’s manpower hovered around or below one-fifth of the Soviet army’s for most of the Cold War, by 1998 it surpassed 80% of post-Soviet Russia’s. As a result, the threat that Turkey perceived from Moscow during the Cold War, and in previous centuries, had been significantly diminished by the end of the 1990s. This was

a crucial factor that contributed to the unprecedented improvement in Russian–Turkish relations throughout the 1990s and in the early 2000s. However, Russian GDP and military power has steadily improved *vis-à-vis* Turkish GDP and military power since 2000, reaching twice the Turkish figures in both categories by 2008, which may have contributed to the relative deterioration in Russian–Turkish relations since then, because Turkey has more reason to fear Russia once again, although the magnitude of the power imbalance and perception of threat is not nearly as bad as it was during the Cold War.

Perhaps equally importantly is that, for the first time in the last four hundred years, with the notable exception of the 1918–1921 period, Russia and Turkey no longer share a common border, due to the emergence of an independent Georgian Republic after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This factor has also contributed to Turkey's sense of security *vis-à-vis* Russia and facilitated the improvement of bilateral relations. Moreover, Georgia's role as a steadfast ally of Turkey and Azerbaijan in many common economic, political and strategic endeavors has further strengthened Turkey's sense of security. However, the Russian–Georgian war over South Ossetia in August 2008 significantly upset this state of affairs, with the Russian army making a strong come back to the South Caucasus. If the Russian military, economic, or political presence in Georgia grows further, or in the unlikely event that Georgia is brought under direct Russian control as in previous centuries, Russian–Turkish relations are bound to suffer significantly.

While the dramatic change in the strategic balance between Russia and Turkey, as well as the independence of Georgia, can be considered as permissive or necessary conditions for the improvement of Russian–Turkish relations, there are a number of other factors and common interests that have motivated and facilitated Russian–Turkish cooperation.

### **Cooperation Against the Iraq War and Against Domestic Ethnic Separatist Terrorism**

Russian–Turkish interests converged in the run up to the Iraq War in 2003. Both Russia and Turkey vocally opposed the U.S.-led plan to attack Iraq, and both countries did everything in their power to prevent the war from happening. Russia opposed the war in the UN Security Council, while Turkey rejected a U.S. request to deploy troops in Turkey to invade Iraq from the north. Moreover, both countries supported the territorial integrity of Iraq and opposed the partition of Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s, although Turkey has increasingly supported the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq after the U.S. withdrawal.

Both states' opposition to the ethnic or sectarian partition of Iraq stems in part from their own problems with ethnic separatist secessionism. Russian opposition to Chechen separatism is undoubtedly one of the most important principles of Russian foreign policy, whereas Turkish opposition to Kurdish separatism is also a long-standing principle of Turkish foreign policy. Russia historically supported all manner of anti-Turkish Kurdish separatist movements since the Tsarist period and throughout the Cold War, culminating in its support for the Marxist-Maoist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). 1999 was a turning point in this respect, as Russia refused to shelter the PKK's fugitive leader Abdullah Ocalan in Moscow, despite the fact that PKK had historically been supported by some segments of the Russian political establishment. Likewise, Turkey declared, in 2002, its willingness to extradite the Chechen propagandist, Movladi Udugov, if found in Turkey. Moreover, numerous pro-independence minded Chechens have been assassinated in Istanbul over the years, and their assassins have not been found or prosecuted. Overall, since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia and Turkey have taken a stance against violent separatist challenges launched by Kurdish and Chechen ethno-nationalists respectively, and this new understanding helped to propel Russian–Turkish cooperation to a higher level than before.

### **Russia and Turkey in Favor of a Multipolar World Order: BSEC, BLACKSEAFOR, OIC, SCO**

At a more macro level, both countries oppose a unipolar world order, and instead favor a multipolar world order in which both Russia and Turkey can contribute more to decision-making on issues of global and regional significance. Russia and Turkey are cofounders of various regional cooperation organizations, such as the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in 1992 and the Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR) in 2001. In 2005, Russia obtained observer member status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which has been headed by a Turkish Secretary General, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, since 2005. Most recently, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan stated that Turkey is considering membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), especially if Turkey's EU membership negotiations continue to be blocked by EU member states.

### **Russian–Turkish Blue Stream and the Nuclear Power Plant Deal**

There are two major energy deals between Russia and Turkey that bind them together, and make potential hostilities between the countries extremely costly for both

sides. The first one is the Blue Stream pipeline from Russia to Turkey under the Black Sea, which provides the vast majority of Turkey's natural gas. Due to the current international sanctions on Iran, which is Turkey's other major option for acquiring natural gas, Turkey will remain largely dependent on Russian natural gas for the foreseeable future.

Moreover, on 12 May 2010, Russia and Turkey signed an intergovernmental agreement on the construction of a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, by the Mediterranean coast. The agreement was published in Turkey's Official Gazette and came into force on 6 October 2010 (Decision no. 2010/918). The budget for the construction of the plant is around \$20 billion, and the construction is expected to begin in 2013, but the reactor will not be operational until at least 2019. Turkey is also hoping to have a second nuclear power plant built in Sinop, by the Black Sea coast, and although a French–Japanese consortium, among others, have expressed interest, no concrete steps have been taken with regards to this second nuclear power plant as of March 2013. Thus, the Russian project remains very significant for Turkey.

