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CONTEMPORARY TRENDS OF IMPROVEMENTS IN TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS: RAMIFICATIONS FOR REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS

Abstract

Progress in Turco-Russian relations in recent times have generated speculations on Turkey leaving the West and moving closer to Russia for establishing alternative coalition; their opposition to Western policies and positions, mutual support, expanding cooperation in diverse fields, similarities in their own stances, deepen such apprehensions. A longstanding ally of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey has lots of grievances with its Western partners, i.e., the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), like, over its failure to secure EU membership due to members' opposition, purchase of Russian weaponry, Armenian Genocide recognition, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, European refugee crisis, etc. Conversely, there are reasons, e.g., economic factors, the West and Russia's common displeasure on its role in Syria, Libya, hardline religious stances, Turkey-Armenia animus, and other issues. Nevertheless, improvements in Turco-Russian relations are likely to have wide-ranging ramifications for the geopolitics of three regions, considered as spheres of influence/interest, i.e., Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is argued that even though Turkey and Russia's bilateral ties have seen important advancement nowadays, Turkey is unlikely to leave the Western camp for deeper alignment with Russia, owing to long history of hostilities and unstable nature of relations with that country.

Keywords: Turco-Russian relation, Erdogan, Putin, Armenian Genocide, Conservatism, Geopolitics, Sanctions, S-400, Ukraine, Black Sea

1. Introduction

For some years, Turco-Russian relations have been going through conspicuous fluctuations. There have been periods of hostility and amity albeit both countries maintained their individual stances on certain issues. While Russia has regularly been at loggerheads with Western countries, specifically the US, EU, ex-Soviet nations, etc., and blamed for various crises, Turkey, an important member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has also developed considerable

strains with them; for example, Turkey's bid for EU membership and EU's pressure on the country for acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide (1915) remain highly contentious issues between these two sides. Recently, the coup d'état of 2016 and Western stance, increasing Turkish conservatism, purchase of the Russian S-400 Triumph missile system, soured their bilateral relations further.

Turco-Russian relations have checkered, long history. These countries had vast empires and engaged in several wars for centuries, where, Western powers sometimes sided with either the Romanoffs or Ottomans, e.g., in the Crimean War (October 1853-March 1856), France, Britain and Habsburg Austria were with the Ottomans against Romanoff Russia whereas, in the First World War (1914-18), Britain, France and Russia (Allied Powers) were in the same camp against the Habsburg Austria and Ottomans (Central Powers). Already weakened by longstanding warfare and internal troubles, both the Romanoff and Ottoman empires collapsed immediately after this war.¹ Relations warmed somewhat when the Bolshevik government of Russia assisted the nationalist movement led by Kamal Atatürk in the Turkish War of Independence and the Greco-Turkish War (1919-22).² In 1925, they signed the Turco-Soviet Treaty of Neutrality and Friendship. During the Second World War, Turkey remained neutral, joining neither the Allies nor the Axis; after that war ended, the USSR said the aforementioned agreement would not be renewed or extended. In 1952, Turkey joined the NATO and when Joseph Stalin died in 1953, the USSR abandoned its previous stance. In the Cold War era, they were in totally opposite camps. Following the USSR's demise in 1991, both Turkey and Russia took initiatives to improve mutual relations.

Of late, these ties experienced noticeable advances, particularly in political, military and business spheres. A common factor behind this phenomenon is their growing grievances with the West.³ Development has not always been linear, e.g., after downing a Russian fighter jet in November 2015 by and ensuing Russian sanctions on Turkey, normalization of ties in June 2016 and Russian support for the Turkish government during the futile coup of July that same year, Turco-Russian consensus on establishing peace talks regarding the Syrian Civil War, both supporting Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, etc. There are divergences too,

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¹ Kirill A. Fursov, "Russia and the Ottoman Empire: The Geopolitical Dimension," *Russian Studies in History* 57, Issue 2 (2018): 100.

² Islam Xoshgedem, "Anti-Western Policy of the Soviet-Turkish Relations during the Greek-Turkish War," *University of Rzeszow Journal of Humanities as Social Sciences*, no. 1 (10): 2019: 12.

³ Paul Stronski, *A Difficult Balancing Act: Russia's Role in the Eastern Mediterranean* (Washington, D.C., USA: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), 7.

like their opposing stances in the Syrian War where Russia is pro-Assad while Turkey is against; in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, their roles are contradictory. Russia is among countries recognizing the Armenian Genocide, an event Turkey denies any liability for. Meanwhile, Russia warned Turkey about broadening military relations with Ukraine.⁴

Russia has for long been in adversarial relations with Western countries and is projected as such by them also; at the same time, with the widening of Turkey-West rifts amid advancement in Turco-Russian relations, there is some speculation Turkey may align with Russia leaving the Western camp.⁵ Many of Turkish and Russian positions have visible similarities nowadays, e.g., authoritarian state practices, admiration, glorification of and calls for restoring bygone political entities (Ottoman, Romanoff and the USSR), aggressive rhetoric and steps with neighbours in disputes, go against Western ideas which may be buttressing their suspicions/worries.

Concerning these scenarios, several questions can come up: what is the status of Turco-Russian relations at present? What grievances does Turkey have with Western allies? May such rift push it for leaving the Western camp and form some sort of coalition with Russia? If so, how may that impact regional geopolitics, i.e., in Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East (because both countries continue to have substantial involvement in these and consider them as a sphere of influence/interest since their days as empires)? The main argument here is, Turkey is not likely to form any alliance with Russia despite its own ties strained with the West.

This article searches answers to such queries. It is a qualitative research effort relying fully on secondary materials; ramifications are political and military only, leaving economic ones aside. There are five sections in it. After the introduction, the second section discusses status of Turco-Russian relations (From Putin's assumption of power—present day). The third speaks on grievances Turkey has with Western partners on various issues, ensuing rifts between the two sides, whether these rifts may drive Turkey away from the West and closer to Russia. The fourth will try to analyze possible impacts of such a change on three regions mentioned just above considering Turkish and Russian longtime involvement there. The fifth section concludes the article.

⁴ "Russia Warns Turkey Over Ties with Ukraine," *Reuters*, May 25, 2021, accessed 10 July 2021, <https://reuters.com/world/russia-warns-turkey-over-ties-with-ukraine-2021-05-24/>

⁵ Francesco M. Bongiovanni, "Turkey: The NATO Alliance's Wild Card," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 53.

2. Turco-Russian Relations (From 2000—Present Day)

Since 2000, both countries have begun to change their foreign policy outlooks to a considerable extent. For example, in June 2000, President Putin announced Russia's new Foreign Policy Concept that put high emphasis on his country's interests in the post-Soviet Space. Similarly in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) focussed on reducing clashes with neighbours and increasing cooperation, diversifying foreign policy from being heavily West-centric, and also strategic-military cooperation with Russia.⁶ That decade was marked by their efforts for developing relations in various spheres, evident visits of high-level political leadership and signing various agreements. In October 2000, Russia's then prime minister, Mikhail Kasyanov, visited Turkey where both sides discussed energy, trade and defence industry cooperation. Expansion of trade and economic relations was again attached high priority during then foreign minister Igor Ivanov's visit to Turkey in June 2001. To increase cooperation and reduce past hostilities in the Caucasus, Black Sea and Central Asia, they signed the Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Eurasia in November 2001, which in turn, helped set up a joint working group on economic, security and political issues of mutual interest.⁷ The then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah Gül, visited Russia in February 2004 while Putin became the first Russian Head of State to visit Turkey in December that year. During this visit, presidents of both countries signed the Joint Declaration on Intensification of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership. In January 2005, then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Russia. In November, the Blue Stream Gas Pipeline was launched. They also went for strengthening security and strategic cooperation; bilateral visits by chiefs of armed forces began in 2002. Turkey inaugurated the Operation Black Sea Harmony in March 2004 to counter security threats facing that region and Russia formally joined there in 2006.⁸

The Russo-Georgian War (August 2008) was the first instance of Russia wielding military muscles beyond borders after 1991. During this war, Turkey called for a ceasefire along with proposal for establishing the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP); Erdogan visited Russia, Georgia and Azerbaijan to promote this. However, in November, allegations arose on Turkey about secretly providing military assistance to Georgia, and Russia restricted products from Turkey

⁶ Evren Balta, "From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after the Cold War," *Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 63 (2019): 9.

