

*Part IV*

**Turkey's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy  
and its Impact on Transatlantic  
Relations**



## *Chapter Thirteen*

# **The Transatlantic Dimension of Turkey's Strategic Rapprochement with Russia: The Turkish Perspective**

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There is a general consensus among Turkish foreign policy scholars that Turkey can best be defined as a “middle power” in terms of its material capabilities and diplomatic influence.<sup>1</sup> This positioning has prompted Turkish leaders to effectively balance between the great powers in order to pursue national interests. In this regard, it can be argued that Turkey's relations with Russia have been largely shaped by its political and economic relations with the West.

Although Ottoman leaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century viewed Russia as their archenemy, they still did not refrain from requesting the assistance of their powerful neighbor whenever they felt threatened by Britain, France, and other European powers. In this regard, the World War I (WWI) was a crucial turning point as it triggered the process resulting in the dissolution of the Russian and Ottoman empires. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Russia was swept away by a civil war where the anti-Bolshevik forces received substantial military support from Britain and France. On the other hand, Turkish nationalists, united around the Mustafa Kemal Atatürk leadership, launched a war of independence against the same European invaders. The cooperation that emerged between Atatürk and Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik government during this period paved the way for a more remarkable political and economic rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet, the Turkish-Soviet understanding came to an end in 1945 when Joseph Stalin claimed the Turkish Straits and Eastern Anatolia, prompting Ankara to seek closer strategic ties with the transatlantic community and eventually join NATO in 1952. From the 1960s onwards, when Turkey became more distanced

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<sup>1</sup> See: Hale, William. *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 1; Oran, Baskin ed. *Turkish Foreign Policy 1919-2016* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010), p. 9.

from its Western allies because of the Cyprus issue, the Soviet Union was once again perceived as an important equilibrant in Turkish foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

The end of the Cold War presented a golden opportunity to initiate a breakthrough in Turkish-Russian relations. However, the two countries quickly became entangled in a new geopolitical rivalry over the newly independent Turkic states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this new regional context, Turkey moved closer to its transatlantic partners in order to advance its political and economic influence in the former Soviet space, while Moscow viewed Ankara's new foreign policy activism as an instrument of NATO's plans to undermine the traditionally strong Russian influence in the region.<sup>3</sup> The dynamics of Turkish-Russian relations began to change once again in the second half of the 1990s. Turkish leaders were particularly frustrated by the EU's 1997 decision to deny full membership to Turkey. Moscow, on the other hand, was alarmed by NATO's determination to expand toward the Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the Turkish-Russian rapprochement—started around the period of the initiation of the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline project—can be viewed as a response to their common disillusionment with the West.<sup>5</sup>

In the new millennium, Turkish-Russian relations continued to evolve under the strong influence of the two countries' bilateral ties with the U.S. and the EU. Although Turkey's NATO membership prevented the emergence of a genuine strategic partnership, Russian leaders viewed their dialogue with an important NATO member as a valuable asset that could be utilized in their geopolitical rivalry with the West. Similarly, Ankara tended to use its developing ties with Moscow to gain leverage against its transatlantic partners and to act more independently in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans.

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<sup>2</sup> Aydın, Mustafa. "Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Changing Patterns and Conjunctions during the Cold War," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2000), pp. 123-125.

<sup>3</sup> Sezer, Duygu Bazoğlu. "Turkish-Russian Relations: The Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership." *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2000), pp. 68-73.

<sup>4</sup> Tanrısever, Oktay F. "Turkey and the Russian Federation: Towards a Mutual Understanding?" in Tareq Y. Ismael and Mustafa Aydın, ed., *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: A Changing Role in World Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 129-130.

<sup>5</sup> Also see: Kalashnikov, Alexander M. "'Goluboi Potok': Kak Vazhnyi Faktor Razvitiya Rossiysko-Turetskikh Otnoshenii [Blue Stream: An Important Development Factor of Russian-Turkish Relations]." *Vlast*, No. 2 (2013), pp. 100-102.

