

TURKEY, RUSSIA, AND THE WEST: **REASSESSING PERSISTENT VOLATILITY, ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE, AND THE SYRIA CONFLICT**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The humanitarian crisis and escalating bloodshed in Syria's Idlib province have brought Turkey-Russia relations to a fraught and volatile moment. The crisis is inextricably linked to numerous other foreign policy challenges facing Turkey, from migration cooperation to relations with NATO, and thus urgently demands a comprehensive reassessment of Turkey-Russia relations and their implications for Turkey's Western allies. To this end, the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) and Economic Development Foundation (İKV) convened a group of leading experts for an international conference in February 2020 on "Turkey, Russia, and the West."

This report synthesizes insights from the conference participants on four issues of crucial importance. First, our analysis identifies why increased cooperation between Turkey and Russia has paradoxically coexisted with heightened instability in bilateral relations. We argue that three factors—relations with the West, personalized decision-making processes, and deepening mutual engagement—are fundamental to understanding why the Turkey-Russia relationship has been so volatile and yet so resilient in recent years. Second, we scrutinize the dynamics of asymmetric interdependence in bilateral relations and highlight that these asymmetries derive not only from economic and energy ties but also from political imbalances. We argue that under such conditions, "compartmentalizing" disagreements is not a sustainable long-term strategy. Third, we analyze in-depth the thorniest issue facing Turkey-Russia relations today: the Syrian civil war and ongoing Idlib crisis. Taking a step back from day-to-day developments, we diagnose the key underlying challenges that confront Turkey both diplomatically and tactically. Finally, we propose actionable policy recommendations. Turkey and Russia, on the one hand, should seek to clarify their policy goals in Syria, leverage international support for humanitarian objectives there, and strengthen the capacity of journalists, policymakers, and researchers to understand the other side. Turkey's Western allies, in turn, should become more accepting of Turkey-Russia cooperation, consider invoking the Berlin Plus agreement in Idlib, and seize the chance to revitalize U.S.-Turkey relations.

INTRODUCTION

On March 5, 2020, after six hours of talks in Moscow, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin declared a halt to months of fighting in the Syrian province of Idlib and announced a skeletal ceasefire agreement. The moment was emblematic of just how volatile, consequential, and resilient Turkey-Russia relations have become over the past decade: Just a week prior, on February 27, airstrikes in Idlib killed 34 Turkish soldiers, and the increasingly bloody conflict there pushed almost a million Syrians toward the Turkish border. And yet the two leaders were able to temporarily defuse the crisis, as they have done with so many others, through a tête-à-tête conversation.

The recurring crises and growing importance of Turkey-Russia relations necessitate an analytically rigorous, policy-relevant, and up-to-date re-evaluation of the bilateral relationship. To this end, the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) and Economic Development Foundation (İKV) organized a full-day, international conference on February 21, 2020 to reassess the Turkey-Russia relationship and its implications for Turkey's Western allies. The conference brought together diverse experts, including academics, journalists, and think tank researchers, as well as speakers from Russia and the United States. (See the conference program in the Appendix.) This report synthesizes and expands upon their wide-ranging insights.

The following analysis addresses four crucial and interrelated topics. Section I offers an explanation of the central paradox in Turkey-Russia relations: the fact that the relationship has been so volatile and yet so resilient. It argues that three key factors—relations with the West, highly personalized decision-making processes, and intensifying mutual entanglement—have undergirded the complex forces shaping the relationship in recent years. Section II then examines the dynamics of asymmetric interdependence in Turkey-Russia relations and highlights that the prevailing strategy of "compartmentalizing" disagreements faces important limitations. We argue that the relationship's asymmetries relate not only to economic and energy ties but also to political factors; given these conditions, many commentators overestimate the capacity of Turkey and Russia to "compartmentalize" effectively.

Turning the focus to current policy issues, Section III analyzes Turkey-Russia relations in the context of Syria's civil war and the yet-unresolved crisis in Idlib. This section identifies the key diplomatic and tactical challenges confronting Turkey's Syria policy in the near- and long-term future. Finally, Section IV concludes by offering several actionable policy recommendations. Turkey and Russia, on the one hand, should seek to clarify policy objectives in Syria, leverage international support for humanitarian objectives there, and strengthen the capacity of policymakers and civil society to understand the other side. Turkey's Western allies, for their part, must become more accepting of Turkey-Russia cooperation, consider invoking the Berlin Plus agreement in Idlib, and seize the current opportunity to reinvigorate U.S.-Turkey relations.