⁷ Emre Erşen, "Turkey and Russia: An Emerging 'Strategic Axis' in Eurasia?," *EurOrient*, no. 35-36 (2011): 269.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, "Turkey's political relations with the Russian Federation," accessed July 27, 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-political-relations-with-russian-federation.en.mfa

into its market.⁹ Relations did not worsen further after this though. During president Medvedev's visit in May 2010 to Turkey, discussions were held on increasing economic cooperation, combatting terrorism and extremism, the Iranian nuclear programme, South Caucasus, collaboration in the Black Sea, etc. The Russia-Turkey High Level Cooperation Council was formed¹⁰ with Russia agreeing also to finance and build the Akkuyu nuclear powerplant in Turkey.¹¹ Their bilateral trade grew remarkably: in 2000, Turkish exports to Russia stood at US\$639.09 million, which reached US\$4.631 billion in 2010; conversely, Russian exports of US\$3.879 billion in 2000 reached US\$21.6 billion in 2010.¹² Simultaneously, in this decade, both Turkey and Russia's relations with the West were experiencing various ups and downs. There was expectation of betterment in Russia-West relations; some progress had been made, like, Russia's support for the US and vital logistic assistance in the global war on terror, several EU-Russia agreements for energy supplies and a proposal for Russia-EU Strategic Partnership, etc. But this did not last long as since 2002, divergence began to grow in Russia-US relations. Russia vehemently opposed the Iraq War in 2003; besides, Colour Revolutions in several ex-Soviet nations with pro-West sides' victory, eastward extension of NATO and EU, war with Georgia, resulted in widening gaps further. For Turkey, the scenario was nearly analogous. The AK party's victory in 2002 elections was welcomed by most EU countries. There had been good momentum in Turkish bid of accession into the bloc and negotiations were opened in 2005 in this respect. Greco-Turkish relations also improved somewhat. Nonetheless, there were evident signs of deterioration when back in 2003, Turkey rejected US troops deployment on its soil to launch invasion of Iraq.¹³ Later in 2004, France called on Turkey to recognize the Armenian Genocide and Cyprus objected on Turkish accession into the EU in 2009.

After 2008, Russia faced strict sanctions and still, went for continuous upgrades of its military. As for Turkey, in the 2010s, ties with the West began taking a gradual nosedive too. Opposition to its membership in the EU was mounting. Likewise, anti-West sentiments began to grow in Turkey and Russia; both nations faced contempt and criticism from them for adopting undemocratic policies. These accusations stemmed from Erdogan and Putin having secured virtually total control of state powers, widespread use of populism, and violent repression of differing

⁹ Gareth M. Winrow, "Turkey, Russia and the Caucasus: Common and Diverging Interests," *REP/EP Briefing Paper 2009/01*, Russia and Eurasia Programme/Europe Programme, Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), London, UK, November 2009, 6-7.

¹⁰ "Official visit to Turkey—President of Russia," accessed July 27, 2021, *Kremlin.ru*, <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/82/events/7731>

¹¹ Sebnem Arsu, "Turkey's pact with Russia will give it nuclear plant," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2010.

¹² Nevzat Şimşek, Hayal Ayça Şimşek, Zhengizkhan Zhanaltay, "Analysis of Bilateral Trade Relations between Turkey and Russian Federation," *Bilig (Journal of Social Sciences of the Turkic World)*, no. 83 (2017): 7.

¹³ Richard Bouderaux and Amberin Zaman, "Turkey Rejects US Troop Deployment," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 2003.

voices; such antipathy from the West worked in driving the two countries closer than before.¹⁴ When Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, Turkish reactions were mainly on human rights of Tatars therein and Ukraine's territorial integrity; it urged for peaceful solution terming the crisis as Russia's internal matter and rather provided asylum to fleeing Crimean Tatars. It, moreover, did not join Western sanctions placed on Russia after the annexation event.¹⁵

Turco-Russian ties suffered a setback in late November 2015 with Turkey downing a Russian Air Force Sukhoi Su-24 fighter-bomber near its border with Syria; Russia subsequently imposed economic sanctions on Turkey. Many business deals were cancelled. A day after the SU-24 shutdown, the Russian State Duma proposed a bill to criminalize denial of the Armenian Genocide, and anti-Turkish sentiments soared among Russian public as well. However, reconciliation process began in June 2016 after Erdogan expressed regrets to Putin about the shutdown. During the failed coup attempt a month later against the Erdogan government, Russia supported Turkey strongly. The coup was thwarted, Erdogan thanked Putin, but held foreign powers liable and said Western governments were siding with those behind the attempt.¹⁶ He especially accused the US in this case although the latter denied any involvement; Russia had reportedly warned Erdogan about the coup beforehand.¹⁷

In spite of playing contrary roles, Turkey and Russia initiated the Astana Peace Talks in December 2016 about the ongoing war in Syria. With improving relations, Russia, since mid-2017, began to remove a number of sanctions it imposed on Turkey. As regards distraught relationship with the US, they have showed support for each other. For example, Turkey in August 2017, voiced its disapproval for EU sanctions on Russia over annexation of Crimea;¹⁸ in August 2018, when the Trump administration levied sanctions on Turkey for arresting a US pastor back in 2016 (after the coup) on charges of aiding anti-Turkish elements, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov condemned that US measure during his visit in Turkey.¹⁹ They hold analogous position in backing the incumbent Maduro government of Venezuela.

¹⁴ Evren Balta, "From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership," 78.

¹⁵ Şener Aktürk, "The Crisis in Russian-Turkish Relations, 2008-2015," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 179, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland, February 12, 2016, 2.

¹⁶ Emma Graham-Harrison and Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "The West Is Supporting Terrorism against Turkey, Claims Erdoğan," *The Guardian*, August 2, 2016.

¹⁷ Şener Aktürk, "Relations between Russia and Turkey before, during and after the failed coup of 2016," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETAV), Ankara, Turkey (Winter 2019), 105.

¹⁸ "Turkey Says It Is against EU Sanctions on Russia," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 11, 2017.

¹⁹ "Russia's Foreign Minister Condemns US Sanctions on Turkey," *Ahval News*, August 14, 2018, accessed 30 July 2021, <https://ahvalnews.com/russia-turkey/russias-foreign-minister-condemns-us-sanctions-turkey#>,

Trade continues to be a vital component in Turco-Russian ties. Between 2000 and 2015, Russian exports saw a 425 per cent rise in values while Turkey's exports to Russia saw 447 per cent.²⁰ Even during the covid-19 pandemic, their bilateral trade reached US\$22.2 billion (Turkey exported US\$4.4 billion and Russia US\$17.8 billion) in 2020. Turkey has plans to take trade figures with Russia to US\$100 billion as the balance remains heavily in the latter's favour.²¹ Another vital area is energy. Once Russia was the main supplier of gas for Turkey; but that position weakened as Turkey is now diversifying energy reliance with importing more from Azerbaijan, Iran and exploring in its own sea borders. In January 2020, Erdogan and Putin launched the Turk Stream gas pipeline. By June 2021, Turkish purchase of gas from Russia stood at 14.64 billion cubic metres.²²

Turkey and Russia are steadily increasing military collaboration. The US removed its Patriot MIM-104 missile batteries from Turkey in October 2015. Turkey decided for purchasing the Russian S-400 Triumph missile defence system in September 2017. The first S-400s were delivered in July 2019; the US placed sanctions on Turkey and excluded it from the F-35 Lighting II Programme²³ but could not stop either country from pursuing the deal. Russia then offered SU-35S and even more modern SU-57 Felon (stealth) fighter jets to Turkey; they have kept up discussions over such procurements but that has to be finalized and US sanctions remain. In September 2020, they held joint naval drills in the Eastern Mediterranean and similar military drills at Idlib, Syria. However, during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that same month, Turkey came out with open support for Azerbaijan and Russia for Armenia, respectively. In April 2021, Turkey urged for diplomatic solution when US warships were scheduled for deployment in the Black Sea amid concerns of possible aggressive response from Russia.²⁴

3. Turkey's Grievances with Western Partners

The country became a NATO member in 1952 and undertook efforts to accede into the EU in late 1980s. But there exist various disputes between the two sides that nowadays have become more complicated and thus deteriorating their mutual relations. Turkey-US ties are experiencing considerable strains as well.

