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20 Years of Leading Analysis

Ukrainian Crisis and Its Limited Impact on Turkish-Russian Relations

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As a country that straddles the divide between East and West, between Europe and Asia, Turkey has multiple interests at stake in the unfolding crisis in Ukraine, which has pitted Russia against the West in a New Cold War.

After the annexation of Crimea, Ankara officially declared its concern for the fate of the Crimean Tatar minority (a Turkic people closely related to the Anatolian Turks) who had suffered wholesale persecution under the Soviet rule, supported Ukraine's independence, and did not want to live again under Russian rule. Still, even Turkey's long-standing affinity with the Crimean Tatar minority and its support for Ukrainian territorial integrity (a sacred principle for Turkey, considering its own Kurdish separatist problem) have not compelled Ankara to adopt a more critical position toward Russia.

Ankara has issued a number of statements expressing support for Ukrainian territorial integrity. However, since then, Turkish official statements have taken on a largely symbolic quality and the Turkish government has done nothing aside from verbally condemning Russian policy of aggression in Ukraine.

Indeed, it appears that this crisis has not had a major impact on Turkish-Russian relations.

As heirs to the Ottoman Empire, defeated many times by the Russian Empire that played a big role in its slow dismantlement in the 19th century, Turkey and its leaders have always tried to avoid major confrontation with Russia. Soviet territorial claims against Turkey after the Second World War were among the key reasons behind Ankara's entry into NATO in 1952. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not allay Turkey's fears, especially with respect to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Turkey has developed a cautious policy there that avoids seriously challenging Russia, taking into account that Moscow still considers the region its "near abroad."

Recent threats have also given Ankara reason to be cautious about Russia. Turkey's policy towards Syria has left it isolated in the region. After some successes in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring, Turkish diplomacy failed in Syria, where it has pursued a line that directly contradicts Russia's strong support for Bashar al Assad's regime. Ankara has not only opposed Russian policy in Syria, but has managed to lose the support of the Europeans and the Americans. Its alleged flirtation with jihadist forces in Syria intended to topple Bashar al Assad, has resulted in criticism from the West, which now prioritizes defeating the Islamic State. Thus isolated in its battle in Syria, Turkey has avoided additional disruptions in its relations Russia, despite its support for Assad.

Economic considerations are a key driver of Ankara's policy toward Russia. In 2008, during the five-day war between Russia and Georgia, Turkey was torn between two economically important neighbors, Russia and Georgia. Turkey imports 60 percent of its gas from Russia. In his December 2014 visit to Turkey, President Putin underscored the importance of energy issues in bilateral relations, promised gas discounts to Turkey, and announced his plan to build a pipeline to Turkey to replace South Stream, which ran into opposition from Europe.

In addition to its energy dependence on Russia, Turkey has lucrative economic ties with Russia in other fields. Turkish construction companies are very active in Russia. Russia is also an important and large market for Turkish agricultural exports. Every year, the tourism sector in Turkey welcomes millions of Russian visitors, who make up the second largest group after German tourists, and reap considerable benefits for the Turkish economy. Opposition to Russian policy in Ukraine and strong support for the Crimean Tatar community would risk alienating an important economic partner and hurt Turkish economic growth.

There is also the similarity between the two leaders, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin. The two presidents have the same authoritarian style, they are not friendly toward independent media, and they share the same sense of nostalgia for their respective former empires. Both have the same obsessive attachment to old symbols and institutions. Putin is courting the Russian Church, while Erdoğan is attempting to make Turkish society more religious and pious. Both leaders advocate on behalf of the same conservative values. Finally, over the last several years, Putin and Erdoğan have become increasingly hostile toward Western values, as well as to the West's involvement in regional issues. Both leaders have expressed their preference for a multipolar international system as opposed to a U.S.- or Western-led system.

Erdoğan has several domestic political reasons for being more accommodating to his Russian counterpart. The Turkish president's aggressive foreign policy, his authoritarian posture in domestic affairs, and, most importantly, revelations of government corruption involving his close allies, have tarnished his image. The reputation of the government that came to power promising to clean up politics and fight injustice has been damaged. In such a delicate internal environment, Erdoğan does not need more challenges in foreign policy, especially since general elections are scheduled to take place in Turkey in June 2015.

Since he came to power in 2002, Erdoğan has managed to remain popular because of the strong performance of the Turkish economy, which has considerably improved the quality of life of the Turkish people. A great deal of this success is owed to robust economic ties with important regional powers like Iran and, most notably, Russia. In the words of Dmitri Trenin, Turkey and Russia have a deeply "compartmentalized" relationship. A disagreement on one regional issue—Ukraine, Georgia or even Syria—will not necessarily derail their bilateral relations.