I. VOLATILE YET RESILIENT: TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS TODAY

Over the past five years, a defining feature of the Turkey-Russia relationship has been its volatility. After the Turkish military shot down a Russian warplane in November 2015, one nationwide poll showed that a plurality of Turks (36 percent) considered Russia to be their country's primary enemy.[1] Yet just two years later, in November 2017, a survey by the Center for American Progress found that Turks viewed Russia more positively than Europe, Germany, or the United States.[2] What is more, in June 2018, polls showed that Turks considered "Russia more trustworthy than they did the United States—by a rate of 40 percent-to-3 percent."[3] These ups and downs point to a second striking feature of the bilateral relationship: its resilience in the face of repeated and at times existential crises. Paradoxically, Turkey and Russia have become remarkably prone to crises and yet also proven quite capable of managing or moving past them.

What explains the coexistence of increased cooperation with chronic instability in bilateral relations today? We argue that three factors are essential to understanding the current push-and-pull dynamics of the Turkey-Russia relationship: relations with the West, increasingly personalized decision-making processes, and deepening mutual entanglement. What makes the bilateral relationship so complex is that each of these factors simultaneously operates as a driver of cooperation and conflict, creating some powerful commonalities but also engendering discord.

Relations with the West

One cannot understand the Turkey-Russia relationship without also talking about the West. That is, the relationship is not just a bilateral one; the two countries' relations with the West strongly influence their relations with one another. In recent years, shared resentment of the West—exemplified by disillusionment with the European Union and the domestic instrumentalization of anti-Western rhetoric—has pushed Turkey and Russia closer together. Discontent with the West pervades Turkey and Russia's diplomacy over the Syrian civil war, as seen in the bilateral Sochi talks and trilateral Astana process with Iran.[4] Furthermore, both President Erdoğan and President Putin now share the view that the United States is the most significant problem in global politics today.

Yet while Turkey and Russia are both contesting the Western-led order, it is crucial to highlight that they are challenging international norms in very different ways.[5] Turkey's contestation of global norms is based primarily on ethical, anti-Western, and anti-colonial appeals. Russia, by contrast, tends to challenge norms in hyper-legalistic terms and frequently invokes the notion of state sovereignty. These different discourses betray the fact that Turkey and Russia have clashing ideas of what the global order should ultimately look like—a factor that also fuels discord in their relationship.

Decision-Making Processes

A second crucial factor shaping bilateral relations has been the intense personalization of foreign policy decision-making processes in both Turkey and Russia. This personalization has two defining features. First, the two countries' heads of state largely are not constrained by bureaucratic institutions or public debate; they are almost entirely free to make or even reverse policies as they see fit. President Erdoğan's decision to acquire the Russian S-400 missile defense system in July 2019 is a paradigmatic example.[6] Turkish state institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not have ownership over the ultimate decision, and public discussion of the issue was very limited. Second, and of equal importance, both the Turkish and Russian leaders have blurred the lines between the public interest and partisan (or simply personal) interest, defined in terms of regime security.

Given the personalization of its own decision-making procedures, Russia has proven uniquely adept at courting other personalized regimes. Around the world, Russia has used familiar and well-developed

1 Max Hoffman, Michael Werz, and John Halpin, *Turkey's 'New Nationalism' Amid Shifting Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, February 2018), 34, https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/02/11/446164/turkeys-new-nationalism-amid-shifting-politics/.

2 Ibid .

3 Max Hoffman, Alan Makovsky, and Michael Werz, *What Turkey's Political Changes Mean for U.S.-Turkish Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, July 31, 2018), 7, https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/07/31/454214/turkeys-political-changes-mean-u-s-turkish-relations/.

4 Comments by Galip Dalay, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

5 Comments by Senem Aydın-Düzgit, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

6 Comments by Sinan Ülgen, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

tactics to offer material benefits to targeted individuals in exchange for geopolitical concessions.[7] For instance, President Putin has used Russia's natural gas company, Gazprom, to curry political influence through lucrative energy contracts. Such deals may benefit a particular sector of a nation's business community, yet they often weaken the country as a whole by increasing energy dependence on Russia. The extent and nature of Russia's influence operations, however, are difficult to document and analyze, since the Russian state is highly skilled at using money laundering and other processes to conceal its actions.

European powers, by contrast, are used to working with institutions, not individuals, and they have thus been less able to cater to the interests of Turkey's leadership. EU leaders would face tremendous domestic backlash if they offered concessions perceived as personally beneficial to President Erdoğan, given his widespread unpopularity with European voters. In recent talks over migration, for instance, an important sticking point has been that the EU is unwilling to disburse funds for refugee integration directly to the central government in Ankara, as President Erdoğan wishes. Instead, the European Commission has taken an institutionalist route and insisted on giving the funds to UN agencies and international NGOs.[8] A more institutionalist approach, particularly as compared to Russian engagement, has proven less effective at winning over political leaders not only in Turkey but also in many other personalized regimes that have experienced democratic erosion.