This chapter aims to evaluate the development of Turkish-Russian relations in the 2000s in light of the shifts in Ankara and Moscow's relations with the transatlantic community. It will particularly focus on three periods: 2003-2006, 2009-2010, and 2016-2017. These periods represent Turkish-Russian rapprochements when both countries confronted significant disagreements with the U.S. and EU over a number of key regional and international issues.

## **2003-2006: Repercussions of the Iraq War**

Although the political and economic relations between Ankara and Moscow had already started to improve since the initiation of the Blue Stream project in 1997, the main development that triggered a Turkish-Russian strategic rapprochement was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Russian President Vladimir Putin became one of the most vocal critics of the George W. Bush administration's policies regarding this issue and even signed a joint declaration with the leaders of France and Germany against the war in Iraq.<sup>6</sup> At a time when the transatlantic allies were deeply divided over this subject, Moscow's anti-war efforts coincided with the Turkish Parliament's voting down a very important motion that would have allowed the deployment of the U.S. soldiers in Turkey to facilitate the defeat of Saddam Hussein's forces.<sup>7</sup>

This development came as a shock to Washington, which was obliged to radically change its military strategy for the invasion of Iraq. It also created a major rift in the Turkish-U.S. relations until at least mid-2006. Russia, on the other hand, appreciated Turkey's decision not to actively join the Iraqi war as it was also reconsidering its relations with the Bush administration.<sup>8</sup> Although the dialogue between Russia and the U.S. improved in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Washington's decision to launch its national missile defense program and NATO's decision to enlarge towards the three Baltic states brought the end of the honeymoon between the two countries. Russia-U.S. relations further deteriorated in the 2003-2005 period due to the color revolutions erupting in former Soviet space.

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<sup>6</sup> See the full text of the three countries' joint declaration in *The Guardian*, March 6, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/06/france.germany>

<sup>7</sup> "Başbakanlık Tezkeresi Onay Alamadı [Prime Ministry's Motion Failed to Receive Approval]." *NTV*, March 1, 2003. <http://arsiv.ntv.com.tr/news/203900.asp>.

<sup>8</sup> "Putin: Meclis Kararı Haftanın Olayı [Putin: Parliament's Decision is the Event of the Week]." *Radikal*, March 5, 2003.

Although it is debatable whether the U.S. or the EU were actively involved in the mass protests in Kyrgyzstan, Russian leaders believed that Western diplomatic and financial support for the opposition forces in Georgia and Ukraine was decisive in bringing about leadership changes in these two countries.<sup>9</sup>

At a time when Russia's relations with the transatlantic community were strained, a number of issues regarding Iraq started to cause serious friction between Turkey and the U.S. Ankara was concerned about Washington's improving relations with the regional Iraqi Kurdish government and criticized the U.S. for not taking effective measures against the strengthened presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Northern Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Turkey's relations with the EU also became complicated, especially after May 2004, when the Greek Cypriot government was admitted to the EU as a full member with the claim of representing the whole island—including the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Although Turkey started accession talks with the EU in October 2005, Ankara's refusal to open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot vessels prompted Brussels to freeze the opening of some important chapters in 2006.<sup>11</sup>

The Turkish-Russian rapprochement gained significant momentum during this period. In the economic sphere, the trade volume between the two countries reached almost 10 billion dollars in 2004, making Russia the second most important trade partner of Turkey. In 2005, the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline was completed, and more than one and a half million Russian tourists visited Turkey. The high-level official meetings between Ankara and Moscow also became quite frequent. In December 2004, for instance, Putin became the first Russian president in over thirty years to officially visit Ankara.<sup>12</sup> The two countries' positions regarding some major regional issues also became aligned. For instance, both of

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<sup>9</sup> See: "Putin Warns West Against Meddling in Ukraine." *RFE/RL Newswire*, December 7, 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/a/1143295.html> and "FSB Believes Foreign Non-Governmental Organizations Prepare New 'Velvet Revolutions.'" *Sputnik News*, May 12, 2005, <https://sputniknews.com/world/2005051239973262>.