²⁰ Valeria Talbot and Chiara Lovotti (eds.), "The role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa region: strategy of opportunism," *EUROMESCO Joint Policy Study*, no. 12, European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMED), Barcelona, Spain (April 2019): 93.

²¹ "Turkey Vows to Rev Up Trade with Russia to Reach Mutual \$100B Goal," *The Daily Sabah*, August 1, 2021.

²² "Turkey Imports 14.6 Bcm of Russian Gas in H1, Highest since 2017," *The Daily Sabah*, July 2, 2021.

²³ Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, "Turkey: Background and US Relations in Brief," *Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report*, no. R4400, Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., USA, November 9, 2020, 6-10.

²⁴ "US Cancels Warship Deployment to Black Sea—Turkish Diplomatic Sources," *Reuters*, April 15, 2021, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-cancels-warships-deployment-black-sea-turkish-diplomatic-sources-2021-04-14/>.

Turkey's invasion of Cyprus (1974) and the resulting conflict are a thorn between Turkey and the EU. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TNRC), established after that invasion, is recognized by Turkey alone and no one else. Even the United Nations (UN) identifies it as a territory occupied by Turkey and sanctioned it. Turkey does not recognize (Republic of) Cyprus, an EU member, which has persistently been obstructing Turkish accession into the bloc. The EU and US have substantial misgivings with Turkey on the Cyprus dispute which can aggravate owing to Turkish exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean for mineral resources that began in 2017; Cyprus labelled these as encroachment into its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), was supported by the EU and US who condemned Turkey's activities. The nearly millennium old Greco-Turkish enmity runs on to this day, encompassing religious, political and military issues. For some years, demarcation disputes (regularly with bellicose postures) in the Aegean Sea have intensified, with Turkey calling for demilitarization of several Greek islands; Greece accuses Turkey of facilitating illegal immigration into Europe, while Turkey blames Greece for sheltering and aiding anti-Turkish groups like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Gulen Movement.²⁵ The Eastern Mediterranean is another case; when in August 2020, a Turkish vessel went there to explore minerals, Greece and Cyprus lobbied with the EU for strict sanctions²⁶ and the EU in December, threatened with sanctions on several Turkish officials.²⁷ Religious tensions are another key issue. When Turkey decided in July 2020 to change the Hagia Sophia museum (originally a church, then mosque, then museum) into a mosque, this drew widespread condemnation from Greece, EU, US and even the Vatican; Matteo Salvini, Italy's ex-deputy prime minister and federal secretary of the Lega Nord said in a demonstration, he would block any more funding to Turkey and also its efforts for gaining EU membership.²⁸

Considerable stress is rising in France-Turkey relations. France is skeptical of Turkey's EU membership. Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy said in 2007, "Turkey has no place in the EU."²⁹ During visit in Turkey in 2011, he advised them to seek an alternative partnership with the bloc, in lieu of membership.³⁰ French recognition of the Armenian Genocide has become another point of disagreement in ties with Turkey. In April 2019, France commemorated 24 April as

²⁵ "Turkey-Greece: From Brinkmanship to Dialogue," Report no. 263, International Crisis Group, Brussels, Belgium, 31 May 31, 2021, 5-8.

²⁶ Fabian Merz, *Trouble with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Center for Security Studies (CSS) Analyses in Security Policy, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland, December 2020, 1.

²⁷ Luigi Scazzieri, *From partners to rivals: the future of Turkey-EU relations*, Policy Brief, Centre for European Reform (CER), London, UK, June 23, 2021, 2.

²⁸ "Matteo Salvini: Hands off Hagia Sophia," *Orthodox Times.com*, July 14, 2020, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/matteo-salvini-hands-off-hagia-sophia/>.

²⁹ Ilya Roubanis, "The European crisis and Turkey's unpredictable role in the Balkans," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 2, SETAV, Ankara, Turkey (Spring 2019): 80.

³⁰ Martin Kuebler, "Turkey Not Fit for EU Accession," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, 26 February 2011, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-not-fit-for-eu-accession-sarkozy/a-14875593>

day of remembrance for that genocide; Turkey was angry and condemned the step harshly.³¹ In October 2020, concerning murder of a French schoolteacher over allegations of insulting Islam, both countries became embroiled in intense war of words and later, recalled respective ambassadors from each other. President Emmanuel Macron claimed in 2021 that Turkey was trying to interfere in upcoming French presidential election of 2022.³² During the drilling row in August 2020, France sought EU sanctions, sent naval forces in support of Greece and Cyprus against Turkey.³³ Germany, too is against Turkey's EU accession bid. Chancellor Angela Merkel maintains her staunch objection in this regard and reiterated that position on several occasions. In 2013, Germany advocated for halting accession talks as Turkish authorities handled anti-government protests harshly. There are allegations on the Turkish national intelligence (MIT) of conducting such activities inside Germany, especially on Turkish-Germans and other Turkish dissidents.³⁴

Turkey has other discordances with the EU. The group has continuously been asking Turkey to recognize the Armenian Genocide which Turkey rejects and alongside that, remains highly critical of some EU members, notably France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands and others for their individual recognition; Erdogan said his country would never acknowledge the case as genocide,³⁵ and so far, holds onto that stance. The European migrant crisis that began in 2015, keeps on prolonging Turkey-EU squabble. They signed a deal in mid-March 2016 to stem the flow of illegal migrants into the EU through Turkey while the latter is already heavily burdened with millions of Syrian and other refugees. Under this deal, the EU agreed on providing Turkey with a total of € 06 billion for supporting refugees in there.³⁶ Despite helping somewhat in reducing number of illegal migrants, the deal has been a source of occasional flare-ups between the two sides: Turkey complains of slow disbursement of EU funds compared with its own mounting expenses for refugees,³⁷ and simultaneously, threatens to overflow Europe with them.³⁸ The EU rejects Turkish military intervention in the second Libyan Civil War and the ongoing one in Syria.

³¹ "France Holds First Armenia Genocide Remembrance Day," *The Jakarta Post*, April 24, 2019.

³² "Macron reiterates claim Turkey attempting to interfere in French elections," *The Daily Sabah*, March 27, 2021.

³³ Fabian Merz, *Trouble with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean*, 4.

³⁴ Stephen F. Szabo, "Germany and Turkey: The Unavoidable Partnership," *Turkey Project Policy Paper*, no.14, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., USA, March 2018, 11.

³⁵ "Erdogan: Turkey Will Never Accept Genocide Charges," *DW*, June 4, 2016, accessed August 2, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-turkey-will-never-accept-genocide-charges/a-19307115>

³⁶ Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, E. Fuat Keyman and Kristen S. Biehl, *Changing Parameters of migration cooperation: beyond the EU-Turkey deal?*, Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), Sabanci University, Istanbul, Turkey, December 2019, 4.

