

3. The Russo-Turkish Entente: A Tactical Embrace Along Strategic and Geopolitical Convergences

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By virtue of geographic, historical and cultural factors, Turkey and Russia's foreign policies are characterised by a natural multi-regional projection stretching throughout the Eurasian land-mass from the Western Balkans to the Central Asian steppes, where their interests, at different times, have collided, competed or converged. Over the post-bipolar era, such a multi-regional dimension has gained a decisive value for the rethinking of the role and the identity of Turkey and the Russian Federation in the contemporary international scenario. This trend is particularly significant since both actors – although to different degrees and benefiting from different resources of power and leverage – emerged from the bipolar system affected by “status panic”¹, i.e. by the need to reaffirm their respective positions in a rapidly changing international environment. Indeed, while the Russian risk of *demotion* associated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union is self-explaining, no less compelling was the risk of strategic marginalisation faced by Turkey as a consequence of the dissolution itself.

Making the status panic even deeper has been the closely connected identity issue, rooted in Russia and Turkey's geographic-civilisational location as well as in the legacy of the multinational empire experience, reawakened in both countries after decades of ostensible marginalisation resulting from the Cold War's ideological orthodoxy. Indeed, to a large extent

¹ A. Sergunin, *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice*, Verlag, Stuttgart, 2016, p. 27.

Turkey's Europeanness was defined according to its geostrategic position², since its anchorage to the Euro-Atlantic security mechanisms represented, throughout the Cold War era, both a manifestation and a confirmation of its Western and European credentials, as well as of the country's attachment to Western sets of values. Therefore, in the post-Cold War environment, the risk of strategic marginalisation went hand in hand with a parallel risk of an identity crisis, exacerbated in the domestic realm by the increasing socio-political challenges to the Kemalist-Republican dogma of Westernisation. In a different yet analogous way, the USSR's dissolution traumatised Russia's "cultural, political, and economic identity"³, thereby generating a vicious circle among the different layers of post-bipolar transition. Consistently with these trends, the post-bipolar reassessment of both countries' foreign policy overlapped and intertwined with the inextricable national identity knot, making the foreign policy-making process a highly symbolic ground for domestic confrontation, the more so since Turkey and Russia's projection toward areas once hegemonised under imperial sway rarely came free of identity considerations and reverberations.

On this backdrop, regional policies provide a privileged perspective for analysing Ankara and Moscow's post-bipolar foreign policy as well as for assessing the evolution, current state and nature of their bilateral relations. Moreover, the contemporary international system is characterised by an increasing misalignment and hierarchic reversal between global and regional dynamics. The global system's high degree of penetration into the various regional systems – typical of the Cold War – is jamming, causing the global distribution of power to be less and less important at the regional level⁴. The resulting regionalisa-

² M. Müftüler-Baç, "Turkey's predicament in the post-Cold War era", *Future*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1996, pp. 255.

³ A. Tsygankov, "Mastering space in Eurasia: Russia's geopolitical thinking after the Soviet break-up", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 36, 2003, p. 104.

⁴ A. Colombo, "L'ordine globale e l'ascesa delle grandi potenze regionali", *Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali*, no. 14, ISPI, 2011, pp. 4-11.

tion of the international system and connected change in the scale of international relations provide the foreign policies of Russia and Turkey – as pivotal actors in multi-regional contexts – with a significance which transcends the mere bilateral interaction level to embrace the wider systematisation of the Eurasian chessboard.

Starting from the assumption that the objective and subjective components of the foreign policy-making process can only be artificially separated, the aim of this chapter is to highlight the roots and the tactical nature of the Turkish-Russian partnership as it developed in response to the still ongoing process of redefining their respective positions in the post-bipolar system. Starting from the similarities in Turkey and Russia's geopolitical features and strategic cultures, the article maintains that Ankara and Moscow came to develop analogous views of the risks and the opportunities resulting from the post-Cold War transition. Coupled with domestic enabling factors – such as economic growth and strong charismatic leaderships – these converging perceptions opened up margins for cooperation in the same regional dimension where for centuries the two actors' interests competed and collided. Therefore, despite being chiefly tactical in nature, the Russo-Turkish entente stands as a key pillar upon which both actors seem doomed to build respective post-bipolar role and identity.

Background for the entente: common geopolitical factors and converging perceptions

Turkey and Russia share significant geopolitical features, both in physical and human terms. In particular, their characteristic and almost unique geographic location in the heart of the Eurasian landmass and at the crossroads of multiple civilisations – coupled with a shared imperial experience and with a problematic post-imperial transition – generated analogous views of the international system and similar strategic cultures. Such analogies contribute to shedding light on both the evolution

and the scope of their bilateral relations, starting from their competition in the 1990s to the entente in the following decade.

A basic commonality in their respective strategic cultures lies in the chiefly military and territorial conception of national security, resulting from a sense of geographic insecurity with deep historical roots⁵. Throughout its existence as an empire, the struggle to stabilise porous frontiers lacking – especially on the Western front – natural borders has accompanied Russian foreign policy and presided over the militarisation of society, leaving a deep imprint on national strategic culture. Although benefiting from more defined external borders – at least in natural terms, and at least on three out of five fronts – Turkey traditionally shared the same perception of geographic insecurity, which, in turn, since imperial times resulted in an analogous tendency to securitise society⁶.

