

# Russia–Turkey relations

## A fine line between competition and cooperation

### SUMMARY

In November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter plane on its way to Syria. The incident led to a diplomatic freeze, highlighting the tensions between the two countries, which compete for influence in their Middle Eastern and Eurasian neighbourhoods.

Syria is one of several theatres where Turkey and Russia back opposing sides – sometimes covertly, deploying foreign mercenaries, sometimes openly, deploying troops and weapons; Libya is another. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which broke out in September 2020, threatened to become not just a proxy war between Turkey and Russia, the two countries' respective backers, but perhaps even a direct military clash between them.

Although there are many frictions between them, Moscow and Ankara also have many good reasons to cooperate. Not only are there important economic ties between them, but the two countries are natural allies, increasingly assertive regional powers whose geopolitical ambitions have created strains with the West. Their overall relationship is therefore one of cooperation, in which individual areas of contention can be accommodated.

While Turkey benefits from cooperating with Russia, overall its economic and security interests are best served by staying aligned with the West. Therefore, Ankara is unlikely to want to leave NATO or its customs union with the EU.



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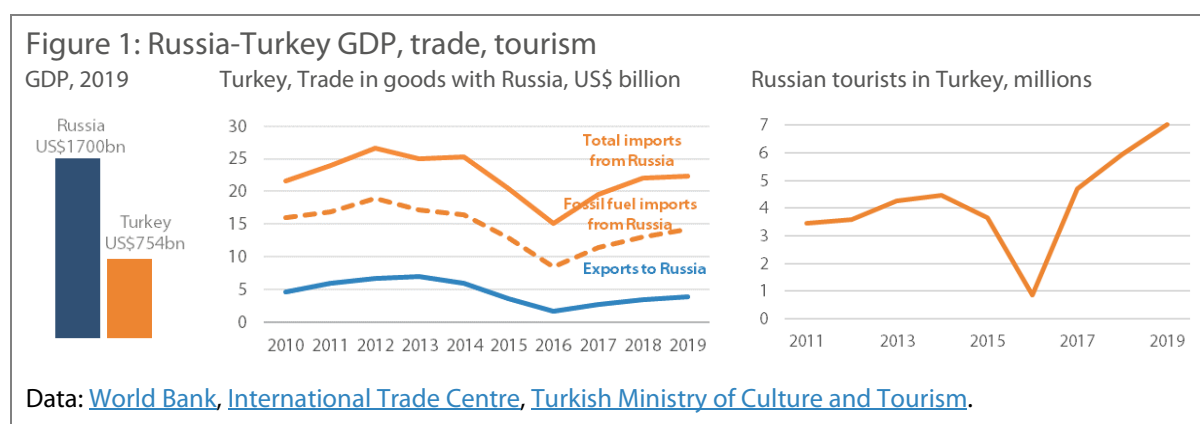
## Pillars of Russia-Turkey cooperation

### Russia-Turkey relations recover after hitting a rock in 2015

In November 2015, shortly after Russia launched its military intervention in Syria, Turkey shot down a Russian military plane that briefly transited its airspace. Russian President, Vladimir Putin, [described](#) the incident as a 'stab in the back', and Moscow retaliated with harsh economic sanctions restricting trade and travel between the two countries. In June 2016, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed regret for the incident. His apology cleared the way for a [return](#) to 'normal partner interaction', as Putin put it after a meeting between the two leaders in the Russian resort city of Sochi in May 2017.

The incident and its aftermath illustrate a pattern in relations between Russia and Turkey. Conflicting geopolitical interests have caused head-on clashes between these two countries in Syria, Libya and the Caucasus. On the other hand, Moscow and Ankara's speedy reconciliation shows that they have even stronger incentives to cooperate. Therefore, the tendency has been for the two 'frenemies' to compartmentalise frictions in the interests of a broader partnership.

### Russia-Turkey economic relations



Economic ties have made Russia and Turkey closely interdependent. In 2019, with bilateral trade totalling €23 billion, Russia was Turkey's [second biggest](#) trading partner after the EU, while for Russia, Turkey came in [fifth place](#). Russia exports hydrocarbons and metals to Turkey (see Box), while for Turkey, Russia is an important export market for textiles, leather goods and agrifood products. Turkish exports of the latter were boosted in 2014, after Russia decided to restrict agrifood imports from the EU in response to the latter's Ukraine sanctions. Turkey has an estimated [US\\$10 billion](#) of investment in Russia, and Russia has a similar amount in the opposite direction. More Russian tourists visit Turkey than from any other country (in 2019, [7 million](#) of them, 16% of all tourist arrivals). The breakdown in relations following the November 2015 plane downing incident hit Turkey harder than Russia. While Russia was able to continue selling gas to Turkey, a large share of Turkey's exports to Russia were

#### Russia-Turkey energy ties

Russia is Turkey's main energy supplier. Turkey used to import over half its natural gas from Russia; since the new TANAP pipeline started bringing gas from Azerbaijan, Russia's share has fallen (as of August 2020, [41%](#) of Turkish gas imports) but is still larger than that of any other country. For Russia, Turkey is not only a major export market for oil and gas in its own right, but also an important transit country for gas supplies to south-eastern Europe; in combination with the still uncompleted Nord Stream 2 pipeline, [TurkStream](#), which has connected the two countries under the Black Sea since January 2020, could eventually enable Gazprom to completely bypass Ukraine (Figure 2). Energy cooperation is not limited to fossil fuels: Russian state nuclear company Rosatom is building Turkey's first ever nuclear plant at [Akkuyu](#), at an estimated cost of US\$20 billion.