While the highly personalized nature of Turkish and Russian decision-making procedures has strengthened bilateral ties, it has also fueled volatility in the relationship. Because there are few institutional mechanisms available to resolve disputes, practically every potential crisis requires a conversation between President Erdoğan and President Putin to achieve a resolution. Moreover, due to the marginalization of professional diplomatic institutions, these high-level agreements tend to be short on details and mostly focus on short-term interests. Consequently, the two countries have been unable to develop a shared vision for the Middle East, the Black Sea, or the Caucuses.

Mutual Entanglement

The final factor essential to understanding the volatility and resilience of bilateral relations is the two countries' intensifying mutual entanglement. Turkey-Russia relations today are not built on trust, mutual sympathy, or even mutual interest; rather, they rest on the acknowledgement that Russia, in particular, could do tremendous damage to Turkey if it wished. In the Syrian civil war, for instance, Russia could endanger Turkey's national security (and President Erdoğan's political survival) if it chose to aggressively support the Syrian regime's full takeover of Idlib, aggravate the Kurdish issue, or push a fresh influx of refugees toward the Turkish border. Turkey, too, could obstruct Russia's policy objectives in Syria, though at a much greater cost. The two sides are thus so entangled that the relationship has remained resilient, even after the aforementioned crises in November 2015 and February 2020.

The persistence of cooperation under conditions of mutual entanglement should not be surprising from a historical perspective; indeed, the norm in bilateral relations over the past century has been cooperation rather than conflict.[9] Although analysts today frequently cast Russia as Turkey's "historic archenemy,"[10] Turkey has in fact engaged selectively with the Soviet Union and Russia in the past, particularly on economic issues.[11] Turkey's turn toward the West and against the Soviet Union in the 1950s was exceptional in historical terms, and today's entanglement should thus be seen as an intensification of previous trends, rather than as a sharp break from the past.

7 Anders Åslund, *Russia's Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

8 Laura Pitel and Alex Barker, "Turkey Demands EU Hands over €3bn for Refugees," *Financial Times*, May 11, 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/ffad64a4-174f-11e6-b197-a4af20d5575e.

9 Comments by Onur İşçi, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

10 Soner Çağaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 137.

11 Comments by Behlül Özkan, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

II. ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE LIMITS OF "COMPARTMENTALIZATION"

Experts and policymakers alike have posited that strengthened cooperation between Turkey and Russia owes largely to a strategy of "compartmentalization," through which the two countries have sought to prevent "the negative spill-over of certain disagreements into areas of bilateral cooperation."[12] In this section, we scrutinize the concept of compartmentalization and underscore its limitations in the context of Turkey-Russia relations. Crucially, this concept presumes that both countries have roughly equal power to compartmentalize bilateral issues, when in fact the dynamics of "asymmetric interdependence" create a significant power imbalance between them.[13] The relationship is asymmetric in the sense that the "exit costs" associated with severing ties are far higher for Turkey than they are for Russia.[14] We highlight that Turkey-Russia relations are asymmetric in several crucial respects and that the idea of compartmentalization merely conceals the power imbalances that result from these asymmetries.

To begin, Turkey's economic relations with Russia are strikingly asymmetric.[15] According to the World Bank, for every U.S. dollar's worth of Russian imports that Turkey purchased in 2018, it exported just 15 cents of its own goods to Russia.[16] Furthermore, it would be relatively easy for Russia to "exit" its economic relationship with Turkey. In 2018, Turkey supplied less than two percent of Russia's total imports.[17] For any particular imported good, Turkey is not usually the primary supplier, and Russia could thus easily switch to alternative sources. And while Turkey is a source of investment for Russia, this investment is concentrated in sectors like construction that are not strategically vital. By contrast, Russia supplies almost ten percent of Turkey's imports—more than any other country—and Russian investment in Turkey is important for strategic sectors such as banking and energy.[18]

Perhaps most notably, Turkey depends heavily on Russia for numerous sources of energy.[19] In 2018, Russia was Turkey's top supplier of natural gas and provided 47 percent of Turkish natural gas imports.[20] Russia also provided 36 percent of Turkey's coal imports during the same year.[21] Given that Turkey imports approximately 75 percent of its energy supply, these numbers are cause for concern.[22] Turkey's decision to award a contract for the Akkuyu nuclear power plant to Rosatom, the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation, has also further intensified Turkish energy dependence on Russia. To be sure, the trends in this domain are not all negative: between 2005 and 2018, for instance, Turkey decreased its dependence on Russian imports of natural gas from 66 percent to 47 percent.[23] But as these data suggest, Turkish efforts to cultivate alternative energy suppliers will take time.

Russia also occupies a stronger bargaining position because of its asymmetric ability to influence Turkey's internal politics.[24] As Katherine Costello documents, Russia has aggressively used its state-sponsored media outlets, *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik*,

12 Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (January 2016): 84.

13 Öniş and Yılmaz, "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order"; Seçkin Köstem, "The Political Economy of Turkish-Russian Relations: Dynamics of Asymmetric Interdependence," *Perceptions* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 10–32.