⁵ The analysis of Turkey's geopolitical features and resulting strategic culture is mainly based upon: F. Vali, *Bridge Across the Bosphorus. The Foreign Policy of Turkey*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins Press, 1971; M. Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture. Republic at Sea*, London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; P. Robins, *Suits and Uniform: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, London, Hurst & Co., 2003; M. Aydin, "Securitization of History and Geography: Understanding of Security in Turkey", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 163-184; A. Karaosmanoğlu, "The Evolution of the National Security Culture and the Military in Turkey", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2000, pp. 199-216. As for Russia, the analysis is mainly drawn from: R. Legvold (Ed.), *Russian foreign policy in the twenty-first century and the shadow of the past*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007; B. Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era. Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2002; T. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities & Foreign Policies, Moscow 1955 and 1999*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002; J. Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy. The Return of Great Power Politics*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

⁶ In Aydin's view the sense of geographical insecurity was mainly the result of the peculiar location of the Anatolian Peninsula, a natural channel not only for migrations from the East, but also for invasions from both East and West. M. Aydin (2003), p. 170.

Thus, security concerns have traditionally been paramount in the devising of Russian and Turkish foreign policies, the more so since the sense of geographic insecurity has been aggravated by the perception of being surrounded by hostile neighbours, prone to take advantage of Turkey and Russia's weaknesses to advance their own interests and agendas to the former's detriment. From this perspective, the idea of Russia as a "fortress" encircled by a hostile Western siege – particularly strong during the Soviet era and revived in the post-bipolar one⁷ – closely resembles Turkey's own insecurity complex as it developed in the difficult decades between the decline and successive collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Republic, epitomised in the so-called *Sèvres Syndrome*⁸. Named after the 1920 Treaty governing the partition of the Ottoman Empire's core territory after its defeat and occupation in WWI, the Syndrome assumes that the country is being encroached upon by hostile powers benefiting from the support of "fifth columns" within the country itself – i.e. ethnic and religious minorities. The peculiarly close relations between external and internal threats, the perception of the latter as being an extension of the former, adds a human geography dimension to the perception of border porosity already introduced in physical and diplomatic terms. In a multiethnic and multi-faith country like Turkey, this conception contributed to creating a vicious circle between domestic and external security policies⁹ and to the securitisation of national identity, traditionally seen by the Kemalist-Republican

⁷ P. Baev, *The Russian Army in a Time of Trouble*, London, Sage, 1996, pp. 27-35.

⁸ D. Jung, *The Sèvres Syndrome: Turkish Foreign Policy and its Historical Legacies*, Chapel Hill, American Diplomacy Publisher, 2003.

⁹ The best incarnation of this vicious circle is provided by the so called "two-and-a-half war strategy" put forward by the retired Ambassador Şükrü Elekdağ in 1996, according to which Turkey should have been prepared to "conducting two full scale operations simultaneously along the Aegean and Southern fronts while at the same time being prepared for a "half war" [with the PKK] that might be instigated from within the country". S. Elekdağ, "2 ½ War Strategy", *Perceptions*, no. 1, 1996, pp. 33-57.

strategic paradigm as a barrier against centrifugal forces benefiting from outside support. A similar pattern is discernible in Russia's experience as a "multinational state whose imperial history has produced a fragile, fragmented national identity"¹⁰, endangered by an analogous threat of transnationalism¹¹.

The Turkish and Russian insecurity complex was anything but defused by the end of the Cold War. Turkey, in particular, seemed not to benefit from the peace dividends that the easing in international tensions ensured to its Atlantic allies. On the contrary, the country found itself at the very centre of one of the main post-bipolar hotspots, in a "pentagon" of instability and uncertainty whose corners extended to the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the Black Sea basin¹². Moreover the proliferation of threats along Turkish borders was aggravated, in turn, by the aforesaid risk of marginalisation from the Western security arrangements as well as by the resurgence of the external-internal security short-circuit as a consequence of the Kurdish drive towards gaining autonomy in Northern Iraq following the Gulf War. As for Russia, the emergence of conflicts in the post-Soviet space, along with the absence of Russian-led security arrangements in the neighbourhood, generated instead a fundamental new challenge, i.e. the possibility that the security void left by USSR's dissolution might end up being filled by hostile powers. Therefore, the risk of demotion at the global level and the instability at Russia's borders concurred in reinvigorating Moscow's traditional insecurity complex.

¹⁰ R. Suny, "Living in the Hood: Russia, Empire, and Old and New Neighbors", in R. Legvold (2007), p. 36.

¹¹ It is worth noting that the phenomenon of transnationalism and the shared perception of threat associated with it contributed to exacerbating tensions in bilateral relations through the 1990s, as a result of reciprocal accusations of supporting the Kurdish and the Chechen insurgencies and terrorism.

¹² This was the perception of the Gen. Nezihi Çakar, Secretary General of the Turkey's National Security Council between 1990 and 1992. See, N. Çakar, "Turkey's Security Challenges", *Perceptions*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1996.