[blocked](#) at the border. From 2015 to 2016, Turkish exports to Russia fell by 48 %, while Russian exports to Turkey were less severely affected (-26 %). Due to a ban on charter flights, the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey dropped by three-quarters. Loss of trade and tourism revenue cost Turkey an estimated [1 %](#) of GDP. The need to repair this economic damage was one of the [factors](#) pushing Erdogan to apologise for the incident to Putin.

## Turkey needs Russia to break out of diplomatic isolation

Since the Second World War, Turkey has chosen a pro-Western orientation: it joined NATO in 1952, concluded an association agreement with the European Economic Community in 1963 and became an EU candidate country in 1999. However, Turkey's ties with its Western allies have been strained by multiple frictions. Turkey is frustrated with the lack of progress in accession talks with the EU, stalled for over a decade. In Syria, it has [criticised](#) the partnership between US forces and Syrian Kurdish forces viewed by Ankara as terrorist. The EU is [alarmed](#) by Turkey's military operations in northeast Syria and its expansionist moves in the eastern Mediterranean – for example, its [drilling](#) for oil and gas in waters internationally recognised as belonging to Cyprus. Deteriorating relations between Brussels and Ankara have led to the suspension of talks on modernising the [EU-Turkey customs union](#), the absence of pre-accession funds for Turkey in the EU's 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework, and sanctions against two Turkish petroleum executives, adopted in 2019.

Western criticism of Erdogan's authoritarian tendencies, especially since 2016, which saw tens of thousands of arrests and a purge of government institutions following an [attempted coup](#), is another source of tension. Although human rights concerns were to some extent sidelined by Donald Trump, the Biden presidency is expected to take a harder line; Biden has [described](#) Erdogan as an 'autocrat' and talked about support for Turkish opposition parties.

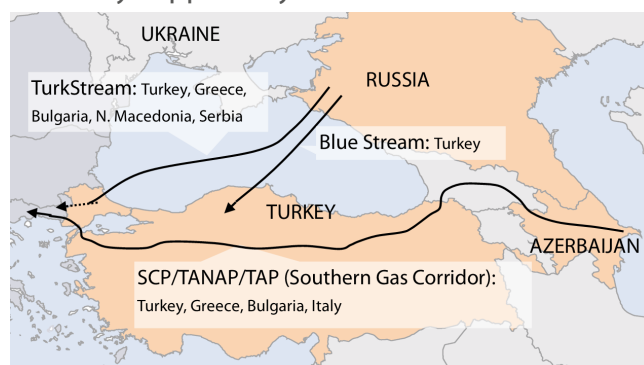
By 2015, Turkey had also fallen out with most of its Middle Eastern neighbours, such as [Egypt](#) and Israel. Despite a '[zero problems](#)' foreign policy, launched in 2008 with the goal of becoming a regional leader, Turkey had become a country with zero friends, having reached 'the loneliest point in the history of the republic', as one [observer](#) put it. On top of the economic cost of Russian sanctions, this diplomatic isolation was a compelling reason for Ankara to seek reconciliation with Moscow.

In many ways, Russia and Turkey are natural allies. The two countries share nostalgia for lost imperial greatness and ambitions to rebuild regional spheres of influence. In both cases, authoritarian and expansionist tendencies have increasingly strained relations with the West. Strongmen leaders who have held onto power for most of the past two decades (both have served as prime minister and president of their respective countries, Putin since 1999, Erdogan since 2003), Putin and Erdogan meet frequently, and have reportedly formed a close [personal rapport](#). In December 2020, Putin [praised](#) Erdogan for his 'predictability' and as a leader who 'keeps his word like a real man'.

## Russia needs Turkey to project influence beyond the post-Soviet space

In 2016, reconciliation with Turkey was also opportune for Russia, its own ties with the West under strain since its 2014 aggression against Ukraine. Better ties with Ankara were helpful to Moscow's drive to establish itself as a power-broker in Syria and the wider [Middle East](#) – and in so doing, to upgrade from a weak 'regional power' in the post-Soviet neighbourhood (as [Barack Obama](#) put it in 2014) to becoming a truly global player.

Figure 2: Gas pipelines in Turkey and countries currently supplied by them



Source: EPRS, 2021.