<sup>10</sup> Çağaptay, Soner. "Where Goes the U.S.-Turkish Relationship?" *Middle East Quarterly* (Fall 2004), pp. 43-52.

<sup>11</sup> Nas, Çiğdem. "Turkey and the European Union: A Stumbling Accession Process under New Conditions," in Oktav Özden Zeynep (ed.), *Turkey in the 21st Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 159-180.

<sup>12</sup> "Sezer ve Putin'den 'Dostluk' Deklarasyonu ['Friendship' Declaration from Sezer and Putin]." *Radikal*, December 6, 2004.

them criticized Washington's plans to impose international sanctions against Iran and Syria, while they hosted the Hamas leadership in 2006 despite the reactions of the U.S., the EU, and Israel. A more significant example of the intensified regional cooperation between the two countries was their active participation within the framework of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Black Sea Naval Co-operation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), and Operation Black Sea Harmony in order to prevent the extension of NATO's political and military influence in this region.<sup>13</sup>

These developments urged some analysts to claim that Turkish-Russian relations were turning into a strategic alliance.<sup>14</sup> The idea of Russian Eurasianism, which emphasizes a type of geopolitical realignment between the countries of Eurasia against the Western countries, also started to attract significant interest in Turkish political and military circles.<sup>15</sup> Yet, it is difficult to define the Turkish-Russian rapprochement as an emerging anti-Western alliance since its trajectory was largely shaped by the two countries' bilateral ties with the transatlantic community. This became particularly visible after 2006, when Ankara's relations with Washington started to improve after the two governments signed a strategic vision document.<sup>16</sup> Turkey also enthusiastically supported the U.S.-led "Greater Middle East" initiative, which planned to facilitate the emergence of a liberal democratic order in a region extending from the Persian Gulf to Central Asia—much to the dismay of Russia.

Ankara also started to actively cooperate with the EU in the Nabucco project, which envisioned the construction of a new pipeline to carry the Caspian and Middle Eastern natural gas via Turkey into Europe. The project gained momentum after the natural gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine in early 2006, urging EU countries to seek alternative routes to reduce their heavy dependence on Russian energy. In response, Moscow launched its own South Stream pipeline project designed to bypass the Ukrainian route and discredit the Nabucco scheme. At the same time,

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<sup>13</sup> Also see: Socor, Vladimir. "Moscow, Ankara Reluctant to Welcome New Black Sea Forum." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 3, No. 112 (2006). <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-ankara-reluctant-to-welcome-new-black-sea-forum>.

<sup>14</sup> See: Hill, Fiona and Taşpınar, Ömer. "Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded." *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2006), pp. 81-92; Taşpınar, Ömer. "Batı'ya Kızgınlık Büyüyor [Rage Grows against the West]." *Radikal*, July 27, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Erşen, Emre. "The Evolution of 'Eurasia' as a Geopolitical Concept in Post-Cold War Turkey." *Geopolitics*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2013), pp. 24-44.

<sup>16</sup> "İşte Stratejik Vizyon Belgesi [Here is the Strategic Vision Document]." *Hürriyet*, July 5, 2006.

however, Turkey's inclusion in a project that openly challenged Russia's geopolitical interests in Eurasia created resentment in Moscow.<sup>17</sup>

Russia's relations with the transatlantic community also started to deteriorate significantly in the 2007-2008 period due to the Bush administration's plans to offer NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. This can be regarded as one of the main reasons behind Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, where he harshly criticized the U.S. for its unilateralist policies.<sup>18</sup> The tensions between Russia and NATO culminated in August 2008 after Moscow militarily intervened in Georgia's dispute with its breakaway republic of South Ossetia. Defeating the Georgian forces in a few days and recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia posed a major challenge against NATO's geopolitical influence in the Caucasus. Although Ankara tried to play the role of a mediator between Moscow and Tbilisi during this crisis, it was very much concerned about the escalation of tensions between Russia and NATO.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the Russian-Georgian war once again demonstrated the limits of a genuine strategic rapprochement between Turkey and Russia.