14 Comments by Tolga Demiryol, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020; on the definition of "exit costs," see Mark J. C. Crescenzi, "Economic Exit, Interdependence, and Conflict," *The Journal of Politics* 65, no. 3 (2003): 811, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.00213.

15 Comments by Tolga Demiryol, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

16 "Turkey: Exports, Imports, and Trade Balance, 2018," World Integrated Trade Solution, accessed March 10, 2020, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/TUR/Year/2018/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country.

17 "Russian Federation: Exports, Imports, and Trade Balance, 2018," World Integrated Trade Solution, accessed March 10, 2020, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/RUS/Year/2018/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country.

18 "Turkey: Exports, Imports, and Trade Balance, 2018."

19 Comments by Volkan Ediger, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

20 "Natural Gas Market in Turkey," Petform, accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.petform.org.tr/en/dogal-gaz-piyasasi/turkiye-dogal-gaz-piyasasi/. Cited in Soli Özel and Gökçe Uçar, "The Economics of Turkey-Russia Relations," Foreign Policy & Security, No. 10 (Istanbul: EDAM, July 2019), 18, https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Economics-of-Turkey-Russia-Relations_compressed.pdf.

21 Piers De Wilde and Dan Lalor, "Turkey's 2018 Thermal Coal Imports down 4.5% to 31.5 Mil Mt," S&P Global Platts, February 4, 2019, https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/coal/020419-turkeys-2018-thermal-coal-imports-down-45-to-315-mil-mt.

22 Pınar İpek, "The Role of Energy Security in Turkish Foreign Policy (2004-2016)," in *Turkish Foreign Policy: International Relations, Legality and Global Reach*, ed. Pınar Gözen Ercan (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 174.

23 Özel and Uçar, "The Economics of Turkey-Russia Relations," 18.

24 Comments by Habibe Özdal, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

to "make Turkey a more compliant partner."[25] For instance, after Turkey shot down a Russian bomber in 2015, the Kremlin intensified political pressure on President Erdoğan by using its media sources to amplify narratives that the president and his family were funding ISIS through illicit oil purchases.[26] The Turkish government had very limited ability to mitigate the spread of these narratives. Thus, Russia has an asymmetric advantage in that its influence operations can change President Erdoğan's domestic political calculus, whereas Turkey lacks comparable tools to meddle in Russian politics.

Finally, a fundamental but often overlooked asymmetry is political.[27] There is a strong pro-Russia constituency in Turkey—within both political parties and the state bureaucracy—that advocates for closer relations with Moscow and is deeply suspicious of Turkey's Western allies. Yet there is no such pro-Turkish constituency in Russia. Turkey's desire for bilateral engagement is much stronger than Russia's, and the latter therefore faces substantially lower costs to walking away from the negotiating table.

These unequal power relations imply that compartmentalization—a strategy essential to the Turkey-Russia relationship today—rests on shaky ground.[28] Under conditions of asymmetric interdependence, compartmentalization is not a stable equilibrium: the stronger party can always threaten to cease compartmentalizing and inflict unequal harm to achieve a desired outcome. Of equal importance, the concept of compartmentalization conceals power asymmetries within the Turkey-Russia relationship. Russia has the choice to compartmentalize; Turkey, by contrast, cannot shrug off the "exit costs" associated with choosing not to do so. Given the asymmetries in bilateral relations, deference to Russia is Turkey's default option.

25 Katherine Costello, *Russia's Use of Media and Information Operations in Turkey: Implications for the United States* (Santa Monico, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 3, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE278.html.

26 Ibid., 3–6.

27 Comments by Sinan Ülgen, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

28 Comments by Tolga Demiryol, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

III. TURKEY'S INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA: KEY CHALLENGES

Perhaps the thorniest issue facing Turkey-Russia relations today is the Syrian civil war and the ongoing crisis in the Syrian province of Idlib. While the two powers have long been on opposite sides of the conflict, tensions erupted on February 27, 2020, when airstrikes in Idlib killed 34 Turkish soldiers—the deadliest single incident for Turkey since the start of the Syria conflict. It was only a week later, and after Turkey had launched a new military operation entitled Spring Shield, that Presidents Putin and Erdoğan announced a ceasefire in Idlib along existing front lines. However, Erdoğan's subsequent remarks, particularly concerning Turkey's refusal to withdraw from certain military outposts, have intensified doubts about the durability of the deal.[29]

This section takes a step back from day-to-day developments in Idlib and identifies the primary challenges facing Turkey's intervention in Syria. We conceptualize these analytically as diplomatic challenges (implicating Turkey's relations with Russia and the West) and tactical challenges (primarily affecting Turkey's military operations and defense policy). What makes the Idlib conflict so intractable is that Turkey has reached an impasse both diplomatically and tactically.