In 2019, Turkey's rift with NATO helped to prompt a remark by French President, Emmanuel Macron, that the alliance was 'brain dead'. For Russia, any weakening of the alliance, which it perceives as a major external [threat](#), is welcome. Cooperation with Turkey has created opportunities for Russia to drive a wedge between Turkey and the rest of NATO. In 2017, Turkey agreed with Russia to buy the latter's S-400 air defence system. Given that the S-400 is incompatible with the systems currently used by NATO countries, Washington [warned](#) that the deal would weaken the alliance's air defences. It also raised concerns that Russian technicians installing the system in Turkey could gain insights into the capabilities of advanced US F-35 warplanes, which Ankara had been due to acquire. In July 2019, Moscow started delivering S-400 components to Turkey, and the system is currently being prepared for [deployment](#). With Turkey refusing to back down, the US expelled Turkey from the F-35 development programme, stopped training Turkish pilots and cancelled deliveries of the plane. In December 2020, it [adopted](#) sanctions against Turkish defence procurement officials.

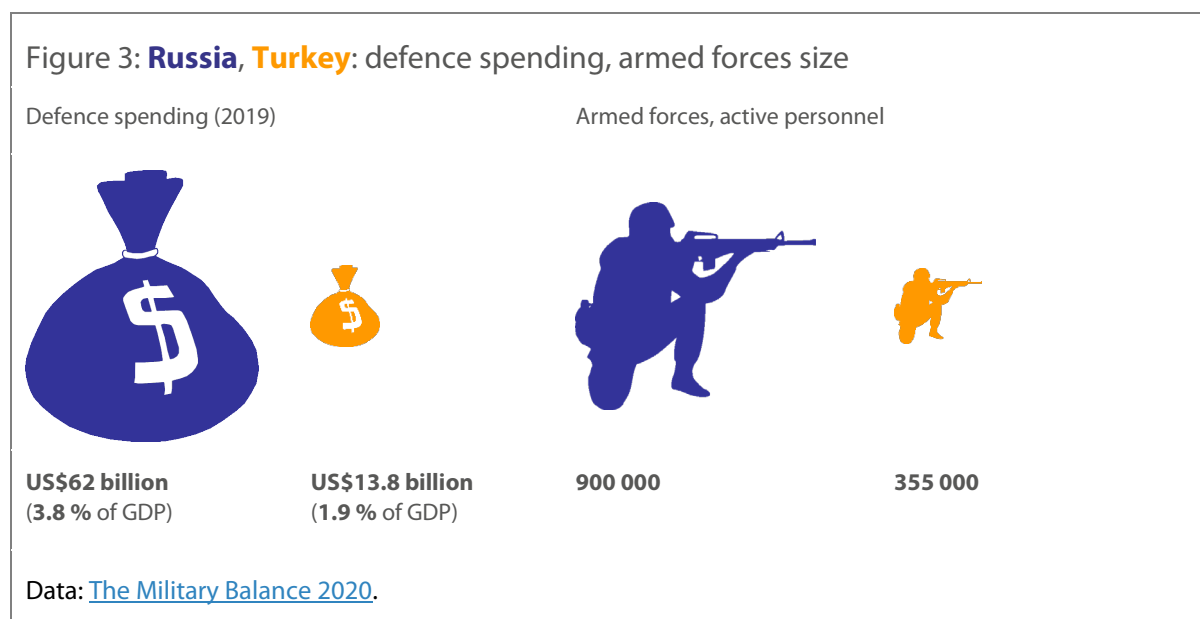
## Areas of competition between Turkey and Russia

### Historical background

As two former imperial powers with overlapping spheres of influence, Turkey and Russia have a historically difficult relationship, fighting more than a [dozen wars](#) with each other over the past five centuries. Turkey's decision to join [NATO](#) in 1952 was largely motivated by its fear of the Soviet Union. That threat receded with the end of the Cold War, allowing a more [constructive relationship](#) with Moscow to emerge. In 2001, the two countries signed a [Joint Action Plan](#) for Cooperation in Eurasia, signalling their intention to work together rather than compete in the shared neighbourhood. In 2004, Vladimir Putin became the first Russian president ever to visit Turkey.

Following this period of cooperation, the relationship became more difficult again as both Russia and Turkey became increasingly ambitious to project regional and international influence. As mentioned in the previous section, the two countries' growing foreign policy ambitions created common ground between them, but they also led to some head-on collisions in areas where the two sides had conflicting goals. Acknowledging this complexity, in October 2020 Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, [noted](#) that, while Turkey has never been Russia's strategic ally, 'it is a partner, a very close partner. In many sectors, this partnership is of a strategic nature'.