### 2009-2010: A Shift of Axis in Turkish Foreign Policy?

The end of the Bush administration in 2009 signified the beginning of a new era in both Ankara and Moscow's relations with Washington. Turkey was one of the first countries visited by President Obama and the two countries confirmed the strategic nature of their relationship—redefining it as a “model partnership.”<sup>20</sup> The Obama administration also initiated a “reset” policy towards Moscow with the aim of achieving a new breakthrough in bilateral relations, which had been in a crisis since the Russian-Georgian war.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cohen, Ariel. “Europe's Strategic Dependence on Russian Energy.” *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, No. 2083, November 2007.

<sup>18</sup> “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy.” *Kremlin official records*, February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>19</sup> Punsmann, Burcu G. “The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform: An Attempt to Foster Regional Accountability,” *ICBSS Policy Brief*, No. 13 (2009).

<sup>20</sup> Also see: Ahmet K. Han, “From ‘Strategic Partnership’ to ‘Model Partnership’: AKP, Turkish-US Relations and the Prospects under Obama,” *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No. 23 (May 2010), pp. 77-112.

<sup>21</sup> “Barack Obama Calls for ‘Reset’ in US-Russia Relations,” *The Guardian*, July 7, 2009,

Despite the new momentum in both countries' relations with the U.S., the repercussions of the global financial crisis significantly influenced Turkish and Russian perceptions of foreign policy. At a time when the U.S. and the EU were plunged into severe economic problems, Ankara and Moscow started to act much more self-confidently increasing their influence in key regional and global political issues. While Turkey's impressive economic performance—indicated by its 9.8 percent growth rate in 2010—helped it become a center of attention for the countries in its neighborhood, Russia successfully aligned itself with rising powers like China, India, and Brazil which performed much better than the Western economies during the global financial crisis. Russia's strategic cooperation with China within the framework of BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became particularly visible during this period. At the same time, the G-20 platform—which included both Turkey and Russia—turned into the main forum for international economic cooperation.

The shift in global economic balances coincided with Ankara's quest for an active foreign policy in its immediate region. Particularly regarding the issues in the Middle East, Turkey's approach started to become much more independent from its transatlantic partners. Apart from its rapidly improving political and economic relations with the Arab countries, Ankara became one of the most vocal supporters of the Palestinian cause. Prime Minister Erdoğan's public outburst at Israeli President Peres at the Davos conference in early 2009 was also a sign of Turkey's critical approach regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Mavi Marmara crisis of May 2010—when the Israeli military forces intervened and killed a number of Turkish nationals on the board of a ship carrying aid to the Gaza Strip—further strained relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv. Around the same time, Turkey collaborated with Brazil in brokering a deal with Iran regarding its nuclear program. In line with their agreement in June of 2010, the two countries voted against a U.S.-initiated resolution that proposed new UN Security Council sanctions against Tehran. Analysts interpreted these developments as signs of a “shift of axis” in Turkish foreign policy.<sup>22</sup>

Russia's relations with the transatlantic community during this period were also equally complicated. Obama's reset policy failed to start a genuine

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/07/barack-obama-russia-moscow-speech>.

<sup>22</sup> See: Mensur Akgün, “Turkey: What Axis Shift?” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 9, 2010, <http://mondediplo.com/outsidein/turkey-what-axis-shift> and Ziya Öniş, “Multiple Faces of the ‘New’ Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2011), pp. 47-49.

rapprochement between Washington and Moscow, although it facilitated the signing of a new nuclear arms reduction treaty in April 2010 and accelerated Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Moscow also resumed its dialogue with NATO over some contentious issues, like the missile defense system, which the alliance in November of 2010, decided to build. Yet, while Russia's concerns about this issue could not be completely eliminated, the NATO-Russia geopolitical rivalry continued over the Caucasus and Black Sea region. Russia was also quite critical of the "Eastern Partnership" initiative launched in May 2009 with a goal of strengthening EU relations with six post-Soviet states. Regarding this issue, Moscow even accused Brussels of attempting to create new spheres of influence in the region.<sup>23</sup> It also resented the EU's "Third Energy Package" accepted in 2009, with the aim of reducing Gazprom's significant influence in the European energy market.<sup>24</sup>