Diplomatic Challenges

The first challenge Turkey faces is that its policy objectives in Syria remain unclear at best and mutually contradictory at worst.[30] In Idlib in particular, Turkish policy is primarily reactive: Turkey seeks to prevent adverse changes to the status quo yet lacks a clear, feasible vision for Syria that it has proactively sought to achieve. What is more, Turkey's Syria policy contains debilitating internal contradictions. On the one hand, Turkey has advocated for a political solution to the conflict that creates a federalized government and establishes a separate administrative region for the opposition in Idlib. Yet on the other hand, Turkey has pushed strongly against a federal solution when it comes to the Kurdish-majority regions in Syria's northeast. A further contradiction is that Turkey has criticized foreign intervention in Syria, yet it has built up its own military presence in Idlib and the northeast.

A second crucial diplomatic challenge will be Turkey's negotiations with Russia over the presence of terrorist groups in Idlib province. In the Sochi agreement of September 2018, Turkey pledged to separate moderate armed groups from jihadist ones—and in particular to rein in the terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The Kremlin has repeatedly charged that Turkey has failed to keep its end of the bargain and prevent jihadist groups from staging attacks on Russian and Syrian government targets.[31] In effect, Russia has alleged that Turkey maintains links to jihadist forces and uses the latter to maintain leverage over Syria's future, in particular to ensure that Turkey has a say over the Kurdish-majority northeast. The issue of terrorist groups, long a sticking point, has the potential to continue fueling instability in Idlib. The March 2020 memorandum between Turkey and Russia included a commitment to "eliminate all terrorist groups" in Idlib; Russia could easily invoke this provision to justify attacks on armed groups in Turkish-held territory.[32]

Turkey's third diplomatic challenge concerns negotiating with the EU over the refugee crisis that the conflict in Idlib has precipitated. The violence there has pushed almost a million more refugees toward the Turkish border in less than three months, and Turkey, which already houses 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees, has made clear that it does not want to take any more. In an effort to internationalize the crisis, President Erdoğan ratcheted up pressure on the EU by announcing that the Turkish government had opened its western borders and would no longer prevent refugees from reaching Europe. This strategy succeeded in galvanizing a much-needed European response, but at the cost of provoking allegations of Turkish "blackmail."[33] Turkey now faces the urgent challenge of negotiating with the EU over the refugee issue, with the knowledge that the recent ceasefire may not provide much time. Turkey also has little choice but to engage diplomatically with Russia, since any safe zone for refugees in Syria will require a (Russian-supported) no-fly zone.

29 Laura Pitel, Henry Foy, and Chloe Cornish, "Turkey Says Idlib Military Observation Posts Will Remain Staffed," *Financial Times*, March 6, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/1675142c-5fac-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4.

30 Comments by Galip Dalay, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

31 Maxim A. Suchkov, "Intel: Will Russia, Turkey De-Escalate Tensions over Syria's Idlib?" Al-Monitor, January 31, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/russia-turkey-idlib-syria.html.

32 Laura Pitel, Henry Foy, and Chloe Cornish, "Idlib Residents Put Little Faith in Russian-Turkish Peace Deal," *Financial Times*, March 8, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/83ed1fd2-6131-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5.

33 Michael Peel et al., "EU Leaders Pledge to Work with Turkey to Revive Migration Deal," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/8d871bdc-61ff-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5.

Tactical Challenges

Further complicating Turkey's involvement in Syria are three tactical challenges facing the Turkish military. The first of these is the simple fact that Russia will not sell out or abandon the Syrian Arab Armed Forces (SAAF), the military of President Bashar al-Assad.[34] As Can Kasapoğlu has noted, Russia enjoys immense "strategic cultural influence over the SAAF;" this influence owes to half a century of Soviet and Russian military advisory and aid missions to train Syria's armed forces.[35] In addition to this "decades-long investment" in cultivating a partner military, the Putin administration has provided further resources to strengthen the SAAF's capabilities.[36] Turkish analysts often do not fully appreciate this deep integration between the Russian and Syrian militaries and thus underestimate Moscow's historical ties to the regime.

Additionally, Russian control over Syria's airspace renders any Turkish ground campaigns highly risky.[37] Russia is "the new boss" in the Syrian skies and particularly in the west of the country, where Moscow has established robust anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities.[38] A telling indication of this reality is the fact that Ankara needed to engage in diplomatic talks with Russia before launching Operation Euphrates Shield in al-Bab and Operation Olive Branch in Afrin.

Finally, the struggle for control over Syria's airspace has prompted Turkey to reevaluate its acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defense system in July 2019 and its stated intention to operationalize the system in April 2020.[39] Turkey's purchase of the S-400 seriously strained relations with its NATO allies, and in particular with the United States, since the U.S. president is required to impose sanctions on Turkey in response to this acquisition under the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Additionally, the purchase of the S-400 has undercut Turkey's ability to counter Russian airpower by triggering Turkey's removal from the F-35 program, which is producing NATO's fifth-generation fighter jet.