³⁷ Nienke van Heukelingen, *A new momentum for EU-Turkey cooperation on migration*, Policy Paper, Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael), The Hague, The Netherlands, February 2021, 3.

³⁸ Matina Stevis Gridneff and Carlotta Gall, "Erdogan Says 'We Opened The Doors' and Clashes Erupt as Migrants Head for Europe," *The New York Times*, February 29, 2020.

Erdogan's advocacy and promotion of ideas, policies, traditions and narratives are seen as attempts of reviving the erstwhile Ottoman empire.³⁹ This trait is often termed as neo-Ottomanism: trying to reassert Turkey's position in regional and global affairs albeit his domestic activities are drawing denunciation and apprehension from outside; conversion of churches to mosques in Turkey has been widely condemned but Erdogan did not stop and rather said, those condemning his country should first address Islamophobia in their territories.⁴⁰ While use of public sentiments/populism, disregarding foreign criticisms and suppressing those at home, issuing open threats against other parties in disputes have been rife, there are attempts to rewrite history. During his visit in 2017 to Greece, Erdogan said the Treaty of Lausanne (1923; helped set boundaries of Turkey with Greece and other ex-Ottoman colonies) would need revision.⁴¹ Under his rule, Turkey has seen significant growth of conservatism.⁴² After the 2016 coup, a state of emergency was declared and there had been massive purges bringing allegations of gross violation of human rights. The EU criticized these measures. Moreover, minority groups like Kurds, women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) people have been targeted; in March 2021, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention on Violence against Women.⁴³

Aside from with the EU, turbulence has arisen and been lingering in Turco-US relations. Gaps began to widen and become palpable since US' removal of Patriot missiles from the Turkey-Syria border. The dissident cleric Fetullah Gulen has been living in the US and is repeatedly accused by Erdogan of destabilizing Turkey. The US, however, rejected his demand for Gulen's extradition. As mentioned earlier, Erdogan blamed the US for orchestrating the coup of 2016. The Trump government's sanctions on Turkey caused massive economic turmoil. The Turkish lira plummeted sharply against the US dollar. Turkey was sanctioned again in October 2019 for attacking Kurdish fighters in Syria.⁴⁴ After removal of Patriot missiles, Turkey chose to purchase the S-400 and subsequently faced more sanctions in December 2020.⁴⁵ Turbulence sustains under the Biden administration, too. During his election campaign, Joe Biden asked Turkey to stay out of the Nagorno-

³⁹ Soner Çağaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the politics of the Middle East* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2020), 286-287.

⁴⁰ "Erdogan Rebuffs Criticism over Hagia Sophia Conversion to Mosque," *The Times of India*, July 11, 2020.

⁴¹ Stavros Drakoularakos, "Turkey and Erdoğan's Rising 'Lausanne Syndrome'," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 30, Issue 1 (Winter 2021): 22.

⁴² Kemal Kirişçi and Amanda Sloat, *The rise and fall of liberal democracy in Turkey: implications for the West*, Policy Brief, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., USA, February 2019, pp. 05-06.

⁴³ Kareem Fahim, "Erdogan Pulls Turkey out of European Treaty Aimed at Protecting Women from Violence," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2021.

⁴⁴ John Fritze, David Jackson and Courtney Subramanian, "Trump Administration Imposes Sanctions on Turkey, as Critics Slam Decision to Withdraw Troops," *USA Today*, October 14, 2019.

⁴⁵ Katrina Manson and Laura Pitel, "Trump Hits Turkey with Long-Awaited Sanctions," *The Financial Times*, December 15, 2020.

Karabakh conflict (September 2020).⁴⁶ Another blow has been his administration's recognition of the Armenian Genocide; in December 2019, the US Senate extended their recognition amid opposition from Trump and Turkey.⁴⁷ In April 2021, President Biden recognized the genocide officially, upheld that position despite Erdogan's denunciation and demand for reversal of the decision.

3.1 *May These Rifts Drive Turkey Away from the West and Closer to Russia?*

In light of Turkey's increasing grievances with the Western partners versus recent improvements in relations with Russia, there can be opinions whether the country will abandon the Western camp and move further close to Russia. These can be put forth for both possibilities, i.e., why Turkey will or will not take such steps.

The first contention that can push Turkey away from the Western camp and closer towards Russia, is its failure in securing the EU membership. It has long-running dissonances with several EU members, some of whom openly disapprove of accepting it into the bloc. Apart from strong obstruction by France, Germany and Italy, unresolved disputes with Greece and Cyprus are complicating this process and resulting in Turkish dissatisfaction further. Accession talks have on a number of occasions been suspended; in May 2021, the EU Parliament voted overwhelmingly, for such suspension.⁴⁸ The country has a customs union agreement with the bloc, yet in August 2017, Turkish minister of economy, Nihat Zeybekci said his country was considering a similar arrangement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) after Merkel opined that the EU-Turkey deal would not be updated.⁴⁹ Thus, Turkey's disillusionment and widening distance with the EU may push it closer to Russia.

Erdogan's conservative turn and policies have become subject of harsh deprecation from the EU. The AK Party promotes what it calls conservative democracy; this includes use of populism, nationalist sentiments, limiting press freedom and political use of religion in administering the country.⁵⁰ Music, alcohol have been banned, media (social media also) censorship is hardening. Protests and criticisms against the government often face aggressive responses. While these

⁴⁶ "Biden tells Turkey to stay out of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," *Ahval News*, October 14, 2020, accessed August 4, 2021, <https://ahvalnews.com/nagorno-karabakh/biden-tells-turkey-stay-out-nagorno-karabakh-conflict>

⁴⁷ Deirdre Shesgreen, "Senate Recognizes Armenian Genocide over Objections from Trump and Turkish Government," *USA Today*, December 12, 2019.

⁴⁸ Sarantis Michalopoulos, "EU parliament calls for the suspension of Turkey's EU talks," *EURACTIV.com*, 20 May 2021, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/eu-parliament-calls-for-the-suspension-of-turkeys-eu-talks/,

⁴⁹ "Economy Minister: Turkey eyes Eurasian Customs Union," *The Daily Sabah*, August 19, 2017.

⁵⁰ M. Hakan Yavuz and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkish Secularism and Islam under the Reign of Erdogan," *Journal of Southeast Europe and Black Sea Studies* 19, no 1 (2019): 7.

practices continuously draw EU's reproach,⁵¹ Erdogan blamed them complaining lack of support for his country's efforts in fighting terrorism.⁵² Neo-Ottomanism is another issue that can enlarge EU-Turkey rifts and push it for seeking closer association with Russia, especially as presidents Erdogan and Putin are supportive of each other, albeit all the time criticized for their hardline policies by the EU, who allege them of trying to bring their individual past empires back, i.e., Ottoman and Romanoff/the USSR.

Turkey may tilt more towards Russia as regards ongoing commotion in Turco-US relations. The country has faced US sanctions on several occasions, seen missiles removed from its soil, and expelled from the F-35 project. Turkey and Russia have backed each other in their particular tussles with the US; for example, Erdogan reproached Biden when he described Putin as a killer in March 2021.⁵³ Similarly, Lavrov said, US sanctions would not jeopardize Turco-Russian military ties.⁵⁴ Turkey's purchase of and Russian proposal for more advanced military hardware have by now created gaping divisions within NATO where EU and US' apprehension of Turkey in this regard continues to grow; therefore, additional alienation will only bolster Turkey's arguments for leaving them in search of an alternative partner.