The relative decline of the U.S. and the EU's influence on the global economic agenda and their unresolved issues with the transatlantic community once again brought Ankara and Moscow closer to each other. During this period, the trade volume between the two countries increased to more than 30 billion dollars, while Russia supplied around 60 percent of the natural gas consumed in Turkey. In addition, they decided to establish an intergovernmental High-Level Cooperation Council and initiated a visa-free travel regime. In 2009, Putin made another visit to Ankara and signed twenty new agreements with the Turkish government.<sup>25</sup> He also convinced the Turkish government to permit the South Stream pipeline to pass through the Turkish exclusive economic zone (EEZ), although this clearly contradicted Ankara's previous commitment to the EU's Nabucco project.<sup>26</sup> In May 2010, the two countries also signed an agreement for the construction of Turkey's first-ever nuclear power plant by the Russian state company Rosatom.

<sup>23</sup> "EU Expanding its 'Sphere of Influence' Russia Says." *EU Observer*, March 21, 2009. <https://euobserver.com/foreign/27827>.

<sup>24</sup> "Tretii Energopaket ES i Otnosheniye k Nemu Rossii [The Third Energy Package of the EU and Russia's Attitude]" *RIA Novosti*, May 30, 2013. <https://ria.ru/spravka/20130530/933499962.html>.

<sup>25</sup> "Türkiye ile Rusya Arasında 20 Anlaşma [20 Agreements between Turkey and Russia]." *BBC Türkçe*, August 20, 2009. [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2009/08/090806\\_putin\\_update.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2009/08/090806_putin_update.shtml).

<sup>26</sup> "Turkey and Russia: Old Rivals, New Partners." *The Economist*, August 13, 2009. <http://www.economist.com/node/14216768>.

As the Turkish-Russian rapprochement gained momentum, some analysts viewed it as another remarkable sign of the shift of axis in Turkish foreign policy—particularly making reference to the rising anti-American public sentiments in Turkey.<sup>27</sup> However, Ankara continued to closely cooperate with its transatlantic partners on a number of strategic issues. For instance, it agreed to the deployment of the early warning radar of NATO's missile defense system in its territories, despite Moscow's discontent.<sup>28</sup> The Arab uprisings that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in late 2010 also strengthened Turkey's relations with NATO. In Libya, for instance, Turkey decided to join its transatlantic partners despite initial reservations, while Putin harshly condemned the Western military intervention launched in March 2011 comparing it to a "crusade."<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, in Syria, Ankara along with Western governments started to actively provide backing to opposition groups, while Moscow emerged as one of the main supporters of the Assad regime. The Syrian issue started to cause greater friction between Turkey and Russia after Moscow's direct airstrikes in Syria in September 2015. Ankara was particularly concerned about Russian jet assaults on the Turkish-supported opposition groups rather than on ISIS targets.<sup>30</sup> Russia's improving relations with the Syrian Kurds—especially the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG)—which Ankara viewed as the extension of the PKK—further strained relations.

Against this backdrop, on November 24, 2015, Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian fighter jet, on accounts that it was violating Turkish airspace.<sup>31</sup> Turkey immediately carried the issue to the NATO agenda and refused to apologize for its action, while Russia harshly responded by declaring large-scale economic sanctions against Turkey, accusing the

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<sup>27</sup> Şafak, Erdal. "Ankara-Moskova [Ankara-Moscow]." *Sabah*, February 13, 2009; "Güzel, Hasan Celal. "Rusya ile Tarihi Anlaşma [Historic Agreement with Russia]." *Radikal*, May 13, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> "Ruslar Kürecik'i Menzile Aldı [Russians Put Kürecik in Range]." *Sabah*, November 25, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> "Putin Sravnyl Vtorzheniye v Libiyu s 'Krestovym Pohodom' [Putin Compared the Invasion of Libya to the Crusade]." *Pravda.ru*, March 21, 2011, <https://www.pravda.ru/news/world/21-03-2011/1070915-putin-0>.

