

Turkey and Russia – neither enemies nor best friends

[Published on 01. December 2017](#) by [Amanda Paul](#) [Edit](#)

Turkey and Russia have a centuries-long history, comprised of periods of conflict, cooperation and everything in between. Relations hit rock bottom after Turkey shot down a Russian jet over the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015. It resulted in Moscow imposing sanctions on Turkey, efforts to shut Turkey out of the Syria conflict theatre and carrying out a vicious propaganda campaign against President Erdogan. Reportedly the sanctions cost Turkey some \$10 billion in lost trade. In June 2016 Erdogan apologized to Russian President Vladimir Putin in a move driven by economic and security related concerns.

The ‘rapprochement’ occurred at a time of growing tensions in Turkey’s relations with the EU and the US which was opportune for Russia. Never one to miss an opportunity, Putin has tried to capitalize on this situation. For a start, unlike the EU and the US, Putin immediately condemned the attempted coup on 16th July 2016, which won him plaudits in Turkey.

Today, nearly 18 months since Putin and Erdogan ‘made-up’, sanctions against Turkey have been lifted - albeit rather slowly - and Russia is to finally allow Turkish tomatoes back into its market by the end of this year. Russian tourists have returned to Turkey’s beaches and energy projects have been pulled from the freezer. The two are also cooperating in Syria and, of course, there is Turkey’s now infamous S-400 missile system purchase. At a meeting in Sochi earlier this month Putin declared that ‘relations can be considered practically completely restored’. Still, Russia has not yet reinstated the visa-free regime for Turkish citizens, which has been suspended since the jet shoot-down. This is particularly problematic for Turkish businessmen.

Yet, some developments would seem to be at odds with some of Turkey’s earlier declared strategic goals. For example, only a short time ago Turkey was saying that energy diversification was a priority, including reducing the country’s dependence on Russian gas which currently stands at some 58 %. But, by getting on board the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline project, Ankara seems to be taking steps to increase its reliance on Russian gas. Turkish Stream aims to deliver some 15.75 billion cubic meters of gas to Turkey and southeastern Europe by 2020. Furthermore, the decision to grant Russia’s Rosatom the rights to build the \$20 billion Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in southern Turkey would seem to imply that Russia will have an important stake in Turkey’s electricity market. This could be a risky move because Russia has proven that it can and will exploit dependency when necessary.

Cooperation in Syria has significantly increased. Without the rapprochement Turkey would not have been able to launch Operation Euphrates Shield, a Turkish cross-border military intervention, in August 2016. Russian air strikes helped the Turkish armed forces and their Free Syrian Army allies to remove the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) from al-Bab in January 2017. Turkey is also a co-sponsor of the Astana peace talks with Russia and Iran. Yet, since the civil war in Syria began Russia and Turkey have been at odds over the future of the country.

Russia's military intervention in September 2015 to support the Assad regime clashed with Turkey's priority of removing Assad from power. Today, Turkey is no longer so vocal, becoming more flexible on Assad's status in future Syrian governments. No doubt, as recently pointed out by Russia expert Dimitar Bechev, Erdogan views cooperation with Moscow as a guarantee that he will have a say in the future of Syria, which has become central to Turkey's own security. Still frictions remain. For example, Russia's refusal to label the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militant wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG) as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as terrorist organisations – as the EU and US do. Russian efforts to have representatives of the PYD included in the Syrian peace process have also riled Ankara. Furthermore, the self-proclaimed autonomous region of Rojava has a representative office in Moscow and Russia has sometimes given the impression that it is not totally opposed to the Kurds having self-rule (as outlined in a draft constitution for Syria that Russia submitted to the Astana talks), which hardly pleases Ankara.

As Erdogan has boosted ties with Putin, he has adopted a more confrontational approach towards Europe and the US. Erdogan likely wants to signal that he has other partners he can turn to when Western allies do not support Turkey. To some degree this explains Turkey buying the S-400 air defence system which has left NATO partners very uncomfortable, with some questioning Turkey's reliability as a partner.

However, in reality Russia cannot replace neither the EU nor the US/NATO. Turkey's cooperation with the West has deep roots dating back to the Ottoman Empire. While relations may currently be at an all-time low, it is a fact that Turkey's economy and security is linked to the West.

In 2016 some 48.1 % of Turkey's export went to the EU, compared to some 4 % to Russia. The vast majority of foreign direct investment in Turkey comes from the EU. Moreover, it is doubtful whether Moscow could provide the technological innovation and the global market access that comes to Turkey with these investments. Therefore, despite tense political relations the EU remains Turkey's economic lifeline. Meanwhile, despite the spat with the US, NATO remains Turkey's security umbrella and this is not going to change. When it comes to geopolitical objectives too, Turkey and Russia are not really on the same page whether it be Syria, the Black Sea, the South Caucasus or elsewhere.

Turkey has always turned to Russia when it quarrelled with the West. Ankara uses its relationship with Russia as leverage vis-à-vis its traditional Euro-Atlantic partners. Furthermore, when relations between Turkey and its traditional transatlantic partners sour, the Kremlin is happy to exploit the spat for its own purposes.



While relations between Turkey and Russia may appear to be friendly and the two will continue to advance common interests which is positive, it is unlikely that Putin has really forgiven Turkey for the jet shoot-down incident. It also seems unlikely that Erdogan has forgotten the hostile words used against him by Russia. The two almost certainly remain deeply suspicious of each other. So, while the two are no longer 'enemies', despite all the smiles and nice words they are hardly the best of friends neither and this is how it has been throughout history. This is very much a relationship of convenience and the chances of relations developing into some sort of strategic partnership are very remote indeed.