By contrast, there are factors that can discourage Turkey from leaving the Western camp and go for deeper association with Russia. Economy is one such issue. The EU is Turkey's largest business partner: their bilateral trade reached about €132.5 billion in 2020. It is destination for over 40 per cent of Turkey's exports and also biggest source of foreign direct investment in the country.⁵⁵ Compared with the EU, Turco-Russian bilateral trade in 2020 stood at US\$22.2 billion as said earlier; Russia is Turkey's third largest business partner⁵⁶ and their mutual investment is expected to grow. In 2019, they announced about creating a joint investment fund.⁵⁷ Russia has been a crucial energy supplier to Turkey as well as the EU, but its economy has not been much diversified unlike the EU's so far, rather continues to heavily rely on military hardware and energy exports. Turkey can encounter almost equal difficulties if it wants to join the EAEU; Armenia

⁵¹ *Turkey 2019 Report*, European Commission, Brussels, Belgium, May 29, 2019, 19-30.

⁵² Sertan Sanderson, "Turkey's Erdogan Criticizes EU Leaders for Lack of Support, Especially against Terror," *DW*, February 4, 2018, accessed 10 August 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-erdogan-criticizes-eu-leaders-for-lack-of-support-especially-against-terror/a-42450125>

⁵³ "Turkey's Erdogan Criticizes Biden over 'Killer' Putin Remark," *The Moscow Times*, March 19, 2021.

⁵⁴ "Russia, Turkey to Develop Military Ties Despite US Sanctions," *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), December 29, 2020.

⁵⁵ "Joint Communication to the European Council—State of play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations," *Join (2021) 8 Final/2*, European Commission, Brussels, Belgium, March 22, 2021, 11.

⁵⁶ Habibe Ozdal, Irina Zivagelskaya and Irina Svistunova, *Russia and Turkey—Partners or Adversaries?*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Moscow, Moscow, Russia, June 2021, 9.

⁵⁷ "Turkey, Russia to Create Joint Investment Fund for 900 mln Euro," *TASS*, April 8, 2019, accessed August 9, 2021, <https://tass.com/economy/1052566>

straightly opposed Zeybekci's statement in this regard in August 2017.⁵⁸ In March 2021, Turkey's tariff privileges in the EAEU were revoked on Armenia's request and in June, the country extended prohibition on Turkish products by another six months.⁵⁹ As Turkey and Russia are at present under tough sanctions with the latter's economy hit particularly hard, seeking greater economic ties with Russia or the EAEU by veering away from the West, may not be viable or beneficial for Turkey.

Turkish military intervention in Libya and Syria has a dual bottleneck; the EU and Russia are on contrary axis to that of Turkey in these two conflicts. In the Second Libyan Civil War, Turkey, Italy, Malta, the US, UN, and the United Kingdom (UK) had been allies with the Government of National Accord (GNA) which was in power from 2015-21 but France was against that government. The GNA signed a maritime boundary agreement with Turkey which created controversy due to alleged breach of UN Law of the Sea, worsening of the Aegean dispute along with infringing upon maritime rights of Greece and Cyprus. The US, Malta, Greece, Italy, France, Germany and a number of Middle Eastern countries condemned it. The EU accuses Turkey of violating UN arms embargo on Libya and EU's *Operation Irini* launched in March 2020. Turkey and Germany became embroiled in row when a German military vessel went for searching a Turkish ship bound for Libya in November 2020.⁶⁰ Russia sides with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA) while Turkish intervention includes its regular forces and Syrian mercenaries. In January 2021, a Libyan court declared the aforementioned agreement as void.⁶¹ These adversities, coupled with opposing stances from Western allies and Russia likewise, will not allow Turkey to leave the Western camp. Complications will be hardly any different in the Syrian Civil War where Turkey and Russia are supporting opposite parties. There have been incidents of Russian airstrikes on soldiers of and fighters backed by Turkey, although these did not escalate into direct clash between them. Russia, like the EU and NATO, condemned the October 2019 Turkish offensive of northeastern Syria; Russian ally Syria, criticizes Turkish occupation of its northern region. France, the US, UK—all support Syrian opposition but also condemn the Turkish assault on Kurdish fighters. The offensive drew sanctions from several EU members, Canada and the US. Similar to its role in Libya, in the face of inimical reactions/responses from Russia and Western countries, Turkey has very limited scope for developing broader alignment with the former.

⁵⁸ "Yerevan calls 'Absurd' Turkey's desire to join Eurasian Economic Union," *Asbarez*, August 21, 2017.

⁵⁹ Aneta Harutyunyan, "Armenia Extends Trade Embargo against Turkish Goods by another 6 Months," *Armenpress*, June 24, 2021, accessed August 9, 2021. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1056439.html>

⁶⁰ "Turkey Summons EU, Italian, German Envoys over Attempt to Search Ship for Weapon," *Haaretz*, November 23, 2020.

⁶¹ Walaa Ali, "Libyan Court Cancels Border Demarcation and Security Cooperation Agreement between Al-Wafaq And Turkey," *Egypt Today*, January 27, 2021.

Russia has historically been on good terms with Armenia and that has not changed up to now. They are members of the EAEU, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Turkey refuses to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide, but its Western partners and Russia recognize the event as such. Armenia also provides logistic support for Russia in the Syrian Civil War⁶² whereas Turkey's role is in contrast to Russia's. In light of Turkey's growing hostilities with the West, both Western and Russian sympathy to Armenia, it will not be able in leaning more to Russia, let alone forming any alliance.

Although Turkey and Russia maintain apparently congenial relations at present, there is no certainty how long this will last. Even with recent improvements since June 2016, there are areas where they uphold positions which are mutually exclusive and thus may engender conflicts. For example, both countries attach high importance to Central Asia and the Caucasus where they once controlled vast territories. Russia remains suspicious of Turkey's growing involvement in here and is now working together with China to curb its influence.⁶³ Turkey has been evoking ethnoreligious ties and increased its outreach with Central Asian republics, who mostly are Turkic-majority. Besides, Turkey's sheltering of refugees from the North Caucasus where insurgency is rampant, may deepen Russian distrust.⁶⁴ In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of 2020, they played contrary roles with providing necessary support for their individual allies. Turkey did not react on Russian annexation of Crimea but in October 2020, signed military cooperation agreement with Ukraine⁶⁵ and in April 2021, sought return of Donbass and Crimea to Ukraine.⁶⁶ Russia responded by warning Turkey about its ties with Ukraine. Such complexities and volatility in Turco-Russian relations will restrain Turkey from abandoning its Western partners and joining Russia.

4. Improvements in Turco-Russian Ties: Ramifications for Regional Geopolitics

Turkey and Russia normalized mutual relations and expanded cooperation in various fields; their growing anti-Western narratives, attitudes and practices raise speculations of creating formal alliance which however, is to happen yet. Regions of

⁶² Narek Sukiasyan, "Appeasement and autonomy," *Geopolitical Series*, Brief 2, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Paris, France, February 1, 2021, p. 3.

⁶³ Paul Goble, "Moscow and Beijing Seek to Counter Growing Turkish Influence in Central Asia," *Eurasian Daily Monitor* 18, no. 53, Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., USA, April 1, 2021.

⁶⁴ "Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and South Caucasus," *Europe Report N°250*, International Crisis Group, Brussels, Belgium, June 28, 2018, 25-26.

⁶⁵ "Turkey, Ukraine Sign Military Cooperation Agreements," *VOA News*, October 16, 2020, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/turkey-ukraine-sign-military-cooperation-agreements>.

⁶⁶ "Turkey Seeks Return of Crimea, Donbas to Ukraine; Supports Kyiv's NATO Bid," *The Kyiv Post*, April 11, 2021.

interest for both countries overlap in many cases and contemporary improvements in bilateral ties can have significant ramifications for geopolitics in those. The regions include: Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia (including the Caucasus).