Now that Turkey is grappling with the challenge of Russian air supremacy in Syria, it has pivoted back toward its NATO allies. This February, Turkish officials asked the United States to deploy two Patriot missile defense batteries in Hatay, along Turkey's southern border, to help defend against attacks by Russian-backed forces.[40] Furthermore, in March President Erdoğan even floated the idea of purchasing the Patriot system and negotiating with the United States over Turkey's decision to operationalize the S-400.[41] These developments suggest that if the confrontation in Idlib between Turkey and Russia intensifies, Turkey may not operationalize the S-400. At a minimum, it appears highly unlikely that Turkey will purchase another battery of the S-400.

34 Comments by Can Kasapoğlu, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

35 Can Kasapoğlu, "Syria's 'Shogun' in the Making: Russian-Backed General Suheil al-Hassan and Future of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces," Foreign Policy & Security, No. 11 (Istanbul: EDAM, November 2018), 6, https://edam.org.tr/en/syrias-shogun-in-the-making-russian-backed-general-suheil-al-hassan-and-future-of-the-syrian-arab-armed-forces/.

36 Ibid., 6.

37 Comments by Can Kasapoğlu, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

38 Can Kasapoğlu, "Control of the Syrian Airspace," SWP Comment, No. 14 (Berlin: SWP, April 2018), https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/control-of-the-syrian-airspace/.

39 Comments by Sinan Ülgen, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

40 Selcan Hacaoğlu, "Turkey Seeks U.S. Patriot Missiles to Deter Russia in Syria," Bloomberg, February 20, 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-20/turkey-asks-u-s-for-patriot-missiles-to-deter-russia-in-idlib.

41 Tuvan Gumrukcu and Orhan Coskun, "Turkey Says U.S. Offering Patriot Missiles If S-400 Not Operated," Reuters, March 10, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa-idUSKBN20X1I8.

IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For Turkey and Russia

The foregoing analysis yields several actionable policy recommendations that Turkey and Russia can take to stabilize bilateral relations. To begin, the two countries should seek to *clarify policy objectives* in the Syria conflict. Russian policymakers, on the one hand, must explain (or be pressed to explain) precisely what they mean when they ask Turkey for a commitment to "eliminate all terrorist groups" in Syria.[42] Given its military superiority, Russia often benefits from strategic ambiguity regarding such issues. But Turkey stands much to gain from clarifying and prioritizing its policy goals. Turkish policymakers should thus develop a coherent policy vision for Syria and prioritize key goals based on a clear-eyed assessment of what the Turkish military can realistically achieve, given the immense tactical challenges it faces in Syria. Clarifying Turkey's policy objectives should also go hand-in-hand with increasing transparency and public involvement in foreign policy decision-making.

Additionally, Turkey and Russia should *leverage international support for humanitarian objectives* to involve the international community and promote effective burden-sharing. As the UN emergency relief chief stated in March 2020, Syria's northwest is confronting an ongoing and "grave humanitarian crisis," in which almost three million people need humanitarian aid.[43] Some of Turkey's allies have demonstrated at least limited willingness to address this crisis, with the United States contributing USD 108 million in aid in early March and other donors pledging another USD 300 million. Turkey can and should play an active role in calling for further assistance and supporting efforts to deliver it.

Taking a longer-term view, Turkey and Russia must also invest in cultivating mutual understanding and *strengthen the capacity of researchers, journalists, and policymakers* to comprehend the other side's perspective. Within Turkey, for instance, Russia is at best an "enigma" and at worst misunderstood.[44] Most Turkish academics and analysts speak English, rather than Russian, and they thus understand Russia through the prism of Western, English-language writing and research. Likewise, in Russia, very few foreign policy experts have an in-depth grasp of Turkey's language, history, and politics. In this context, it is almost inevitable that each country's news media and foreign policy establishment will have an incomplete or distorted perspective of the other side. Indeed, the news media (at least in Turkey) has reached the point of becoming a threat to national security, given the extent to which it presents the public with misleading or incomplete information on sensitive foreign policy questions.[45]

For Turkey's Western Allies

Turkey's NATO allies, in turn, urgently need to *shake the Cold War reflex* of viewing Western and Russian relations with Turkey as zero-sum and mutually exclusive.[46] Rather, NATO members should acknowledge that some level of cooperation with Russia is beneficial to Turkey—and that Western efforts to limit such cooperation have often been counter-productive and provoked an indignant Turkish response. Western countries should keep in mind that even during the Cold War, Turkey's integration into the West never meant a complete end to cooperation with the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, the EU and NATO should *invoke the Berlin Plus agreement* to assist Turkey directly in responding to the Idlib crisis.[47] Finalized in 2003, the Berlin Plus agreement consists of a "package of arrangements that allow the EU to make use of NATO assets and capabilities for EU-led crisis management operations."[48] These provisions would allow the EU to conduct a humanitarian mission in Idlib while relying on NATO military assets for protection. A key advantage of this multilateral approach is that it would allow the EU to proceed without working through the United Nations Security Council, where China and Russia wield veto power.