The countries' insecurity complex – coupled with their “status-seeking” apprehension – was primarily responsible for the conflicting trends in Turkey-Russia relations over the first decade of post-bipolar transition. Here, consistent with a trend inscribed in regional history¹³, the defensive actions undertaken by Turkey and Russia in order to defuse their respective insecurity complexes concurred in generating a power competition between Ankara and Moscow – progressively acquiring a pivotal role for opposed axes of multi-regional alliances¹⁴. In particular, Turkish-Russian relations were naturally strained as a consequence of Ankara's attempt to defuse the risks of strategic marginalisation through revitalisation of its partnership with Atlantic allies, primarily with the United States. Consistent with a *bandwagoning* attitude, Turkey acted as a strategic and geographic bridgehead for US regional projection towards the post-Soviet and Middle Eastern area, subscribing to a neo-containment logic, which ineluctably put Ankara and Moscow on a collision course. Thus, recalling the alliance politics' theory¹⁵ it might be said that while Turkey's strengthened commitment to the alliance with the US helped defuse the perceived *risk of abandonment*, at the same time it led to the opposite *risk of entrapment* while fostering an insecurity spiral with Russia, which, in turn, aggravated both actors' perceptions of threat and sense of encirclement. The resulting need to defuse the polarisation trends and to find a more even balance between the global and regional dimensions of respective foreign policy was the first factor paving the way for the search for engagement in Turkish-Russian relations.

Another traditional pattern inherited from the imperial experience and similar in Turkey and Russia's strategic culture is their adherence to the *balance of power* principle, as the soundest

¹³ R. Legvold, “Introduction”, in R. Legvold (2007), p. 18.

¹⁴ P. Robins (2003), pp. 165-172.

¹⁵ G. Snyder, “The security dilemma in alliance politics”, *World Politics*, no. 36, 1984, pp. 461-495.

guarantee of systemic stability and national interest, and their upholding of the *status quo* as an indirect yet indispensable form of safeguarding status and security. Such behavioural patterns historically emerged – especially in the case of Turkey¹⁶ – in times of strategic retreat and diminishing power and therefore, *mutatis mutandis*, revived along the same rationales in the difficult post-bipolar environment¹⁷. Indeed, the inscrutable and mercurial nature of this environment, coupled with diminishing power resources and with the demotion-marginalisation risk, relegated Russia and Turkey to a position of “status quo power unable to maintain the status quo”¹⁸, i.e. with the contradicting need to oppose revisionist tendencies in a rapidly changing environment that instead required pro-active policies.

The common resolve to safeguard the *status quo* against revisionist tendencies was a determinant factor around which Ankara and Moscow’s interests began to converge at the turn of the century. Such a convergence resulted primarily from similar reactions to the sharper US unilateralist and interventionist position following 9/11 and from a shared perception of risk associated with the two pillars sustaining the *Bush Doctrine* – i.e. the *preventive war* and the *democracy promotion* principles¹⁹.

¹⁶ A. Karaosmanoğlu (2000), pp. 201-202.

¹⁷ While Turkey’s traditional *status quo* attitude goes undiscussed in literature, quite different is the case for Russia, especially in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. For a rep-up of the debate, see: A. Sergunin (2016), pp. 27-37.

¹⁸ The expression, originally proposed for Russia, seems to fit Turkey too, see G. Herd, “The ‘Battle of Ideas, Concepts, and Geopolitical Projects’ in Central Asia, Implications for Russo-Chinese Relations?”, in R. Piet and R. Kanet (Eds.), *Shifting Priorities in Russia’s Foreign and Security Policy*, Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington, 2016, p. 197.

¹⁹ The common opposition to the *preventive war* pillar clearly emerged in the shared dissent towards the Iraqi Freedom Operation (2003) as well as towards the possibility of military interventions in the Middle East. The perception of possible destabilisation associated with *democracy promotion* emerged primarily in the diffidence shown towards the “Color revolutions” in Ukraine (2003), Georgia (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005).

Far from being the mere result of exogenous factors, the progressive convergence in interests and perspectives was also the consequence of the maturation of the domestic identity debate. The progressive weakening of Westerners' positions – i.e. of the Kemalists-Republicans, on the one hand, and of the European-Atlanticist school of thought, on the other – paved the way for the redefinition of the nexus between identity and foreign policy in the muted post-bipolar environment, based on both objective and subjective elements. From the first perspective, the multiform and cyclic identity, institutional and economic crises affecting the West and the simultaneous rise of China presided over an eastward shift of international politics' centre of gravity, ensuring a renovated centrality to both Turkey and Russia in the Eurasian landmass and, by extension, in the international system. Moreover, the objective elements substantiating this view were intertwined with and enhanced by subjective ones, resulting from the shared perception of being “refused” by the West – not only in strategic but also in civilisational terms²⁰ – which, in turn, facilitated the reassessment of national identity contours through the valorisation of the countries' specificities and distinctiveness. Therefore, the sense of centrality progressively characterising both Turkey and Russia's self-perception should not be understood in merely physical terms, but also in cultural and civilisational ones. Consistently, Russian “uniqueness” came to be interpreted as the single factor justifying its natural multi-regional projection as well as its “indispensability” and natural *droit de regard* in the same scenarios²¹. An analogous causal relationship between the country's geographic, strategic, and cultural uniqueness and a resulting “right and duty of involvement” in regional affairs also underlies the foreign policy conceptions emerging in Turkey at the turn of the century – as

²⁰ Y. Bozdağlıoğlu, *Turkish foreign policy and Turkish identity: a constructivist approach*, New York and London, Taylor & Francis, 2005, pp. 79-85.

²¹ The relation between Russia's uniqueness and indispensability is particularly strong in the case of the Eurasianist school of thought. See B. Lo (2002), pp. 18-19. As for the notion of indispensability, see also pp. 53-55.

theorised by Ismail Cem's "Positive Steps Diplomacy" doctrine and, successively, by Ahmet Davutoğlu's "Strategic Depth" concept²². As a matter of fact, the basic and common assumptions of both these doctrines was Turkey's shift from the periphery to the core of the international system, i.e. from being a "European outpost" or a "wing country" in the bipolar system to becoming a "neuralgic centre" or a "central country" in the post-bipolar²³.