### Russia's and Turkey's armed forces



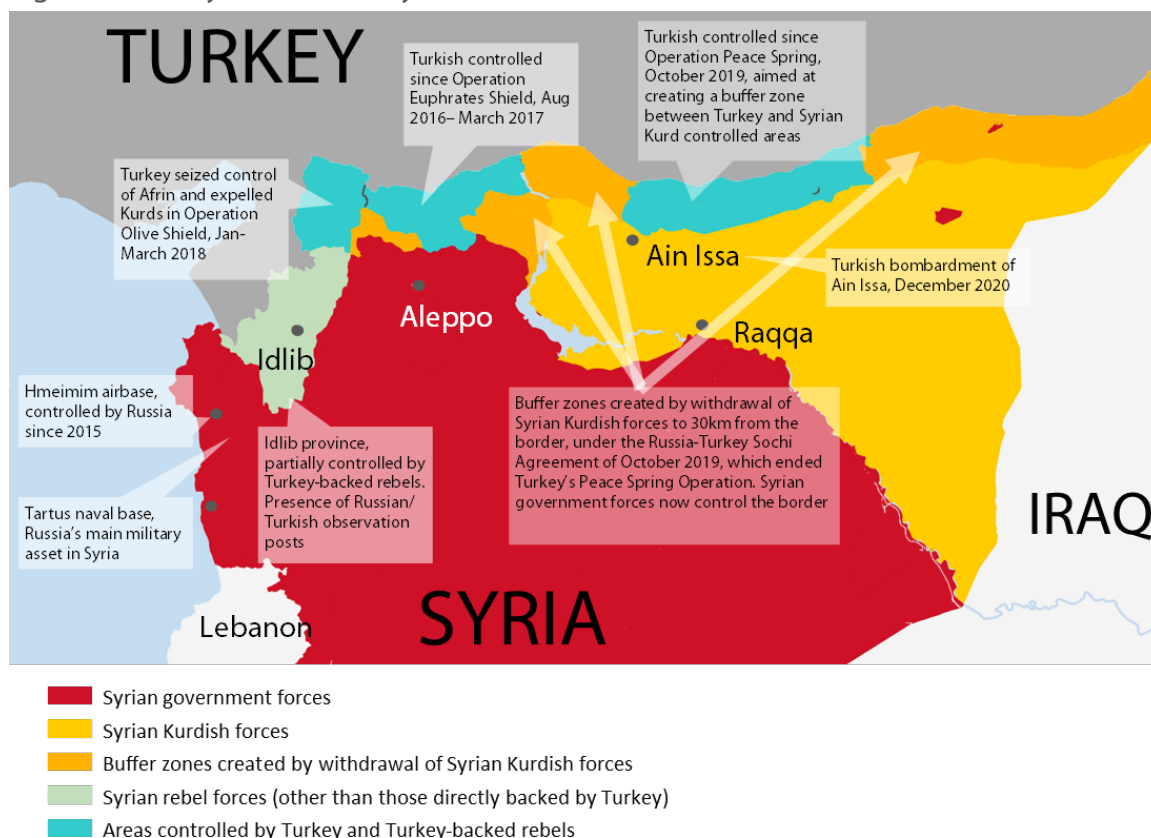
Both Russia and Turkey have invested heavily in their armed forces, which play a key role in their foreign policy interventions. With a defence budget of [US\\$13 billion](#), Turkey has NATO's second

largest armed forces (355 000 in 2020). Turkey's role in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict points to a high level of sophistication; although Turkey's troops were not directly involved, its military planners [helped](#) to secure victory for Azerbaijan. Clearly though, Turkey is outgunned by Russia, which, besides being one of the world's two [nuclear superpowers](#), spends four times as much on defence and has over twice as many military personnel (Figure 3). Nevertheless, Russia has every reason to avoid a direct conflict with Turkey, as this could trigger a collective response by NATO.

## Syria

Since civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, the country has been one of the main areas of competition between Russia and Turkey, with each backing opposing sides. After Erdogan [denounced](#) Assad as a 'butcher' in 2013, Turkey backed some of the rebels that were seeking to overthrow him – for example, the Free Syrian Army, which has [participated](#) in some Turkish army operations in northern Syria. However, Ankara was also deeply [concerned](#) that the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region, after Damascus lost control of north-eastern Syria, would fuel Kurdish separatism within Turkey's own borders. By contrast, Russia was [determined](#) to defend Assad, its only significant remaining Middle Eastern ally after the Arab Spring had overthrown the Russia-friendly regime in Libya. While Russia's main partner in Syria is the Damascus government, it is also willing to work with the Kurds; in 2016, it called for them to be included in UN peace talks and also became the first European country to host a [representative office](#) of Syria's Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which Ankara claims is linked to PKK terrorists in Turkey.

Figure 4: Turkey in northern Syria



Source: EPRS, 2021.

Russia's military campaign in Syria, launched in September 2015, targeted Turkey-backed groups, among other rebels. Turkey's decision to shoot down a Russian plane that posed no military threat to Ankara may have been intended to [discourage](#) further intervention by Moscow. This however did

not happen; with Russian backing, pro-Assad forces have prevailed, expelling the rebels from most parts of the country.

Turkey has now [dropped](#) its demands for Assad to step down, and since 2016 it participates alongside Russia and Iran as one of three 'guarantors' of the ongoing Moscow-led [Astana peace talks](#) that have negotiated a series of ceasefires across Syria. Although Turkey now seems to accept that Assad is likely to recover control of most of Syria with Russia's and Iran's backing, it has also ensured that its concerns about the Syrian Kurds are largely addressed. To this end, Turkey launched two military operations in Syria, Euphrates Shield (2016-2017) and Olive Branch (2018); these put Turkey and allied rebel groups in control of formerly Kurdish north-western Syrian border regions (see Figure 4).