Security issues in Europe may to a great extent, be impacted by Turco-Russian presently increasing relations. They have been accused of waging subversive activities in the region with Russia bearing the weightier brunt, e.g., espionage, assassination and such attempts, meddling in elections, cyber warfare, propaganda, etc, and sanctioned by the EU alike. Turkey's hopes for EU membership are in deep despair and Russia has been under sanctions since its war with Georgia in 2008. As for their unfriendliness with the EU, if they decide for responding through covert means, that will pose a grave threat because aside from a manifest rival, the region will need then to deal with a longstanding ally, i.e., Turkey, with whom they have had very close security cooperation under NATO, whose stated goal is to deter Russia. NATO's eastward enlargement (a recurring irritation for Russia) and the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) will encounter additional complications from Russian antagonism. Neither Turkey nor Russia is part of the EaP and rather, have distraught relations with members here, EU and non-EU countries alike; e.g., other than with several EU members, Turkey has problems with Armenia while Russia's troubles go on with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Regarding Turkish purchase of military hardware from and increasing strategic cooperation with Russia, there is concern in NATO that Russia may obtain classified information on their weaponry from Turkey.⁶⁷ The Eastern Mediterranean has already emerged as a flashpoint in EU-Turkey relations; Russia may not have direct and wide-ranging military presence in that region except for in Syria, but is actively involved in energy trade, notably building nuclear powerplants in Turkey and Egypt, oil-gas exploration agreements with Libya and Syria, etc.⁶⁸ If it comes in support of Turkey in tussles with EU members, that can certainly worsen situations in a region already suffering from conflicts, illegal immigration and flow of refugees into Europe. The same can happen if Turkey supports Russia in confrontation with EU members in the Black Sea where Russia has the *Black Sea Fleet* and they are enhancing military cooperation; in late June 2021, the Russian Coast Guard fired warning shots against British and Dutch military vessels there.

Large numbers of Turks and Russians have been living in EU nations. Both countries nowadays regularly put emphasis on their respective diasporas addressing with ethnic, nationalist and religious sentiments; the last is commonly used by

⁶⁷ Kamal A. Beyoghlow, *Turkey and the United States on the brink: implications for NATO and US-Turkish strategic and military partnership*, Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, USA, January 2020, 5.

⁶⁸ Ruslan Mamedov, "Russia: towards a balance of interests in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Russian International Affairs Council* (RIAC), August 6, 2021, accessed August 18, 2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/russia-towards-a-balance-of-interests-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>,

Turkey who has been highly critical of laws/policies taken by some EU countries and says these are aimed at maltreatment of Muslims. For example, it condemned the EU Court of Justice's hijab ban in workplaces,⁶⁹ engaged in row with France about freedom of speech versus defamation of Islam,⁷⁰ Austria over a controversial Islam map,⁷¹ etc. Unlike Turkey, Russia does not raise religion, but its pledge during the Crimean annexation to protect rights of Russians living abroad aroused serious worries in Baltic republics on the same basis.⁷² Putin reiterated this position in 2018 with stronger vow.⁷³ Rightwing populism is attaining rapid upsurge and spread in many parts of the globe nowadays. Europe too, has not been immune from that, compounded further by refugee influx. Accordingly, these policies of Turkey and Russia can cause significant mayhem in the bloc. Russia did not react about the Turkish threat of flooding Europe with refugees. Increasing authoritarianism in these two countries presents additional concerns as their values are in disagreement with those of the group.⁷⁴ Eurocepticism also runs pretty much visible in both. Despite facing harsh punitive measures and nonstop condemnation, Turkey and Russia are supportive of each other. Russia, moreover, firmly supports Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, the last dictator of Europe. The EU has some discontented members, like Hungary and Poland who have been rebuked by the bloc complaining their alleged lack of democracy.⁷⁵ Although Poland is highly apprehensive of Russia, Premier Viktor Orbán of Hungary has staunchly defended closer relations with Russia.⁷⁶ Seeing Turkey and Russia continue to defy the EU by various means, members such as Hungary and Poland who have experienced suspension of some of their rights (under Article 7 of the EU Treaty) may be inspired as well to leave the group. If happens, that will undermine the EU's unity badly indeed.

There are a few issues where the EU and Russia may find some common ground against Turkey, although that is subject for speculation. Recognition of the Armenian Genocide has for long been an irritant in EU-Turkey relations; Russia and EU both have extended their recognitions in this regard. Nevertheless, Turkey refuses to accept any responsibility for that event and criticizes recognition from the EU or any other entity including Russia's (this was even before the November 2015 Su-24 incident) although has not been into any war of words over this with that country. The Erdogan government's hardline stance on religious affairs, e.g., conversion of ancient churches into mosques (e.g., Hagia Sophia conversion;

⁶⁹ "Turkey Condemns EU Court Ruling on Headscarf Ban at Workplaces," *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 18, 2021.

⁷⁰ Stanly Johny "What's Behind the Erdogan-Macron Spat?," *The Hindu*, October 29, 2020.

⁷¹ "Ankara urges Austria 'to stop targeting Muslims'," *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 29, 2021.

⁷² "Baltic States Fear Kremlin Focus on Ethnic Russians," *The Financial Times*, September 2, 2014.

⁷³ "Russia Will 'Vigorously Defend' Rights of Compatriots Abroad," *The Moscow Times*, October 31, 2018.

⁷⁴ Stanislav Secrieru, Sinikukka Saari and Dimitar Bechev, "Fire and Ice: The Russian-Turkish Partnership," *Chaillot Paper/168*, EUISS, Paris, France, June 2021, 14-15.

⁷⁵ "EU Says Democratic Standards under Threat in Poland, Hungary," *The Hindustan Times*, July 20, 2021.

⁷⁶ Dominik Istrate, *Russian influence in Hungary: the case of PAKS 2 and the Kremlin's influence-seeking efforts through nuclear energy*, European Values Center for Security Policy, Prague, Czech Republic, March 25, 2021, 5-8.

condemned by EU and Russia alike) may bring Russia and the EU onto a shared platform. With such undertakings, in spite of its now expanding cooperation with Russia, Turkey may antagonize both sides while ties with Western allies have already seen ample degradation. Contrarywise, the Ukraine issue can bring Turkey and the EU together; the latter remains critical of Russian annexation of Crimea, role in southern and eastern Ukraine conflict. Turkey's sympathy for Crimean Tatars and growing cooperation with Ukraine are cases in point. The country has repeatedly said it will not recognize the Crimean annexation.⁷⁷ Russia expressed grave displeasure about these.⁷⁸ These three also differ on recognition of Kosovo; Turkey and EU support and recognize Kosovo's independence but Russia does not and calls it a breakaway region of Serbia. Hence, apparently it may seem Turco-Russian relations are now growing in the face of both countries' hostilities with the EU (and by extension, the West) and their commonalities in many policies, but there still exist important fault lines which have adequate potential to greatly influence the pattern of bilateral relations between and among these three parties and in turn, European geopolitics. It remains to be seen who sides with whom or takes what stands on specific issues.

Turkey and Russia's increasing involvement in the Middle East carries significant ramifications for geopolitics in this region notwithstanding their divergent interests, policies and positions. In the Syrian war, for example, they back rival groups. Their often-changing policies can protract and aggravate the bedlam even more; Russia backs the Kurdish-dominated militia group Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who are battling Turkish occupation of northeastern Syria, yet asked them to surrender the Ayn Issa subdistrict to Bashar government. At the same time, Turkey urged Russia to stop airstrikes on its occupation zone.⁷⁹ Kurdish separatist struggles are going on in Turkey and Syria. As regards Turkish use of force on Kurds in both lands, Russian and US support can encourage them (Kurds) to establish the Syrian Kurdistan; once formed, that can have spillover effects in Turkey but can also create gory ethnic clashes as Turkish nationalistic ideologies are manifest in its support for Syrian Turkmens.