From competition to cooperation: the "double compartmentalisation logic"

Building upon the convergence in interests and geopolitical perceptions, since the turn of the century the Turkish-Russian entente has been founded upon the "double compartmentalisation" of bilateral relations. Such a logic entailed, on the one hand, the separation between economic and political-diplomatic relations and, on the other, a tendency to marginalise those political-diplomatic issues which might trigger renewed competition, focusing instead on cooperation in the regional scenarios and issues manifesting convergence of interests. As such, the double compartmentalisation logic allowed Ankara and Moscow to insulate tactical convergences from persistent strategic divergences, effectively capitalising on the former while avoiding being affected by the potentially negative repercussions of the latter.

The first dimension of the compartmentalisation logic has been consistent with a trend toward the economisation of

²² I. Cem, *Turkey in the New Century: Speeches and Texts. Presented at International Fora (1995-2001)*, Lefkoşa, Rustem, 2001, pp. 42-44; A. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, Kure Yayınları, İstanbul, 2001; "Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı", *Radikal Gazetesi*, 26 February 2004.

²³ As for the relation between Turkey's rediscovered centrality and its responsibility in the neighbourhood see Ş. Kardaş, *From Zero Problems to Leading the Change: Making Sense of Transformation in Turkey's Regional Policy*, TEPAV, Turkey Policy Brief Series, no. 5, 2012.

Ankara's and Moscow's external relations, which emerged at the turn of the century as the main adjustment to flawed foreign policy-setting excessively focused on geopolitical and hard-security considerations. In both cases, however, the economisation of foreign policy did not account for a reversal of the traditional "security-first" approach to international relations. Instead it represented a different *tactical means* to achieve the same traditional *strategic aim* of improved security and sounder balance of power. In particular, for both Russia and Turkey their economic growth came to be interpreted as a prerequisite for carrying out independent foreign policy, which in turn represents a key factor for the enhancement of state power at the regional and international levels. It is not by chance that in both Turkey and Russia the renewed emphasis placed on the economic dimension of foreign policy was not sustained and compounded by a parallel process of domestic liberalisation, based first of all on the relinquishing of state control over key national economic assets. Quite on the contrary, the verticalisation of state management – maintained in Turkey and accentuated in Russia – allowed for a more efficient use of national companies in the pursuit of traditional foreign policy goals.

Consistent with the above-outlined trend, the economisation of international and regional relations stemmed from Moscow's attempt to ensure greater tactical coherence for its foreign policy tools, "substituting economic for cruder military instruments"²⁴. Thus, besides reinforcing a renewed social pact based upon the promise of increased and enlarged well-being, economic growth was not an end in itself but a course followed "for the sake of power, autonomy, and global position"²⁵. In the same tactical vein, the emphasis Ankara put on promoting economic interdependence with regional partners was coherent with the attempt to protect Turkey from the unavoidable and

²⁴ R. Legvold (2007), p. 7.

²⁵ C. Wallander, *Global Challenges and Russian Foreign Policy*, in R. Legvold (2007), p. 458.

cyclic instability in the neighbourhood, enhancing and supporting the logic of “zero problems with neighbours” theorised by Davutoğlu²⁶.

In bilateral relations, the isolation of the economic agenda from the political allowed the partners to achieve a number of significant results, which contribute to better outline the state and the prospects of the relationship itself. First and foremost, compartmentalisation allowed the partnership to expand to traditionally politicised economic sectors, where cooperation was previously hindered by broader strategic considerations as well as by restrictions imposed by the logic of international alignments. The primary reference goes to the energy sector – which currently absorbs the larger share of bilateral trade – and, more specifically, to the strategic natural gas sector²⁷.

The 1997 bilateral agreements by virtue of which Russia committed to supply Turkey with a volume of 6 billion cubic meters per year over a 25-year period as well as to build a dedicated infrastructure through the Black Sea – the so called Blue Stream – represented the first rupture of that Russia-containment policy around which Ankara and Washington had reinvigorated their bilateral partnership in the post-bipolar era. Indeed, by guaranteeing the long-term supply of one of the most promising regional gas markets, the Turkey-Russia agreement subtracted feasibility margins from the rival East-West Energy Corridor between Central Asia and Europe, promoted and supported by the United States with a view to enhancing

²⁶ See, e.g., A. Davutoğlu, “[Turkey’s Zero-Problems Foreign Policy](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2010.

²⁷ Unlike oil, natural gas has a transport process that is “rigid” by definition and which hinders the formation of a global market. This means that – despite the growth of spot markets – gas exchanges are still largely based on bilateral contracts that bind buyers and sellers in the long term. Therefore, the rigidity of the market obliges both exporter and consumer countries to apply a more strategic and far-sighted planning, which is not confined to the economic sphere but requires a wider political entente between the parties as well as a greater role for so-called energy diplomacy.

the sovereignty and independence of the post-Soviet producer and transit states along the aforesaid route²⁸.