<sup>30</sup> "Rusya 7 Bin 200 Hava Saldırısı Düzenledi [Russia Made 7,200 Airstrikes]." *Yeni Şafak*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/rusya-7-bin-200-hava-saldirisi-duzenledi-2415461>.

<sup>31</sup> For a summary of Turkey's claims regarding Russia's incursions into the Turkish airspace see: *TRT World*, December 27, 2015. <http://interactive.trtworld.com/highlights-of-2015/ajax/infographics/infographic08.jpg>.

Turkish government of assisting ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria.<sup>32</sup> In the following several months, the fighter jet crisis turned the Middle East into a new theatre of confrontation between Turkey and Russia. Moscow deployed its advanced S-400 air defense system in its newly acquired airbase in Syria, and virtually closed Syrian airspace for Turkish jets. As a result, Turkey had to stop its air support to the U.S.-led international coalition against ISIS, and failed to take any cross-border military measures against the PKK.

### 2016-2017: From Crisis to Rapprochement

As Russia continued to increase its military presence in the Middle East, it became harder for Ankara to play a meaningful role in the Syrian issue without solving its problems with Moscow. The Russian sanctions' negative impact on the Turkish economy were also a factor that urged Turkish leaders to seek reconciliation with Russia.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, in June of 2016, President Erdoğan wrote a letter of regret to President Putin expressing his willingness for the normalization of bilateral relations.<sup>34</sup> However, it was the sharp deterioration of the relations between Turkey and its transatlantic partners that provided a real impetus to the Turkish-Russian reconciliation. The failed coup attempt that took place in Turkey on July 15, 2016, can be viewed as a turning point in this regard.

Although the coup attempt was quickly repelled by Turkish security forces, Ankara was disappointed in the muted and hesitant reaction of Washington and Brussels. Moscow and Tehran, on the other hand, gave outright support to the Turkish government against the coup plotters. Turkey's relations with its transatlantic partners became even more strained in the second half of 2016. The reluctance of U.S. authorities to extradite the Pennsylvania-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, who Ankara accused of orchestrating the coup attempt, further alienated Washington from Ankara. On the other hand, in November of 2016, the European Parliament took a decision advising temporary suspension of the accession

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<sup>32</sup> Russia's sanctions included restrictions on the import of Turkish goods, the reintroduction of a visa regime for Turkish citizens, and the ban of selling Turkish holiday resort packages.

<sup>33</sup> "Turkey Faces Big Losses as Russia Sanctions Bite." *BBC News*, January 2, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>.

<sup>34</sup> "Vladimir Putin Received a Letter from President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan." *President of Russia*, June 27, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52282>.

talks with Turkey due to the government's "disproportionate repressive measures."<sup>35</sup>

The deepening rift between Turkey and its allies after the July 15 coup attempt provided a new momentum for Turkish-Russian reconciliation. At a time when Russia was also under U.S. and EU sanctions—because of its role in the Ukrainian crisis and its decision to annex Crimea in 2014—the deterioration of Turkey's relations with the West was perceived as an opportunity by Moscow to cause a new split among NATO members.<sup>36</sup> It also gave a trump card to the Putin administration, which had become increasingly concerned about NATO's plans to strengthen its military presence in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region.<sup>37</sup>

Another issue that caused significant problems in Turkey's relations with its transatlantic partners during this period was the Syrian Kurds question. The possibility of the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria became stronger in August 2016, when the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—in which the PYD/YPG played a leading role—liberated the town of Manbij in the west of the Euphrates River. Ankara was alarmed not only because of a strengthened military cooperation between the U.S. and PYD/YPG forces, but also because the latter came very close to achieving their goal of unifying the three Kurdish cantons in northern Syria.<sup>38</sup> Although the Putin administration had also developed relations with the Syrian Kurds and in February of 2016, even permitting them to open an office in Moscow, Washington's increased support for the PYD/YPG urged Turkey to move closer to Russia on the Syria issue.