### **Turkey and the “Five Day War” between Russian and Georgia**

The South Caucasus is undoubtedly the primary region in which Russian and Turkish interests collide, with this conflict of interests unlikely to be reconciled in the near future. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia, Armenia and Iran have formed an axis against Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The problems between the two axes are manifold. Most obviously, Russia and Armenia actively deny the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and Azerbaijan, respectively. Armenia invaded one-fifth of Azerbaijan's territory, including the entirety of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Republic and several other surrounding Azerbaijani regions, with in approximately one million Azeri refugees escaping the Armenian occupation. The United Nations demanded the withdrawal of all Armenian forces from occupied Azerbaijani territory, most recently in Resolution 62/243 on 14 March 2008, supported by 39 member states including Turkey, but opposed by only seven including Armenia, Russia, United States, France and India. Armenia is politically, economically, and militarily entirely dependent on Russia, perhaps more so than any other post-Soviet state. Russia also supports the two break-away Republics of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, militarily, economically and politically, hence denying Georgian claims of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Georgia is Turkey's other key ally in the South Caucasus.

Russian–Turkish relations were seriously challenged when Georgia and Russia engaged in a war over South

Ossetia in August 2008. The so-called “Five Day War” ended in a humiliating defeat for Georgia, perhaps permanently wresting South Ossetia away from Georgia. The war also damaged Turkey's strategic position in the Caucasus, as it led to the serious weakening of a key ally, including the bombing of some Georgian roads and facilities, which were built or renovated by Turkey. Although neither Turkey nor Azerbaijan were directly affected by the war, this conflict nonetheless rekindled fears about the reemergence of Russia as a military threat in the South Caucasus.

Aside from previously built and operational Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, Turkey has ongoing projects with Georgia, the most important of which is the building of the Kars–Tbilisi railway. However, both Russia and Armenia oppose the building of this railway, because they fear that it would strengthen the Turkish–Georgian–Azeri axis to the detriment of the Russian–Armenian–Iranian axis.

### **Russian–Turkish Confrontation over the Syrian Civil War**

While some may have suggested that the Russian–Georgian war of 2008 could be seen as a proxy war between Russia and Turkey, such a description is much more apt in terms of the two states' positions on the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011, which represents the most serious crisis in Russian–Turkish relations since the 21<sup>st</sup> century began. Turkey is the main state pushing for the downfall of the Baathist Assad dictatorship in Syria, while Russia is the primary outside actor trying to keep the Assad regime in place. The Russian naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus is the only such base Russia has in the Mediterranean. Russia has blocked any powerful UN action against Syria in the UN Security Council. By contrast, Turkey actively organizes and supports the Syrian opposition, both domestically and internationally.

It is nonetheless a testimony to the strength of Russian–Turkish relations and the importance of their common interests that the Russian president, Vladimir Putin visited Turkey at the height of the Syrian Civil War in December 2012, in order to sign numerous trade agreements. Georgia is Turkey's gate to Eurasia and Syria is Turkey's gate to the Middle East, and Russia's interests, in these strategically important countries' for Turkey, clash with Turkey's in an almost diametrically opposed way. These conflicting interests have culminating in their role and support for opposite sides in the militarized conflicts of the Russian–Georgian and the ongoing Syrian Civil War. Russia clearly has the power and the will to frustrate Turkey's attempts to expand its influence in the Caucasus and the Middle East, as it successfully did in Central Asia during the 1990s. And indeed, as it

did in Central Asia, Turkey will most likely recognize that it can neither nor should it openly challenge and engage in a hot conflict with Russia in either the Cau-

casus or in the Middle East, especially given that Russia and Turkey have greater common interests.

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#### *Further Reading*

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- Aktürk, Şener. "Counter-hegemonic visions and reconciliation through the past: the case of Turkish Eurasianism." *Ab Imperio* 4 (2004): 207–238.

## ANALYSIS

# What Is So Special About Russian–Turkish Economic Relations

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## Abstract

This article analyses contemporary Russian–Turkish economic relations. It considers the problems that the two sides are faced with, in spite of their steadily increasing bilateral trade volume and investment flows, and highlights the rather different positions that they take towards addressing these problems and suggests how they might successfully manage these difference.

Economic cooperation is a key element of the Russian–Turkish relationship. According to a number of experts, economics surpasses political contacts in terms of importance. Moreover, the high level of economic interaction between Russia and Turkey is a factor that predetermines their mutual desire to maintain their political dialogue on a solid foundation. Therefore, it is important to understand the specific features that have propelled economic ties to a domineering position within the bilateral relationship between Russia and Turkey.

## Why Does Increasing Bilateral Trade Volume Bother Turkey?

Bilateral trade is the primary vehicle driving the economic relationship. The statistical data in Figure 1 and Table 1 on page 9 reveals a steadily increasing trend in the volume of bilateral trade, which has been disrupted only once throughout the 2000s, as a result of the reverberations from the global financial crisis: in 2009, the trade turnover declined more than 40%, however by 2010, it was had already back on track and started to grow again.

The deficit between Turkey's imports from, as compared to exports to Russia is a chronic feature of the bilateral relationship, displaying a tendency towards steady and absolute growth. Its profound nature is exemplified by the fact that the maximum ratio of Turkey's exports to its imports has not been any higher than 25% throughout recent years. Consequently, some analysts are prone to draw a parallel between one of the most disturbing problems in the Turkish economy—the Current Account Deficit—and the development pattern in its trade relations with Russia.

The reason why Turkey's exports are unable to match the growth rates in its imports is the structure of Russian–Turkish bilateral trade. Since 2007, Russia has been Turkey's No. 1 foreign energy supplier, and is a major purchaser of primary energy resources: natural gas, crude oil and petroleum products accounted for 65% of its imports from Russia in 2012. During this year, the oil price that defines the market prices for all primary energy resources was 3.7 times higher than the corresponding price in 2003. Therefore, the trend of increasing expenditure on imports from Russia has