More than other economic sectors, energy embodies the essence of the functional interdependence between the two partners, in term of relations between a supplier and a consumer country as well as between an exporting and a potential transit country. First and foremost, for Turkey Russia represents an indispensable and reliable energy supplier – traditionally and by far the largest supplier of natural gas and one of the most important suppliers of oil – whose cooperation is essential in satisfying domestic demand for primary energy²⁹. Conversely, at a time when traditional gas commercialisation schemes are increasingly challenged by significant innovations in extractive techniques as well as in marketing technologies and methods – i.e. by shale gas potential, by the growth in LNG supply and by spot markets – Turkey for Russia represents a strategic market in terms of both current and prospective demand for natural gas³⁰. Moreover, no less significant is this bilateral cooperation in relation to respective long-term energy and infrastructural strategies. From this perspective, for Ankara the Russian gas

²⁸ C. Frappi, “The Caspian Sea Basin in United States Strategic Thinking and Policies”, in C. Frappi and A. Garibov (Eds.), *The Caspian Sea chessboard: Geopolitical, Geo-strategic and Geo-economic Analysis*, Milan, Egea, 2014, pp.181-202.

²⁹ In 2015 Russian oil and gas accounted respectively for 12.4% and 55.3% of total annual imports. Meaningfully, the volume of gas exported in 2016 was only slightly inferior (1.84 billion cubic meters/bcm) to the 2015 volume (26.6 bcm), despite the bilateral crisis in the first half of the year and reciprocal threats of interruption, see BP, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, June 2016.

³⁰ With a volume of gas imports from Russia of 24.76 bcm in 2016 (on a total consumption of 42,1 bcm), Turkey represents the second final market for Gazprom exports, behind Germany (29.2 bcm in 2016). Moreover, notwithstanding a contraction trend in Turkish annual gas demand, current independent estimates in gas demand growth indicate that by 2025 the demand latter is expected grow up to 55-56 (bcm) a year by 2025 and to 60-62 bcm/year by 2030. See, G. Rzayeva, “Turkey’s gas demand decline: reasons and consequences”, *Energy Insight*, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, no. 11, 2017.

supply channel represents a key resource for advancing a traditional and central aim of its energy policy, i.e. the resolve to take advantage of the strategic location of the country, situated between Eurasia's main energy producing and consuming areas, in order to promote a regional *hub* role. That is, by maximising supply channels and import volumes, Turkey may re-export the surplus, thereby reducing the elevated costs associated with import dependency and simultaneously raising its own strategic significance to both regional producer and consumer countries. Vice-versa, from Moscow's perspective Turkey stands as a vital bridgehead to the Southern European gas markets, at the same time bypassing transit through Ukrainian territory and the tightening EU energy normative. On this backdrop, the energy interests and strategies of Turkey and Russia were welded together by the fall 2014 agreement aimed at the construction, along the Black Sea route, of the off-shore Turkish Stream gas pipeline, on the ashes of the scrapped South Stream project.

Besides contributing to the remarkable increase in annual economic turnover³¹, the enhancement of their economic interdependence allowed the partners to both expand and consolidate the bases of bilateral relations. In fact, the increased level of bilateral turnover led to a broadening of economic ties and interactions beyond the major state-owned enterprises – *in primis* the national energy companies –, thus widening and deepening the synergies between the countries' entrepreneurial and productive sectors. Facilitated also by the decision to adopt a visa-free travel regime, this trend in turn presided over the enlargement of those national stakeholders concerned with the maintenance of good bilateral relations, thereby providing the partnership with enhanced solidity and with a higher degree of sustainability over time.

³¹ The level of bilateral trade grew from US\$2.9 billion in 1999 to a peak of 31.2 billion in 2014. In 2015 and 2016 the bilateral trade stood respectively at 23.9 and 16.9 billion. Turkish Statistical Institute, *Foreign Trade Statistics Database*.

Last but not least, the enhancement of economic and trade relations facilitated and strengthened the entente at the political and diplomatic levels³², along the second dimension of the partnership's compartmentalisation logic – i.e. the isolation of contentious regional issues from the ones benefiting from sounder convergence in interests. The political-diplomatic entente developed consistently with the above-mentioned adjustments in the perceived civilisational location and systemic role of Turkey and Russia in the post-bipolar environment.

In the Turkish and Russian views, the rediscovery and reaffirmation of the countries' geographic, historical and cultural uniqueness naturally endowed them with the primary responsibility to ensure and guarantee peace and stability in neighbouring areas. Therefore, the bond welding Ankara and Moscow's policies in their shared neighbourhood came to be the joint proposition of a "regional ownership" principle, whereby countries belonging to the same area are called upon – borrowing words from then Foreign Minister Davutoğlu – "to find regional solutions to their regional problems, rather than waiting for other actors from outside the region to impose their own solutions"³³. As said, the degree of *defection* from the alliance with the United States embodied in Davutoğlu's wording and in consistent Turkish regional projection opened up room for cooperation with Moscow in a multi-regional direction. As a consequence, albeit to a different degree of depth and with different results, the regional ownership logic guided bilateral cooperation and initiatives in the shared neighbourhood, i.e. from the Black Sea area to the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Nowhere has the joint proposition of the regional ownership principle been more successful than in the Black Sea basin, which during the first decade of the century emerged as

³² For a coeval analysis, see D. Sezer, "The Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership", *Turkish Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp. 59-82.

³³ [Interview](#) by Ahmet Davutoğlu published in *AUC Cairo Review*, 12 March 2012.

the main flash point between the enlarged Euro-Atlantic institutions and the area traditionally perceived by Moscow as its own natural sphere of interests. Here, starting from 2001, Turkey and Russia developed sound mechanisms for naval cooperation, which enabled Ankara to join Moscow in resisting US pressure to extend to the basin the NATO naval anti-terror operations conducted in the Mediterranean under Operation Active Endeavor³⁴.