The Turkish-Russian rapprochement gained momentum particularly after the meeting between Putin and Erdoğan in St. Petersburg in August 2016. Following this summit, the two leaders met a few more times in person and often spoke on the phone. Putin's visit to Turkey in October

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<sup>35</sup> "European Parliament Votes to Suspend Turkish Membership Talks." *Financial Times*, November 24, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/afa9ecd8-c324-303a-b203-2073ff1aead6>.

<sup>36</sup> "Russia Jumps for Joy over Wedge between Turkey, NATO." *The Washington Times*, August 11, 2016. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/aug/11/russia-jumps-for-joy-over-wedge-between-turkey-nat>.

<sup>37</sup> Gürçan, Metin. "Is Turkey Turning its Stern on the West in the Black Sea." *Al-Monitor*, December 15, 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/turkey-russia-nato-is-ankara-changing-black-sea-policy.html>.

<sup>38</sup> "US Stance on PYD West of Euphrates a Burning Question." *Anadolu Agency*, August 13, 2016. <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/us-stance-on-pyd-west-of-euphrates-a-burning-question/627735>.

2016 was particularly important as the two governments signed an agreement for the construction of the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline, which replaced the South Stream project following its cancellation by Moscow as a reaction to EU economic sanctions.<sup>39</sup> Turkish-Russian relations also developed in the military sphere. The most important outcome of this military dialogue was Turkey's "Operation Euphrates Shield"—launched in August 2016 against the ISIS and PYD/YPG forces in northern Syria. Ankara also established a direct military hotline with Moscow and announced its interest in buying the Russian S-400 missile system to strengthen its national air defense. In addition, the two countries joined their efforts in facilitating a ceasefire in Aleppo for the safe evacuation of the civilians from the city.<sup>40</sup>

Even the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara by an off-duty Turkish police officer in December 2016 could not slow down the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia. Only one day after this incident, the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Iran came together and signed the "Moscow Declaration," announcing a comprehensive ceasefire in Syria and launching a new peace process in Astana between the Assad regime and opposition groups.<sup>41</sup> This was perceived as a significant Turkish concession to Russia and Iran mainly because it signified Ankara's abandonment of its previously declared goal to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power.<sup>42</sup> It was also interpreted by many analysts as Turkey's inclusion in the Russian-Iranian axis in Syria, since the Astana peace talks largely excluded the U.S.<sup>43</sup> Most importantly, it once again indicated that despite its long-standing strategic relations with the transatlantic community, Turkey would continue to use its special ties with Russia as a

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<sup>39</sup> See: Ünver, Akin. "Russia May Block EU Energy Ambitions with Turkish Stream Pipeline." *World Politics Review*, November 7, 2016. <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/20382/russia-may-block-eu-energy-ambitions-with-turkish-stream-pipeline>.

<sup>40</sup> For details see: Erşen, Emre. "The Turkish-Russian Dialogue in Syria: Prospects and Challenges." *Al Sbarq Forum*, January 5, 2017. <http://sharqforum.org/2017/01/05/the-turkish-russian-dialogue-in-syria-prospects-and-challenges>.

<sup>41</sup> For the full text of the document, see: *Sputnik Turkey*, December 21, 2016. <https://tr.sputniknews.com/ortadogu/201612211026428478-rusya-turkiye-iran-suriye-ortak-bildiri>.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance: *Cumhuriyet*, December 21, 2016. [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/dunya/648479/Turkiye\\_nin\\_Suriye\\_politikasi\\_Moskova\\_da\\_coktu...\\_Birinci\\_madd-eye\\_dikkat\\_.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/dunya/648479/Turkiye_nin_Suriye_politikasi_Moskova_da_coktu..._Birinci_madd-eye_dikkat_.html).