The ongoing uncertainty in Libya brought in by long civil war, does not receive much attention unlike the Syrian war, but Libya can suffer heavily from Turkish and Russian meddling as these two, like in Syria, are on opposite fronts here too. A ceasefire is in place; Turkey and Russia agreed on removing their respective

⁷⁷ "Erdogan Tells Zelensky Turkey Will Not Recognize 'Crimea's Annexation'," *TASS*, April 11, 2021, accessed August 18, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1276437>

⁷⁸ "Russian Rebuke of Turkey for Crimea Support Highlights Ankara's Delicate Balancing Act," *Al-Monitor*, August 25, 2021, accessed 29 August 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/russian-rebuke-turkey-crimea-support-highlights-ankaras-delicate-balancing-act>

⁷⁹ "Turkey and Russia Escalate Standoff in Syria," *Arab News*, March 22, 2021.

mercenary fighters from there.⁸⁰ Russian mercenaries working with Haftar's forces, are reportedly backed by the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.⁸¹ Turkey, however, has prior allegations on itself of breaching the UN's arms embargo on Libya, faces severe opposition and criticism from EU countries for its role in the country; furthermore, its maritime boundary agreement with the GNA has now been annulled and not renewed. In such circumstances, Turco-Russian differences can jeopardize the peace process and produce added instability in Libya which will not stay confined within the country.

Turkey's animosity with Arab countries vis-a-vis Russia's growing presence can have far-reaching repercussions; for some years, Turkish relations with several countries here have witnessed a downward spiral. In the Qatar diplomatic crisis of 2017, Turkey stood firmly by Qatar against Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Persian Gulf, enraging them all. Turco-Saudi relations damaged more regarding the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Saudi's growing sympathy towards the Armenian Genocide, denunciation of Turkey and Azerbaijan for instigating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2020), efforts for securing respective influence on Muslim countries, etc. Meanwhile, Russia was quick in bolstering ties with the Middle East; it also refused to criticize Saudi Arabia for the Khashoggi murder.⁸² In November 2020, it held joint naval exercise with Egypt in the Black Sea which was perceived as a message for Turkey signalling regional powers' dislike of its role in the Middle East.⁸³ After Zelensky's visit in April 2021 to Turkey, Lavrov visited Egypt that same month. Russia signed military cooperation agreements with Egypt⁸⁴ and Saudi Arabia⁸⁵ in August 2021 as well. Middle Eastern countries are vital buyers of weapons, and it is normal for Russia, the second largest global arms exporter, to try for enhancing position in this field. The Turkish arms industry is gradually intensifying global reach with production of diverse and sophisticated weaponry, particularly unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Currently, Turkey is trying to normalize ties with countries here,⁸⁶ and if successful, it may also try to claim a share in the arms market here. Thus, an arms race will start amid presence of other main suppliers like the US, European countries and Russia. Turkey faces another predicament. It is an energy importer. By contrast, Russia and Middle Eastern nations are exporters with several mutual

⁸⁰ Rebecca Klapper, "Russia, Turkey Reach Agreement to Remove Troops from Libya, US Official Says," *Newsweek*, June 23, 2021.

⁸¹ Ali Bakir, "The UAE's disruptive policy in Libya," *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 4, SETAV, Ankara, Turkey (Fall 2020), 163-164.

⁸² Matthew Chance, "Putin Won't Criticize Saudis on Khashoggi killing. Why not?," *CNN*, October 25, 2018, accessed August 29, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/25/europe/putin-saudi-khashoggi-intl/index.html>,

⁸³ Ridvan Bari Urcosta, "Egyptian-Russian Naval Exercises in the Black Sea: Strategic Balancing against Turkey?," *Eurasian Daily Monitor* 18, Issue 11, Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., USA, January 21, 2021.

⁸⁴ "Egypt, Russia Sign Military, Security Cooperation Protocol," *Egypt Today*, August 26, 2021.

⁸⁵ "Saudi Arabia, Russia Ink Deal Aimed at Developing Military Cooperation," *Arab News*, August 22, 2021.

⁸⁶ "In Bid to Break Isolation, Turkey Reaches out to Saudi Arabia," *The Arab Weekly*, May 5, 2021.

agreements on cooperation in energy sector. Since Turkey remains reliant on energy exports from them, confrontations with either party can take heavy tolls on its ambitions in this region.

Both Turkey and Russia criticize the US for withdrawal (during the Trump administration) from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) apropos the Iranian nuclear programme. In March 2021, they urged the US to lift sanctions on Iran and are in support of keeping the JCPOA functional.⁸⁷ Iran likewise, denounce US sanctions on Turkey. One thing to note here is, Russia, Turkey, Iran—all are at this time under Western sanctions. Iran, like Russia, is an energy exporter; the proposed Iran-Europe/Persian Pipeline includes Turkey and Russia is supportive of this project. However, Iran is still at loggerheads with Saudi Arabia with whom it vies for regional supremacy (aside from Turkey-Saudi competition), Russia has good relations now whereas Turkey is trying to restore its. Iran's ties with Armenia, a Russian ally, are friendly yet considerable degree of unease exists with Turkish ally Azerbaijan. In the latest Nagorno-Karabakh clash, these tensions came to fore when some Iranian individuals and groups viewed Azerbaijan to be an Israeli ally.⁸⁸ Pan-Turkism as propagated by Turkey, may also create problems by stirring up nationalistic feelings among Turkic ethnic groups living in Iran. There are many stakes involved and recent developments in Turco-Russian relations can give rise to quite a lot of intricate equations when it comes to Iran. In addition, for their own interests, Turkey and Russia are likely to keep up efforts for convincing the US in rejoining the JCPOA.

Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and Caucasus had for centuries been a Romanoff-Ottoman battleground and a major constituent in the USSR, retains significance to Turkey and Russia. After 1991, Russia revamped ties with newly sovereign republics here through a variety of endeavours, e.g., the CIS, CSTO, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and EAEU. The country does not accept prominent role or involvement of other powers. Current improvements in Turco-Russian relations will affect Central Asian geopolitics from multiple angles. Turkey is thought of being an important juncture in the EAEU's connectivity initiatives and Russia does not oppose growing Turkey-EAEU ties but its ally Armenia fervently disagrees. Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh War, particular stands by Turkey (for Azerbaijan) and Russia (for Armenia) with rival parties can destabilize this conflict-prone part of the world even more and that will in turn, affect the EAEU, in spite of Turkey and Russia's plans for expanding partnership bi- or multilaterally. These days, both countries use

⁸⁷ "Russia, Turkey see 'window of opportunity' to salvage Iran nuclear deal, urge US to lift sanctions on Tehran," *Arab News*, March 5, 2021.

⁸⁸ Arvin Khoshnood and Ardavan Khoshnood, "The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict and Its Implications for Iran," *Perspectives Paper*, no. 1778, Begin-Sdat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA), Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel, October 16, 2020, 3-4.

discourses referring to their past glory on frequent basis: Turkey with the Ottoman empire, Russia with the Romanoff empire and USSR; however, there are sizeable numbers of ethnic Russians also living in Turkic-majority nations of Central Asia, with whom Turkey shares longstanding historical-ethnoreligious-cultural-linguistic ties and its evocation of these has become commonplace. Similarly, there are Tatars in those nations and Russia who have at various points of history faced Russian ill-treatment, the latest was Crimean Tatars fleeing annexation and seeking refuge in Turkey; Putin vowed for protecting Russians abroad which may mean interfering in Central Asian countries in the case of any plea from them or Russia thinks compatriots are at risk there. If that happens, Turkey may also come out in support of its Turkic brethren carrying the pan-Turkism banner. Russia has comparative advantages over Turkey as for having military bases in Armenia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; Turkey has only one in Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, as a result of their competition by two strongman leaders for securing influence in this region, conservatism, nationalistic rhetoric, admiration and attempts of restoring long-gone polities, likelihoods of ethnic strife cannot be written completely off. Such clashes and ensuing pandemonium will be far more lethal, owing to different independence struggles and separatist groups prevalent here, e.g., the *Ajnad al Kavkaz* (Soldiers of Caucasus), *Ahrar al-Sham* (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant), Turkistan Islamic Movement (TIM), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Caucasus Province (ISIL-CP), ongoing separatist insurgencies in Turkey, Russia, and their role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, even after seemingly growing collaboration. This is not unfounded; cooperation efforts like establishment of the CSCP did not, in reality, see better relations or decrease in tensions/mistrust either in these two's relations with nations here and in surrounding regions, rather, the contrary; Turco-Armenian hostilities and Russia's with Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova can corroborate this argument. There is more: all five countries of Central Asia have authoritarian governments who do and will possibly benefit more from Turkish and Russian conservative policies, but in a (hypothetical, real or proxy) face-off between them, will also be in dilemma about whom to side with.