The results of joint cooperation and stabilisation initiatives were instead somehow muted in the Southern Caucasus where notwithstanding different – and to a great extent opposite – stances over the systematisation of the area and over the principles for resolving protracted sub-regional conflicts, Ankara and Moscow seemed to be keen to develop joint initiatives. This was particularly the case in the aftermath of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war over South Ossetia when Ankara's resolve to put forward "regional solutions to regional problems" resulted in the autonomous proposal of an initiative aimed at involving Russia and local actors in "Calming the Caucasus"³⁵. The main achievement of Turkey's initiative was to keep open a bilateral channel for dialogue in times of crisis, while avoiding entrapping the country in a spiral of sub-regional polarisations with Russia. However, in spite of Moscow's declaratory stances, it failed to involve Turkey in concrete and shared joint measures

³⁴ In April 2001 the Black Sea littoral states created the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (Blackseafor), a naval cooperation mechanism entrusted, since 2004, also with prerogatives in the field of anti-terrorism and for the control of trafficking in weapons of mass destruction. Turco-Russian strategic cooperation in the basin was further widened in December 2006 by virtue of Russia's association to the *Black Sea Harmony* operation, launched by Ankara in 2004 for the control of vessels transiting the Sea. These prerogatives – and specifically the will to not duplicate the existing mechanisms – represented the main justification for rejecting the US proposal to extend to the Black Sea the NATO's anti-terrorist operations (Active Endeavor) conducted in the Mediterranean since 2001.

³⁵ A. Babacan, "Calming the Caucasus", *The New York Times*, 23 September 2008.

for stabilisation – i.e. in the proposal of a region-wide stabilisation platform and in the relaunch of negotiations over the protracted conflicts.

The muted results of the attempt to extend the regional ownership logic to the Caucasus area reveal two essential traits of the bilateral entente. First and foremost they exposed the asymmetrical nature of the bilateral relation between Russia as a great power and Turkey as a middle power, even beyond economic considerations based on the latter's energy dependency³⁶. Russia's unwillingness to give up its sub-regional hegemonic role for the sake of stabilisation shows Moscow's rational resolve to retain its power resources as well as the gap in bargaining power between the partners. Secondly, when compared to the achievements of bilateral cooperation in the Black Sea area, the shortcomings in the Caucasus demonstrate the lack of a shared strategic vision between the partners and the eminently tactical nature of the entente. For Russia, the Turkey entente falls primarily within the attempt to balance the United States by means of so-called network diplomacy – that is, a web of flexible and tactical regional and sub-regional alignments allowing Moscow to pursue this balancing in different scenarios in cooperation with pivotal local partners. Therefore, in those areas where Moscow may perform an *internal* balancing act or, rather, may act in cooperation with different partners, the scope of Turkish-Russian cooperation is naturally narrower.

The fallacy of the compartmentalisation logic: the Middle Eastern lessons

The pillar upon which the Turkish-Russian embrace is built – i.e. the double compartmentation logic – embodies both the contingent strength of the cooperation axis and the deepest

³⁶See, for instance, Z. Öniş and Ş. Yılmaz, "Turkey and Russia in a shifting global order: cooperation, conflict and asymmetric interdependence in a turbulent region", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2016, pp. 71-95.

reasons for its structural weakness. That is, while it allowed for a rapprochement otherwise difficult to achieve, at the same time, by advocating tactical alignments in the absence of a broader and shared strategic vision, it keeps open the possibility for renewed spirals of crisis and confrontation. Simultaneously, the compartmentalisation logic remains vulnerable to the possibility that marginalised regional issues may unintentionally raise the stakes, fostering conflicting reactions and endangering the whole spectrum of the bilateral cooperation.

The latter was precisely the case of the Middle Eastern scenario, which, before the wave of the so-called Arab Spring, was relegated to the margins of Turkish-Russian cooperation, notwithstanding the shared intent to abide by the general principles guiding the entente – i.e. the resolve to safeguard the *status quo* by avoiding the diplomatic isolation of local actors as well as by opposing foreign interventions potentially disrupting regional stability. However, the course of the regional events – and, particularly, the protracted conflict in Syria – progressively raised Turkish and Russian stakes in the scenario, exposing conflicting views and interests regarding the area’s stabilisation and entangling the partners in opposite camps of regional ethnic and sectarian polarisation. This was chiefly the result of Turkey’s attempt to capitalise on the wave of unrest, maximising a decade of improved soft power in order to advance a regional leadership role. Facing the unprecedented dilemma of taking sides either with the insurgent populations or with the local regimes³⁷, Ankara opted for the former by subscribing to a regime change agenda which took Turkey to the forefront of the heterogeneous “revisionist camp”, including both Western and Sunni powers. In doing so, Ankara not only ended up

³⁷ On the eve of regional upheaval, then Foreign Minister Davutoğlu efficaciously recapped the dilemma by portraying Turkey as being “entrapped between [...] two successes” – i.e. good relations with Middle Eastern governments and growing popularity among populations – and, thus, between two opposite expectations. See B. Yinanç, “[Turkish FM says US, NATO support Ankara’s roap map for Libya](#)”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 7 May 2011.

by reinvigorating its own insecurity complex, but also openly contradicted the original rationale of the bilateral entente with Russia, thus clashing with Moscow's opposite resolve to keep the *status quo* unaffected and, simultaneously, to enhance its regional alignments along the Damascus-Baghdad-Tehran axis.