In the north-east, after the withdrawal of most US troops in October 2019 left Kurdish forces unprotected, Turkey launched a third operation, [Peace Spring](#). An [agreement](#) between Putin and Erdogan concluded the same month in Sochi left Turkey in control of the territory it had captured during Peace Spring, and obliged Kurdish forces to withdraw 30 kilometres behind the sections of the border between north-eastern Syria and Turkey not yet under Turkish control. This created a buffer zone between the two countries that is jointly patrolled by Syrian government and Russian troops. Russia and Turkey have also carried out [joint patrols](#) in the buffer zone.

In the parts of Syria that it now controls, Ankara has carried out a campaign of [ethnic cleansing](#) to expel Kurds and resettle some of the 4 million Syrian refugees that are now living in Turkey. As a result, Turkey has now achieved its goal of distancing the Syrian Kurds from almost the entire length of its border.

In December 2020, Turkey [bombed](#) Ain Issa, a Kurdish city just outside one of the areas controlled by Ankara since the Sochi agreement. Turkey says that it is only responding to Kurdish attacks, while Kurdish forces claim that Turkey aims to expand deeper into Syrian Kurd territory. Kurdish forces have [denounced](#) Moscow's failure to condemn Turkish attacks, which favour Damascus's efforts to reassert control over Kurdish-controlled areas by pressuring them to allow more Syrian government troops into border regions as protection from Turkey.

Also on the border with Turkey, Idlib province is partially [controlled](#) by Turkish-backed rebels (mainly the National Liberation Front), alongside jihadists from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly affiliated to al-Qaida. In 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran declared Idlib and three other rebel-held areas in Syria as 'de-escalation zones'. However, the situation in Idlib is not a stable one. While Russia backs the Syrian government's drive to expel rebels from their last stronghold, [Turkey](#) is keen to avoid having to take in another mass influx of refugees. Having recaptured the other three de-escalation zones, Syrian government forces have [advanced](#) into parts of Idlib, and fighting there continues despite two [ceasefires](#) agreed by Russia and Turkey in September 2018 and March 2020. Most of the fighting is between Syrian government and rebel forces, but Russia and Turkey are sometimes directly involved. Russian bombers have carried out air strikes on rebels, the deadliest of which was in [October 2020](#), killing dozens of Turkish-backed militia fighters. On the Turkish side, over [30 soldiers](#) were killed in February 2020, fighting alongside rebels against Syrian government forces.

Some observers see the latter developments as part of the give-and-take in the broader Russia-Turkey relationship. For example, Russia's acquiescence to Turkey's seizure of formerly Kurdish [Afrin](#) in January 2018 went hand-in-hand with Syrian government forces recapturing a swathe of rebel territory in Idlib, while the October 2020 Russian airstrike on Turkish-backed Idlib rebels may have been a [message](#) to Turkey, Azerbaijan's main backer in a war against Russian ally Armenia.

Although the conflict between Russia-backed Syrian government forces and Turkey-backed rebels continues to generate frictions between Moscow and Ankara, the current status quo appears to benefit both of them: while Russia has become the main power broker in Syria, Turkey has extended its control into adjacent Syrian territory, thus keeping Kurdish forces at arm's length from its borders, and, as one of the three guarantors of the Astana peace talks, it has a place at the negotiating table.

Figure 5: Competing Russian and Turkish interests in Eurasia/Middle East/North Africa



Source: EPRS, 2021.

## Libya: Another proxy conflict

Libya, like Syria, is torn by civil war. The two main [parties](#) to the conflict are, in the west of the country, the UN-endorsed Government of National Accord (GNA) based in the Libyan capital Tripoli, and in the east, the Benghazi-based Libya National Army (LNA), led by Khalifa Haftar. In Libya, as in Syria, Russia and Turkey are on opposing sides; Turkey is the GNA's main military backer (alongside Italy and Qatar), whereas the LNA is supported by Russia, alongside France, Egypt and the UAE.

According to [US intelligence](#), Russian private military company [Wagner](#) has deployed 3 000 of its own personnel and 2 000 Syrians to Libya in support of the LNA. Although the Kremlin has not acknowledged any links to Wagner, it often uses mercenaries in situations where deploying official troops would be illegal or controversial (for example, in eastern Ukraine and on the ground in Syria). In 2019, Russian mercenaries played a key role in an LNA offensive that pushed deep into GNA territory, reaching the outskirts of Tripoli.

To avert a GNA defeat, in January 2020 Turkey [announced](#) that it was deploying soldiers to Tripoli; like Russia, it also brought in mercenaries from Syria (an estimated 5 000 of them), alongside several hundred troops from the Turkish armed forces. These helped to halt and partly reverse Haftar's gains.

Russia has not invested the same diplomatic and military resources in Libya as in Syria. It has no official military presence in the country, and a delivery of 14 fighter planes to an LNA-controlled air base (re-routed via Syria and with Russian markings painted over to disguise their origin) in May 2020 was apparently intended to protect Haftar from further losses rather than handing him an outright victory. To [hedge](#) its covert support for the LNA, Russia is reportedly also keeping communication channels open with the GNA. Furthermore, there is [evidence](#) that political consultants with probable links to the Russian state talked to Saif Al-Islam Qaddafi, the son of the former dictator who has declared his intention to stand in future elections, with a view to helping him prepare his bid to become Libyan president.