42 Pitel, Foy, and Cornish, "Idlib Residents Put Little Faith in Russian-Turkish Peace Deal."

43 "UN 'Determined to Stand by the People of Syria' Says Lowcock, as Grave Humanitarian Crisis Intensifies around Idlib," UN News, March 3, 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1058511.

44 Comments by Çiğdem Nas, Roundtable on "Reassessing Russia's Role in Global Politics," February 20, 2020.

45 Comments by Sinan Ülgen, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

46 Comments by Michael Reynolds, Roundtable on "Reassessing Russia's Role in Global Politics," February 20, 2020.

47 Comments by Sinan Ülgen, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

48 European External Action Service, "Shaping of a Common Security and Defence Policy," July 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/common-security-and-defence-policy-csdp/5388/shaping-common-security-and-defence-policy_en.

The United States, in particular, should *seize the opportunity to reinvigorate U.S.-Turkey relations*. In particular, the Trump administration should approve Turkey's limited request for the Patriot missile defense system and provide the equipment on a temporary basis to respond to Turkey's immediate security needs.[49] Additionally, the U.S. executive branch should seek to limit the damage from compulsory sanctions on Turkey. The 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) mandates that the president impose sanctions in response to Turkey's purchase of the S-400 system, but it is important to highlight that these sanctions are à la carte.[50] If President Trump takes the lead in applying sanctions and thus prevents Congress from assuming responsibility, he can implement a more limited approach and mitigate the damage to U.S.-Turkey relations. However, if the United States enforces more punitive sanctions, it could seriously strain the bilateral relationship and undermine Turkish national security by affecting Turkey's existing F-16 and helicopter inventories.[51]

While policy responses can address certain aspects of the Turkey-Russia relationship, it is crucial to acknowledge that the challenges facing bilateral relations are deep and structural. Asymmetric interdependence across numerous dimensions of the relationship constrains Turkey's room for maneuver, and the ongoing crisis in Syria presents urgent diplomatic and tactical problems that lack easy solutions. Yet Turkey and Russia are now deeply entangled on policy questions ranging from the Black Sea and the Caucuses to Libya and Syria. The policy recommendations above offer the hope that Turkey, Russia, and the West can manage their mutual entanglement more constructively and limit the persistent volatility in their relations.

49 Comments by Sinan Ülgen, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

50 Comments by Can Kasapoğlu, Conference on "Turkey, Russia, and the West," February 21, 2020.

51 Can Kasapoğlu and Sinan Ülgen, "Strategic Weapon Systems in the Turkey-Russia-US Triangle," Foreign Policy & Security, No. 2 (Istanbul: EDAM, January 2019), https://edam.org.tr/en/strategic-weapons-systems-in-the-turkey-russia-us-triangle/.

APPENDIX

İPM | IPC İSTANBUL POLİTİKALAR MERKEZİ SABANCI ÜNİVERSİTESİ KAMPUSU ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER AT SABANCI UNIVERSITY

İKV 1965 55 yıl

Turkey, Russia, and the West

Historical Perspectives, Current Dynamics, and Future Prospects

Friday, 21 February 2020

Istanbul Policy Center

(Minerva Han, Bankalar Caddesi No: 2, Karaköy)

Turkey and Russia have achieved a striking rapprochement in recent years, defying the expectations of many scholars and reshaping Turkey's relations with the West. This full-day conference, organized by the Istanbul Policy Center and Economic Development Foundation, will convene international experts to reassess the Turkey-Russia relationship and its implications for Turkey's Western allies. Scholars will examine the history of Turkey-Russia relations from the imperial past to the present, identifying the dynamics that have previously led to cooperation or conflict. Experts will then analyze relations today, addressing key issues such as energy, economic ties, and the Syrian conflict. Finally, speakers will assess the prospects for Turkey-Russia relations amidst rising great power competition and discuss how Western policymakers can respond to deepening ties between Ankara and Moscow.

This event will be in English. Simultaneous translation will not be provided.