Over and above the immediate causes and the course of the bilateral crisis – from the downing of a Russian bomber by Turkish forces in November 2015 to Erdoğan's letter mending the relation's fences in June 2016 – the crisis contributes to portraying both the fallacies and the resilience inscribed in the partnership as well as in the logic presiding over it.

First and foremost, the crisis in the Middle East demonstrated that a renewed spiral of confrontation in one of the regional scenarios where Turkey and Russia concurrently project their influence might have a domino effect on cooperation in other scenarios, rapidly enlarging the scope and the depth of the crisis itself. Over the crisis' seven-month duration, this was particularly the case with Turkey's threat of *disalignment* in the Black Sea area. Here the threat took the shape of a renewed tilting toward naval cooperation with NATO³⁸, contrasting with the bilateral cooperation's achievements in the basin. Moreover, it took the shape of an enhancement of the partnership with Ukraine and a hardening of the tones condemning Russia's illegitimate takeover of Crimea³⁹, contradicting the balanced position held by Ankara since the eruption of the Ukrainian crisis. Nor did the retaliation spiral leave unaffected the core element of the partnership, i.e. the economic and energy dimension. Indeed, besides adopting economic sanctions against Turkey, Moscow scrapped the preliminary agreement for realisation of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline, thus leveraging its main source of bargaining power *vis-à-vis* its partner. Moreover, exacerbating one of the main security threats posed to Turkey by the Syrian

³⁸ J. Kucera, "Erdoğan, In Plea To NATO, Says Black Sea Has Become 'Russian Lake'", *Eurasianet*, 11 May 2016.

³⁹ "[Turkey and Ukraine Forge an Unlikely Alliance](#)", *Stratfor*, 14 March 2016.

conflict, the Kremlin openly revived its traditional patronage relationship with the Kurdish population⁴⁰ – whose breach, at the end of the 1990s, had been one of the main factors facilitating the bilateral rapprochement.

The retaliation spiral has had another important impact on the partnership. While not necessarily demonstrating the ineluctability of conflicting relations between Ankara and Moscow⁴¹, nonetheless it reactivated a traditional sense of reciprocal diffidence between the parties deeply rooted in both history and their respective insecurity complexes. Exposing the risks associated with renewed phases of competition between the partners, such a perception was not entirely dissipated by the normalisation of relations after June 2016. That is, the *normalisation* process did not bring about a parallel and wider *reconciliation* process, still largely unfulfilled⁴². Moreover, the harsh rhetoric employed by both country's leadership during the crisis, fueling both societies' growing nationalistic sentiments, ended up by creating societal resistances to the reconciliation process. This trend risks, on the one hand, weakening the enlargement of societal stakeholders achieved through the improvement of economic interactions while, on the other, potentially leaving the countries more prone to renewed spirals of crisis than they were before November 2015.

The way the crisis was defused and bilateral cooperation relaunched is equally telling in portraying the current status and the perspectives of the Russian-Turkish entente. Firstly,

⁴⁰ M. Reynolds, "Vladimir Putin, Godfather of Kurdistan?", *The National Interest*, 1 March 2016.

⁴¹ For a contrasting view, see J. Mankoff, "Why Russia and Turkey Fight. A History of Antagonism", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 February 2016.

⁴² An indirect yet significant element showing both the incompleteness of the normalisation process at the intergovernmental level as well as the depth of reciprocal diffidence is the Kremlin's decision not to withdraw – at the time of writing – all the economic sanctions adopted against Turkey during the crisis. The Kremlin's position was reciprocated, in March, by Turkey through the decision to freeze the issuance of licenses for duty-free grain imports from the country.

Erdoğan's letter of condolence and apology sent to Russian counterpart Putin, exposing Turkey's inability to bear the economic and political costs of the confrontation – especially at a time of growing diplomatic isolation, reigniting of the domestic-external Kurdish threat perception, and looming economic crisis – proved once more the asymmetrical nature of the partnership and the gap in respective sources of power and leverage.

Looking *ex post* at the crisis' course, it is worth noting that, notwithstanding the reciprocal threats to retaliate by downgrading energy cooperation – i.e. cutting gas supply or rather reducing its purchase – Russia's supply to Turkey went largely unaffected, clearly demonstrating the primary weight of the sector in supporting and enhancing the resilience of the bilateral partnership. It is not by chance that the revitalisation of the Turkish Stream pipeline project and acceleration of the normative process leading to its realisation emerged as a priority and privileged ground for diplomatic normalisation. Moreover, the normalisation process itself is equally telling in confirming the traditional partnership priorities for action as well as the logic behind it. Indeed, over and above the revitalisation of energy partnership and the inauguration of a significant cooperation course in the defense sector⁴³, the normalisation process has been chiefly based upon the reaffirmation and the spatial widening of the *regional ownership* principle. From the first perspective, the renewal of cooperation plans in the Black Sea basin, along with the resumption of the still-limited-in-scope dialogue

⁴³ In September 2017 Turkey and Russia signed a controversial €2.14 billions deal for the purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles. The deal, finalised in December, is particularly significant as far as Ankara-Moscow bilateral relations and Turkey participation in Atlantic Alliance are concerned. Indeed, the deal stands as the biggest purchase of Russian arms made not only by Turkey (whose purchase from Russia between 1992 and 2016 reached a total of US\$201 millions) but, generally speaking, from a NATO member country. Moreover, the S-400 anti-aircraft system cannot be integrated into NATO's own military apparatus, including the one deployed in Turkey itself.