Neither Russia nor Turkey have managed to dominate international efforts to end fighting in Libya. In January 2020, a [ceasefire](#) agreed by the GNA and the LNA at talks sponsored by Russia and Turkey

in Moscow soon came unstuck. Starting with the [Berlin Conference](#) held a few days later, Germany and its European allies played a key part in peace talks, which eventually led to a longer-lasting UN-brokered [ceasefire](#) in October 2020. Western diplomats, such as US Ambassador, Richard Norland, played a [key part](#) in moving negotiations forward, causing Russia to complain of being [marginalised](#); for its part, Turkey has expressed [scepticism](#) over the truce.

In Libya, neither Russia nor Turkey has succeeded in securing a dominant role, nor have they managed to exclude other players such as the US. However, both are in a strong position to capitalise on their influence over Libya's warring factions. Such benefits include access to Libya's huge energy resources. Already in 2017, Russian state-controlled oil company Rosneft signed an oil exploration [deal](#) with its Libyan counterpart; this has not delivered significant results so far, but a more stable political situation could allow Moscow to revive Gaddafi-era energy cooperation with Libya. For its part, in November 2019 Turkey signed an [agreement](#) with the GNA on demarcation of the two countries' exclusive economic zones in the oil- and gas-rich eastern Mediterranean. The agreement ignores the maritime claims of Greece and is not recognised by other Mediterranean countries or the [EU](#). Nevertheless, following talks with the GNA, Turkey could be on track to secure exploration rights in Libyan waters. Military bases are another potential prize for both Ankara and Moscow; reportedly, Turkey is [negotiating](#) two possible naval bases with the GNA.

## The southern Caucasus

Although Russian fears of [Turkish support](#) for Chechen rebels were a source of tensions in the 1990s, this problem was largely resolved by an agreement between the two countries that Russia would not recognise Turkey's Kurdish rebels in exchange for Turkish non-interference in Chechnya. The main remaining area of friction in the Caucasus region is the long-running conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Geographically and culturally, Azerbaijan is closer to Turkey than the other former Soviet Turkic states, to the point where the two countries habitually [describe](#) themselves as 'one nation, two states'. Turkey is Azerbaijan's [second biggest](#) trading partner after the EU and the main destination for Azerbaijani gas exports via the new TANAP pipeline. Turkey backs Azerbaijan's position that Armenia should withdraw from [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), a territory internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but mostly inhabited by ethnic Armenians.

On top of the Nagorno Karabakh issue, Turkey's relations with Armenia are poisoned by the [massacre](#) of over 1 million Armenians during and after the First World War, which Ankara, unlike much of the rest of the international community, refuses to acknowledge as genocide. Turkey has no diplomatic relations with Armenia, and the borders between the two countries have been closed since 1993. Being at loggerheads with its two Turkic neighbours, Armenia has aligned with Moscow, and has joined Russia-led structures such as the Collective Security Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union EEU. As for Russia, despite its alliance with Armenia, it still maintains friendly ties with Azerbaijan, which is a major purchaser of Russian weapons, as well as being an important [transit country](#) for traffic between Russia and the Persian Gulf countries. Alongside the United States and France, Russia is one of three countries in the [Minsk Group](#), which mediates between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Nagorno Karabakh.

In 2020, Nagorno Karabakh put Russia-Turkey relations to their severest test since 2015. Russia is bound to Armenia by an obligation of mutual defence, while Turkey is Azerbaijan's close defence partner. The [war](#) between Azerbaijan and Armenia that broke out in September 2020 had the potential to escalate from a proxy war to a direct conflict between Ankara and Moscow.

However, Russia and Turkey were careful to prevent this happening. To avoid being drawn in, Russia made it [clear](#) at an early stage of the conflict that its obligation to defend Armenia did not apply to Nagorno Karabakh, only to the country's internationally recognised territory – which Azerbaijan mostly refrained from attacking. Azerbaijan's immediate [apology](#) after shooting down a Russian helicopter and Russia's willingness to accept that apology were indicative of a determination on both sides to prevent the conflict from escalating. For its part, despite unreserved diplomatic support for Azerbaijan's position, Turkey did not deploy any of its own troops in Azerbaijan, instead



sending several hundred, or perhaps several thousand, Syrian [mercenaries](#) – enough to draw [criticism](#) but not to trigger a military response by Russia.

Following the logic seen in Syria and Libya, Russia and Turkey managed to compartmentalise their differences on Nagorno Karabakh and reach a solution that offered [advantages](#) to both of them. For Turkey, Azerbaijan's victory strengthens its influence in the southern Caucasus. Moreover, a transport corridor agreed by Armenia and Azerbaijan in November 2020 will connect Azerbaijani exclave Nakhchivan (which borders on Turkey) with the rest of Azerbaijan, thus giving Turkish traffic a more [direct route](#) to the Caspian Sea without having to pass through Iran.

At the same time, the peace agreement confirms Russia's dominant role as a regional power-broker, mediator and peacekeeper. It marginalises the US and France, the two remaining members of the Minsk Group, which played no part in negotiating it. Furthermore, for the first time since 2012, when Russia's lease on [Gabala radar station](#) expired, Russian troops will be stationed on Azerbaijani territory.

