

Russian-Turkish Relations: Moscow Calls the Tune

Eugene Kogan

The relationship between Russia and Turkey is an unequal one. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan does not like playing second fiddle in the Russian-Turkish orchestra, conducted by Russian President Vladimir Putin. However, at every twist and turn, Putin holds more leverage over Erdoğan than the other way around.

Putin will cooperate with Turkey as long as it suits Russian interests. He would quickly end the relationship if Turkey were to turn against him and tried to return to the Western fold from which it has drifted away ever since the failed coup on 15 July 2016. Erdoğan is aware of this and, as a result, is leading Turkey ever deeper into the Russian fold since the European Union, the United States and NATO all remain suspicious of him and his administration's goals and are simply unwilling to assist him in his various military activities in Libya, Syria and, most recently, in the South Caucasus. Putin provides Erdoğan with the leeway and breathing space but still keeps the Turkish president on a tight leash.

Russia Keeps Turkey in its Gas and Nuclear Power Plant Net

Although Turkey remains dependent on Russian pipeline gas, the percentage of this dependency has declined from more than 50% in 2016 to only 14% in June 2020. It should be stressed, however, that despite such a steep decline, the opening of the Russian-Turkish Stream gas pipeline to Turkey in January 2020 means that Gazprom will continue to remain Turkey's primary supplier and, therefore, will limit Turkey's room for manoeuvre.

In August 2020, President Erdoğan announced that a Turkish drilling ship had discovered the country's largest natural gas reserve in the Tuna-1 area off the Black Sea coast. Whether or not Turkish Black Sea gas will be competitive remains to be seen. But what is clear is that it will take



Photo: Russian Presidential Executive Office

For years now, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan has been a frequent visitor to Moscow.

longer than expected for Erdoğan and his administration to start extracting the gas; namely, about three years from the time of the discovery. Although the terms of Turkish energy security have improved, Turkey remains dependent on Russia for the foreseeable future, something which binds the two together.

Moscow is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant (NPP) in Mersin Province. According to Anastasia Zoteeva, CEO of the Akkuyu Nukleer AS project company established by Russia in Turkey, "the project is the first to use Rosatom's build-own-operate (BOO) model. Under a long-term contract, the company is responsible for the plant's design, construction, maintenance, operation, and decommissioning." Rosatom State Corporations hold a 99.2% stake in the project company, the cost of which it estimates at about US\$20Bn. Zoteeva added that "within 10 to 12 years, Turkish personnel will replace Russian personnel at the plant."

The newly constructed Akkuyu NPP again binds Turkey to Russia for the foreseeable

future since the plant's security arrangements will remain in the hands of Russian, not Turkish personnel, with Turkish staff taking over the plant's maintenance and operation 10 to 12 years in the future.

Russia Continues to Engage with Turkey on the S-400

In July 2020, it was reported that the Head of the Rostec Corporation, Sergei Chemezov, during a meeting with President Putin, announced that "Russia is preparing to supply the second batch of the S-400 air-defence system to Turkey." The parties are awaiting Turkey's final decision. According to the Russian news agency, RIA Novosti, Director General of Rosoboronexport, Aleksander Mikheev, said in August 2020 that "Russia and Turkey signed a contract for the delivery of the second batch of the S-400. The two sides continue to negotiate the financial parameters of the contract." In November 2020, it was reported that the Head of Turkey's Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB), Ismail Demir, said that "Tur-

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Photo: via author

The 96L6E Surveillance and Tracking Radar of the Russian S-400 system being deployed in Turkey

key is ready to buy the second batch of the S-400 on the condition of the technology transfer and joint manufacture." Demir's statement was reiterated by Erdogan's statement made in January 2021 that "Turkey will hold talks with Russia in January about the purchasing of a second S-400 battery." There was no further information on the issue. It is evident, however, that negotiations between the two countries over the purchase of the second batch of the S-400 continue despite the harm that it inflicts on US-Turkey relations.

Ceasefire Agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan

On 9 November 2020, the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement was signed by President Vladimir Putin, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Not a word was said about the role of Turkey and its resolute support of Azerbaijan in the 44 day war. In other words, Putin has shut down Erdogan's role with the latter reduced to the role of second fiddle in the Russian-Turkish orchestra. To sweeten the bitter pill, the two sides agreed to construct a

Russian-Turkish or Turkish-Russian Observation Centre to monitor the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The name of the joint centre depends on whom you ask. The centre began to operate on 30 January 2021 in the Agdam region of Azerbaijan but with a caveat that Turkish personnel were not allowed to enter what is left of Nagorno-Karabakh while about 2,000 Russian peacekeepers guard the territory. In order to seize the initiative which Erdogan had lost to Putin on 9 November, Erdogan proposed a six-country regional cooperation platform including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Russia and Turkey on 10 December. Commenting on Russia's perspective on the initiative, Erdogan said that "President Vladimir Putin is positive about it. The two sides have agreed to further develop this initiative." At the moment, it is difficult to evaluate the feasibility of Erdogan's initiative without more details. Still, as a gesture of cordial relations between the two, Putin informed Erdogan about the 9 November ceasefire agreement. Once again, Putin made the next move and invited Aliyev and Pashinyan to Moscow for trilateral talks on 11 January 2021. The

talks focused on unblocking all economic and transport links in the region; namely, between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia; between Azerbaijan, Armenia, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Turkey; and Armenia, Nakhchivan and Iran. Georgia was left out in the cold. This is seen as Russia's way of punishing western-oriented Georgia for its misbehaviour and this is despite the fact that Azerbaijan and Turkey are Georgia's partners in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas (TANAP) pipelines, as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) rail link. In other words, Russia is playing chess like a Grandmaster vis-à-vis the three "Lilliputs" namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran, by excluding Georgia and still leaving Turkey enough room for manoeuvre without any loss of face.

Successful Information Operations in Turkey

Moscow carries out information operations in Turkey through the Sputnik news agency, which is largely supporting the opposition. Despite that, Sputnik's operations in Turkey have not been shut down as they have been in several EU member states, but continue to sow seeds of discord, something which is typical of the Russian programme. Although Moscow is not interested in which side prevails, it is interested in influencing the narratives on both sides and in disseminating pro-Russian content. When pro-Russian information supports the government's position, the pro-government networks disseminate it. When the information contradicts the government's position, the opposition networks pick it up. As a result, Russia is the clear winner and Putin again has the upper hand over Erdogan. Checkmate!

In conclusion, Putin outfoxes Erdogan by using all the means and tools at his disposal, as well as by appealing to Erdogan's vanity, while at the same time showing the Turkish president that he is a junior partner in the bilateral relationship. According to retired Turkish Ambassador Murat Bilhan, "Behind Putin's smile, Russia remains a big state and can show its claws [to Turkey] whenever it is convenient. Russia is a superpower and Turkey is a regional one." That is the crux of the matter and that is how Putin corners Erdogan and keeps the relationship going. Finally, the EU, the US and NATO should not blame themselves for Erdogan's deeds; namely, the deepening rift between Turkey and the West. They should also take Erdogan's statements that "he wishes to improve relations with the EU and the US," in particular with a pinch of salt. ■



Photo: via author

A part of the Russian S-400 system is unloaded from a AN-124 transport aircraft in Turkey.