on the pacification of the Southern Caucasus⁴⁴, confirm the prioritisation of the shared neighbourhood for the joint pursuit of regional ownership. Furthermore, the latter was also extended to the Middle Eastern area and widened through the inclusion of Iran, as epitomised by the so-called Astana Process. While for Turkey such widening seems to be consistent with a wider process aimed at re-ensuring coherence with (and mending the fences of) its Middle Eastern policy by defusing the risks associated with the regional polarisation spiral, for Russia it represents the enhancing of its network diplomacy in an environment critically important for the *multi-regional balancing* of the United States. Notwithstanding the mutual benefits of the revived entente, the pivotal role played by Moscow in the unfolding trilateral dialogue and cooperation once again testifies to the widening gap in Russia and Turkey's power and leverage resources, i.e. the enhanced asymmetry in their bilateral partnership – simultaneously exposed also by Moscow's key role in helping or allowing Ankara to defuse the increasing Kurdish threat coming from its Southern border.

Conclusion

The parallel and intertwined processes of searching for identity and role in the post-bipolar era opened up room for tactical entente and cooperation between Turkey and Russia, along a double compartmentalisation logic. While allowing for a pragmatic rapprochement otherwise difficult to achieve, such a logic epitomises the inherent weaknesses of the partnership, on two basic levels. Firstly, as exposed by the 2015-2016 crisis over Syria, regional issues marginalised by the relation may unintendedly rupture the compartmentalisation borders and endanger the whole course of bilateral partnership. Secondly, the

⁴⁴ See respectively M. Gurcan, “Is Turkey turning its stern on the West in the Black Sea?”, *Al-Monitor*, 15 December 2016; “FM: Turkey, Russia work jointly to settle Karabakh conflict”, *Today.Az*, 22 March 2017.

tactical nature of the entente leaves constant room for the clash of wider strategic interests and policies. *Inter alia*, this means that renewed spirals of crisis and confrontation may materialise not only where Turkish and Russian interests more openly collide, but also in those regional scenarios where they apparently converge in safeguarding the *status quo* and, potentially, as a consequence of unwanted and beyond-their-control initiatives coming from third parties. This is, e.g., the risk emerging in a critical and polarised scenario like the Southern Caucasus, where there is no strategic convergence between the partners over the perspective for long-term systematisation and where the patronage logic puts them on opposite sides of potential sub-regional conflicts. At the same time, the tendency to tactically align regional policies in the absence of a common strategic vision – like in the current Syrian scenario – naturally leaves room for a renewed spiral of competition and confrontation.

The recent crisis in relations, while exposing a widening power asymmetry between the partners, has nonetheless confirmed the high degree of resilience of the entente, which still represents an important vector for both partners' foreign policy. While Turkey still represents a key interlocutor in advancing Moscow's own view of a multilateral international system, Russia is for Ankara a valuable partner in pursuing its traditional securitisation goals as well as in striking a coherent balance between its regional and global alignments. From this perspective, the old Ottoman tendency to protect the state's interest by playing great powers' policies against one another seems to fit well the current policy of middle-power Turkey, thus making relations with Russia as important as ever – the more so as a consequence of the bad state of relations between Ankara and its Western interlocutors on both the shores of the Atlantic Ocean.

When analysing the logic behind the Turkish-Russian partnership it would be unwise not to look beyond the mere tactical convergences of respective interests. Indeed, since its inception the rapprochement stemmed chiefly from the challenging and still largely unfulfilled process of adapting to the changing

parameters of the international post-bipolar system, in both strategic and identity terms. From the former perspective, the entente was the result of adaptation to the regionalisation process of the international system, which, in comparison to the Cold War environment, has been witnessing a hierarchical overturning between global and regional dynamics, much to the benefit of the latter. From the second and closely connected point of view, the rapprochement resulted from the maturing domestic identity debate, around a shared downgrading of the Western-European component of their respective syncretic identities and a simultaneous valorisation of their civilisational uniqueness. Welding together the double transition trends, Turkey and Russia have been advancing and claiming a new centrality in the current international system, consistently with a process of strategic-identity realignment which can hardly be interpreted as merely conjunctural and which seems to leave wide room for the improvement of bilateral relations in a multi-regional perspective.

The aforesaid consideration is also important in appraising the current state of Ankara and Moscow's relations with the West. Indeed, Turkey and Russia's strategic defection from the alliance and from cooperation with the West reflects a wider identity reassessment process, which, in both cases, signals the partial overcoming of a sense of backwardness and peripheral-ity *vis-à-vis* Western civilisation, with deep roots in both history and strategic culture. Extending to Turkey what Bobo Lo wrote about Russia, it might be said that in both cases "gone is the desperation to be accepted in the European mainstream, and the inferiority complex that imbued this aim"⁴⁵. The intertwined strategic and identity reassessment processes naturally entail a degree of competition with the West, in strategic, economic, and even normative terms. While not necessarily assuming conflicting traits, this trend seems to emerge as a

⁴⁵ B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 181.

structural dynamic in Ankara and Moscow's relations with their Euro-Atlantic interlocutors, demonstrating their shared interests in safeguarding the multi-regional *status quo* and resisting the West's perceived revisionist tendencies and, at a wider look, an attempt to base post-bipolar roles and identity on the affirmation of a multi-regional pivotal or hegemonic role.