However, Russia and Turkey are still quibbling over the role each will play in the disputed region. Despite Turkey's demands to be involved in negotiations on the future status of Karabakh, Russia has blocked its [bid](#) to join the Minsk Group. Russia also insists on leading peacekeeping operations, with only a secondary role for Turkey; according to Moscow, Ankara will send observers to a Russian-Turkish joint monitoring centre, but these will only have access to Azerbaijani territory outside Nagorno Karabakh. For its part, Turkey is still [demanding](#) its own independent monitoring centre.

## Ex-Soviet Central Asia

Although it was never under Ottoman rule, Central Asia has cultural and linguistic ties to Turkey; Turkic languages are spoken not only in Azerbaijan but also in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, all of which are predominantly Muslim. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey was the first to recognise the independence of these 'sister republics' and, building on cultural similarities, [projected](#) itself as a model and regional leader for them. To assist in their development, Turkey established a Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) in 1992.

Turkish involvement was welcomed by the newly independent Central Asian states, determined to avoid over-dependence on Russia. In 2009, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Turkey founded the [Turkic Council](#) (Uzbekistan did not join until 2019) on an initiative of then Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Kazakhstan, a country where ethnic Kazakhs were almost outnumbered by Russians until independence, has been particularly keen to assert its [Turkic identity](#).

However, Turkish influence in Central Asia has been quite [limited](#). Although Turkic Council cooperation includes regular meetings at head of state, foreign minister, parliamentary and other levels, it has not led to many practical results. There is little economic interaction; Turkey's trade with the five Central Asian states is just 4 % of its total trade.<sup>1</sup> Although Turkmenistan offers potential as a supplier of natural gas, the obstacles to building a [trans-Caspian pipeline](#) remain insuperable. Initially focused on Central Asia, most Turkish development aid now goes elsewhere – for example, to the [Middle East](#). Bilateral frictions, such as Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's refusal to comply with Turkish demands to close [Gülen schools](#), or the presence in Turkey of [opponents](#) to former Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, have also held back cooperation.

By contrast, Russia remains the [dominant](#) power in Central Asia: Tajikistan (which is non-Turkic), Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Moscow-led Collective Security Organisation (CSTO), which is a military alliance. Although Uzbekistan left the CSTO in 2012 and has not announced plans to re-join, it has recently resumed [defence](#) cooperation with Russia. Although Russia has been overtaken by China and the EU as an economic partner for Central Asia, it still trades nearly five times as much as Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Russia's leadership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan belong to, gives it additional influence. Russia has made no efforts to exclude Turkey, which plays a mostly [subordinate role](#), from the region. Only

during the brief period of tensions following Turkey's 2015 downing of a Russian jet were Central Asian countries under [pressure](#) to choose sides between Moscow and Ankara.

## Ukraine and the Black Sea: Russia as a potential security threat for Turkey

The [Bosphorus](#) is critically important to Moscow as the gateway for Russian shipping to reach the warm waters of the Mediterranean. During the First World War, Turkey's chokehold on Russian trade played a key role in Tsarist Russia's defeat. Under the 1936 [Montreux Convention](#), countries with a Black Sea coastline can send commercial and naval vessels through the straits, with only minor restrictions. The convention benefits both sides, as it gives Turkey control over the straits (in contrast to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which did not allow Turkish restrictions on marine traffic), while guaranteeing uninterrupted Russian access to the Mediterranean. Thanks to this, in 2016 Russia was able to deploy [warships](#) and submarines from its Black Sea fleet to Syria, despite tense relations with Ankara at the time. Although this arrangement works well, there are questions over its future, due to Turkey's plan to divert marine traffic through a yet to be built [Istanbul Canal](#) bypassing the Bosphorus that would probably not be covered by the Montreux Convention.

Military presence in the Black Sea region is another major issue for the two countries. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Turkey became the foremost Black Sea naval power, but Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea shifted the balance back in its favour. Since 2014, Moscow has, in Putin's [words](#),

turned the peninsula into a fortress, deploying large numbers of troops, warships and submarines there. According to a former NATO [commander](#), Russian air defence missiles can now reach targets across practically the entire Black Sea, while its anti-ship missiles cover nearly half that area. In 2016, Erdogan [warned](#) that the Black Sea was in danger of becoming 'a Russian lake'. Reflecting these concerns, Turkey welcomed NATO's [Tailored Forward Presence](#) in the Black Sea, despite its often strained relations with the rest of the alliance, and also supported NATO enlargement to [Ukraine](#) and [Georgia](#).

To counter Russian domination of the Black Sea, Turkey has built close relations with Ukraine. The two countries have a [strategic partnership](#) since 2011, visa-free travel since 2017, and in October 2020 they [agreed](#) to closer defence cooperation. Although it did not join Western sanctions against Russia, Turkey has repeatedly [condemned](#) the latter's annexation of Crimea.

## Implications of Russia-Turkey relations

Competition between Russia and Turkey for influence in Eurasia has drawn the two countries into several proxy conflicts, with differing outcomes: in Syria, Russia was on the winning side, in Nagorno Karabakh, Turkish ally Azerbaijan prevailed, while in Libya, the Turkish-backed GNA and Russian-backed LNA have reached a stalemate.