Conference Program

9:30–10:00 **Introductory Remarks**

Fuat Keyman, *Istanbul Policy Center*
Haluk Kabaalioğlu, *Economic Development Foundation*

10:00–12:00 **Can Turkey and Russia Escape the Past? Historical Legacies and Lessons**

Moderator: **Evren Balta**, *Istanbul Policy Center & Özyeğin University*
Mitat Çelikpala, *Kadir Has University*
Onur İşçi, *Bilkent University*
Behlül Özkan, *Marmara University*
Michael Reynolds, *Princeton University*

12:00–13:00 **Lunch**

13:00–14:45 **Assessing the Relationship Today: Key Bilateral Issues and Dynamics**

Moderator: **Soli Özel**, *Kadir Has University*
Tolga Demiryol, *Altınbaş University*
Volkan Ediger, *Kadir Has University*
Can Kasapoğlu, *EDAM*
Habibe Özdal, *Istanbul Okan University*

14:45–15:00 **Coffee Break**

15:00–16:45 **Prospects for Turkey-Russia Relations and Possible Western Responses**

Moderator: **Aslı Aydıntaşbaş**, *Stiftung Mercator–Istanbul Policy Center*
Senem Aydın-Düzgit, *Istanbul Policy Center*
Galip Dalay, *SWP Berlin*
Fyodor Lukyanov, *Russia in Global Affairs Magazine*
Sinan Ülgen, *EDAM*

16:45–17:00 **Closing Remarks**

Senem Aydın-Düzgit, *Istanbul Policy Center*
Çiğdem Nas, *Economic Development Foundation*

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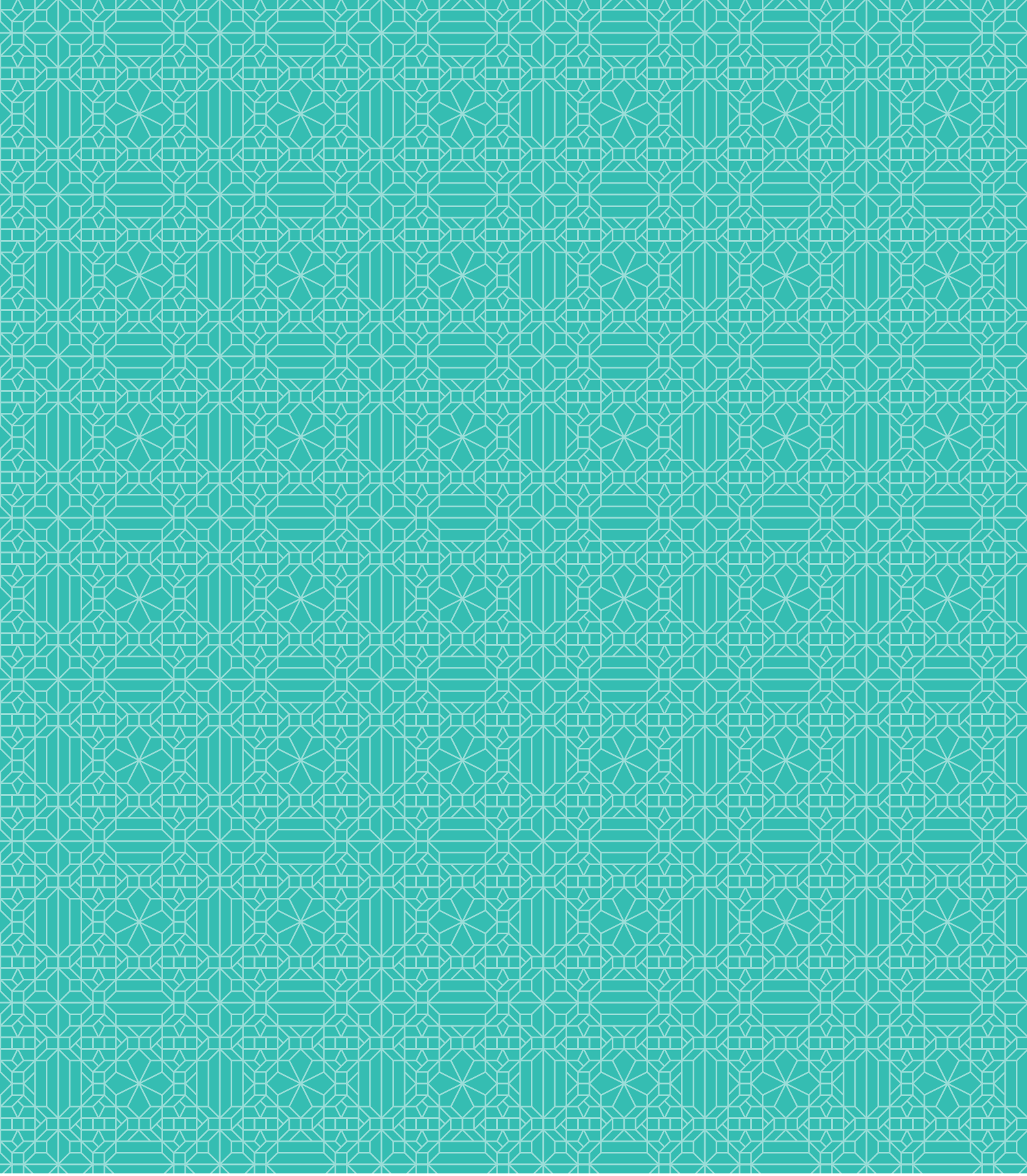
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