<sup>43</sup> "Russia, Iran and Turkey Meet for Syria Talks, Excluding U.S." *The New York Times*, December 20, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/20/world/middleeast/russia-iran-and-turkey-meet-for-syria-talks-excluding-us.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/20/world/middleeast/russia-iran-and-turkey-meet-for-syria-talks-excluding-us.html?_r=0).

leverage against Washington and Brussels in order to advance its national interests in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

History shows that all major tilts towards Russia took place during periods when Ankara had sharp disagreements with its transatlantic partners. The same can also be said about Russia, as Moscow tended to prioritize its ties with Ankara when its relations with the U.S. and the EU were deteriorating. Although it is true that Turkey's membership in NATO has enabled the West to effectively contain Russia's geopolitical influence in the Black Sea and Middle East, special relations with Ankara have also granted Moscow an important opportunity to manipulate the internal dynamics of the transatlantic alliance.

Currently, Turkey and Russia are again in a phase of strategic rapprochement. In January 2017, they even made an agreement to carry out joint operations against ISIS militants in Syria. A few months later, they reached a new deal that also included Iran for setting up a number of de-escalation zones in Syria, once again largely excluding the U.S. from this process.<sup>44</sup> It is no surprise that some analysts have already started to make reference to the emergence of a new shift of axis in Turkish foreign policy towards Russia and Iran.<sup>45</sup> Turkish leaders also frequently expressed their interest in joining the SCO as a reaction to Turkey's stalled EU membership process.<sup>46</sup> Yet, it should be recalled that such shifts in Turkish foreign policy have always been temporary, and that Ankara resumed its strategic cooperation with its transatlantic allies as soon as it had resolved its bilateral problems with Washington and Brussels.

Therefore, one can conclude that the future of the current Turkish-Russian rapprochement process will once again be shaped by the trajectory

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<sup>44</sup> "Turkey, Russia, Iran Back Syria 'De-escalation Zones'," *Anadolu Agency*, May 4, 2017, <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-russia-iran-back-syria-de-escalation-zones/811321>.

<sup>45</sup> Frolov, Vladimir, "The New Axis: Russia, Turkey and Iran Take over Syria," *The Moscow Times*, December 30, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/the-new-axis-russia-turkey-and-iran-take-over-syria-56703>. Also see: Kohen, Sami. "Suriye İçin Yeni Eksen [A New Axis for Syria]." *Milliyet*, December 20, 2016. <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/suriye-icin-yeni-eksen-dunya-ydetay-2364537>.

<sup>46</sup> Chulkovskaya, Yekaterina. "Will Turkey Leave NATO?" *Al-Monitor*, January 9, 2017. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/russia-turkey-erdogan-putin-membership-shanghai-sco-eu.html>.

of the two countries' relations with the West. The policies of the Trump administration in the U.S. will be of particular importance. If Washington changes its position on the PYD/YPG issue in Syria and seeks a new rapprochement with Ankara, the Turkish government may feel more comfortable to distance itself from Moscow. Yet, as he indicated during his presidential campaign, President Trump may opt to reach an understanding with Putin in order to solve the Syrian issue. In the case of such a grand agreement between the two leaders, the regional priorities of Turkey in Syria can be overlooked by both Washington and Moscow.

At the same time, however, Turkey and Russia still have significant disagreements over a number of issues in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea region. It should be noted that Turkey has moved closer to Russia and Iran more out of necessity than choice, since its options in Syria became significantly reduced following the dramatic changes in the military balance in favor of the Assad regime. Yet, Moscow's improved relations with the Syrian Kurds as well as its strong support behind Assad remain major concerns for Ankara. Russia, on the other hand, is uneasy about Turkey's refusal to recognize the annexation of Crimea as well as the Turkish government's developing strategic ties with Georgia and Ukraine. The Turkish-Iranian geopolitical rivalry over Syria is also far from being resolved. All these problems may urge Ankara to strengthen its strategic dialogue with NATO and seek support from its transatlantic partners in order to guard its interests in the region. Achieving this objective without alienating Moscow will present the greatest challenge for Turkish policymakers in the coming period.