However, there are striking similarities, as well as differences, between these three situations, all of which have allowed Russia and Turkey to carve out regional spheres of influence for themselves. In Libya, Russia and Turkey have not had it all their own way, but in Syria and Nagorno Karabakh, they have mostly succeeded in excluding other international players, such as the US and the EU. Multilateral mechanisms – such as the UN-led Geneva negotiations on Syria, eclipsed by Russia's Astana talks, or the OSCE's Minsk Group on Nagorno Karabakh, which played no part in mediating the ceasefire or peacekeeping, have been sidelined. Referring to the Astana talks, in December 2020 EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, [warned](#) that 'Astanisation' posed a threat to multilateralism.

### Turkish backing for the Crimean Tatars

Ever since Russia first seized control of Crimea from the Ottomans in the 18th Century, Turkey has seen itself as a [protector](#) of the Crimean Tatars, Turkic people that endured heavy [persecution](#) at the hands of the Soviet and, since 2014, the Russian governments. In 2017, Turkish development aid financed a [Crimean Tatar](#) centre in Kyiv. Erdogan has also lobbied, sometimes [successfully](#), for the release of Tatar prisoners in Russia.

In all three conflicts, Russia and Turkey [prioritised](#) geopolitical interests over internationally recognised principles such as self-determination, territorial integrity, fundamental human rights, political pluralism, and refraining from the use of military force. In Syria, Russia shields the Assad regime from calls to hold it to account for human rights abuses, while Turkey has effectively annexed swathes of Syrian territory to create a buffer zone against the Kurds; in Nagorno Karabakh, Turkey threw its weight behind a military, rather than diplomatic solution; in Libya, the two countries added fuel to the fire of a bloody civil war, backing warring factions in an effort to impose outcomes that would favour their interests.

What are the implications of these developments for Turkey's alliance with the West? Turkey is certainly not unique in having to compartmentalise its relations with Russia. Given that Russia is far too big to simply ignore, all Eurasian and Middle Eastern countries – including EU Member States – need to engage with Moscow (indeed, selective engagement is one of the fundamental tenets of [EU-Russia relations](#), adopted by EU foreign ministers in 2016, recently [confirmed](#) by EU High Representative Borrell). What is worrying about Turkey is the extent to which its increasingly assertive foreign policy has compromised the values to which it nominally subscribes as a NATO ally and EU candidate country, and the risk that partnership with Russia will only encourage this tendency.

Some would argue that the results are much closer to Moscow's vision of a '[multipolar world](#)' – in practice, a return to great power competition – than the multilateral rules-based order favoured by the EU and its allies. Under Erdogan, it seems that Turkey, while still aligned with the West, is increasingly inclined to Russia's worldview.

Russia would certainly [welcome](#) a split between Turkey and the West. However, this seems unlikely to happen. Tensions in the Black Sea are a reminder of the Turkish concerns about Russia as a potential adversary and its need for NATO allies. On the economic front, Turkey's exports to the EU are 15 times higher than to Russia, and it therefore has every reason to continue its [customs union](#) with the EU, rather than joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. Brussels and Ankara have long been deadlocked over modernising their customs union, and in June 2018, EU foreign ministers [agreed](#) that there would be no further negotiations, in view of Turkey's increasingly difficult relations with the EU. Nevertheless, Ankara still [sees](#) the customs union as important for its economic integration with Europe. In view of this, occasional comments on possible Turkish membership of the Eurasian Economic Union – for example, by Turkish Economy Minister, [Nihat Zeybekci](#), in 2017 – are unlikely to express a serious intention to break with the EU.

The West also has an [interest](#) in continued cooperation, despite the many issues that divide the two sides: Turkey is a major economic partner, a bridge to the Muslim world and a strategically important military ally, protecting Europe's south-eastern flank and controlling access to the Black Sea. Given this mutual dependence, Turkey is likely to stay within the Western camp, while continuing its competitive-cooperative partnership with Russia.

#### **European Parliament position**

In its [resolution](#) of September 2020 on the eastern Mediterranean, the Parliament points out that Turkey, as an EU candidate country, is expected to comply with international law. The Parliament criticises Turkey's 'unilateral foreign policy initiatives' and calls on it to respect the UN arms embargo on Libya. On [Eastern Partnership](#) countries (June 2020), a Parliament recommendation notes with concern the 'interest and ambition of third countries, such as ... Turkey ... which do not necessarily share the values and interests of the EU'. The Parliament condemns the [Turkish military intervention in north-east Syria](#) (resolution of October 2019) as 'a grave violation of international law'. In a similar vein, the Parliament's [resolution](#) of March 2019 on the state of EU-Russia relations criticises Russia's violations of international law, its support for the authoritarian regime in Syria, its interference in countries such as Libya, and its involvement in protracted conflicts in the Caucasus region. Following the arrest of opposition activist Alexey Navalny, in a January 2021 resolution the Parliament [called](#) for even harsher sanctions against Russia.

## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> According to UN Comtrade [data](#) (which do not include Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

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