5. Concluding Remarks

Turco-Russian ties have varied over time, from outright enmity, relative amity, proxy to close cooperation. Russia has always been depicted as a rival by the West, but noticeable cracks are opening up in Turkey-West relations too. Recent improvements in Turco-Russian relations incite speculations if Turkey will leave the Western camp and align with Russia instead. Vital drivers behind this are their antagonism with the West, commonalities in policies, e.g., autocratic administrations, conservatism, nationalistic-irridentist narratives (elicitation of cross-border historical links and glorifying ex-empires), bellicose postures in disputes with neighbours, etc; they adopt similar stances on many issues yet contrast

on others. Turkey's growing rifts with the West, expanding collaboration with and reliance on Russia for energy supplies, purchase of Russian weaponry and enhancing military relations, deepen assumptions of a vital Western ally abandoning them and now seeking broader partnership with a hostile country. Whether that happens or not, is subject of conjecture, but present advances in relations will markedly impact geopolitics in three regions Turkey and Russia consider as spheres of interest/influence: Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Turkey has numerous reasons to leave Western partners and form alternative coalition with Russia. First comes the country's failure to achieve the EU membership. Different issues are complicating the process, like, disputes with Greece, Cyprus, rejection of acknowledging the Armenian Genocide, opposition from influential EU members, rising conservatism including in religious affairs, illegal immigration to Europe, repression of dissidents and opponents, blaming the EU, US for the 2016 coup and Russian backing for Erdogan government are to name a few. Yawning gaps have arisen with the US over purchase of the S-400, removal of Patriot missiles, expulsion from the F-35 programme and Biden's recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Similarities in policy stances can also push Turkey more towards Russia. Even then, there are factors to persuade Turkey against seeking alliance with Russia turning back on the West. The EU is Turkey's largest trade partner and Russia is third, lacking a multifaceted economy unlike the EU's. Turkish plans for joining the EAEU were dashed by Armenian disagreement, resulted in withdrawal of tariff facilities and Russia did not react. Western sanctions are taking tolls on Turkish and Russian economies. Russia and EU disapprove of Turkish role in Syria (alongside occupation of the northeastern part by Turkey) and Libya. Together with the US, they sympathize with Kurds on whom Turkish use of force goes on in its own land and Syria. Divergences persist on Crimean Tatars' cause, propagation of pan-Turkism in Central Asia, Turco-Ukrainian military ties and Russian warnings to Turkey. These factors provide sufficient grounds for Turkey to not leave the Western camp in search of wider association with Russia, despite gaping fissures.

Improvements in Turco-Russian ties carry important ramifications for Europe's geopolitics. Both have been accused of destabilizing the EU by covert actions. If they use these as a response to EU's measures against them, the bloc will then collide with ally Turkey besides rival Russia. For the EU, their mutual camaraderie in each one's conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea will be equally troublesome. Increasing authoritarianism, frequent reference to their diasporas in Europe with jingoistic fervour, growth of rightwing populism can spawn further risk; aside from Putin's strong patronage, Turkey helped soften NATO's punitive steps against Belarusian autocracy.⁸⁹ These can also embolden

⁸⁹ "Report: Turkey 'prevented harsh NATO sanctions against Belarus'," *Arab News*, 28 May 2021.

disgruntled EU members like Hungary and Poland, who already have qualms with the bloc, for moving away. Nonetheless, the EU and Russia may unite against Turkey in light of its refusal to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide and coercive religious policies, e.g., turning churches into mosques. Conversely, Turkey and the EU may unite against Russia on the Ukraine crisis and recognition of Kosovo.

Middle Eastern geopolitics can be affected in a number of ways by Turkey and Russia's rising involvement there. They are backing enemy groups in Syria and Libya. However, Russia, the UN and the West are critical of Turkey's role in these two countries. Russian and US stances for Kurds can speed up their struggles for autonomy in Syria, which can spill over into Turkey; there are possibilities of ethnic clashes as well. The GNA-Turkey maritime deal has been cancelled. Amidst such delicate conditions, Turco-Russian divergences can cause more problems for Libya. Turkey has been at odds with Middle Eastern neighbours in recent years, whereas Russia's ties expanded. The country, a leading arms exporter, signed military cooperation deals with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Turkey is now normalizing ties with Middle Eastern nations; its arms industry is flourishing and may be encouraged for arms trade in the region. That can create arms race as other major players are active here. An energy importer, it may face difficulties in spreading own influence given Russia and Middle Eastern countries' exporter status. Turkey and Russia denounce US sanctions on Iran and are trying to ensure the country's return to the JCPOA. Iran similarly condemns US sanctions on Turkey but relations with Azerbaijan remain problematic which can hamper relations with Turkey.

Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus will be significantly impacted by Turco-Russian reset of bilateral ties. Their contradicting positions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will weaken the EAEU's prospects. Turkey's pan-Turkism and Russian neo-Eurasianism can clash as both countries now heavily focus on their diasporas and ethnic kinspeople living in this region; Russia itself has a large number of Tatars. Thus, chances of racial tensions cannot be ignored. Besides, Turkey and Russia's own insurgency problems, various independence movements are going on in Central Asia and the Caucasus which can endanger the region gravely. Countries here will be in a dichotomy because in the case of Turco-Russian confrontation, supporting or opposing either of these two sides will hurt them very badly.

Turkey and Russia have a long history of belligerency between themselves and with Western countries as well. Ottoman wars in Europe, Russo-Turkish wars, Romanoff wars with other European powers and USSR-West Cold War are some worth mentioning. There may have been some progress in their mutual ties and both problems with the West, yet have not put their differences aside; there is barely any surety if Turco-Russian relations will remain pleasant as of now. Despite expanding relations, gaps began to grow after the Crimean annexation and severely degraded after the aircraft shutdown incident in 2015. On the other hand, Erdogan said

recently, his country was hopeful about availing EU membership;⁹⁰ he also said later, Turkey and the US were entering a new era of relations.⁹¹ Russia-US relations have always been crisis-ridden but even amid that, Russia supposedly offered one of its military bases in Central Asia for espionage on the Afghan Taliban.⁹² In light of these, this may not be an exaggeration to say that although Turco-Russian ties have improved, but punishing measures on Turkey came from both Russia and the West; therefore, given the country's lesser capacities in comparison to them and unpredictable nature of relations with Russia, it will not be feasible for Turkey to leave the Western camp and found alternative partnership with the latter.

⁹⁰ "Turkey determined to join EU membership despite obstacles," *Hirriyet Daily News*, 09 May 2021.

⁹¹ "Erdogan says Turkey and US entering 'new era' of relations," *AP News*, 21 June 2021, available at <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-east-europe-turkey-government-and-politics-2bb4335453301c770c6b622df1de95334>, accessed 20 September 2021.

⁹² Anupama Ghosh, "Russia offers its 'Military Bases' to the US as Afghan Taliban wreaks havoc in the region," *The Eurasian Times*, 20 July 2021.