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Conceptualizing Russia-Turkey Strategic Political Competition

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ABSTRACT

The Russia-Turkey relationship has risen to become one of the key dynamics defining contemporary geopolitics in the MENA region. The often febrile nature of this bilateral relationship, manifesting in the world's most febrile region, makes it a worthy and important topic of analysis. Hence, the research rises the question of what are the key driving trends and dynamics define the bilateral relations within such complicated political strategic competition? The hypothesis that there are three key driving trends and dynamics define the bilateral: firstly, the ability for both sides to overlook their competing interests in order to pursue strategically advantageous cooperation; secondly, the shared aim of both nations to use each other to increase their respective autonomy from the West; and thirdly, the economic interdependency that incentivises both sides to maintain cooperation, even if the asymmetry of this interdependence, favouring Russia, has the potential to be used as leverage. Following an examination of these historical trends, the analysis will then expand on these dynamics and show how they're manifesting in the current bilateral relationship through the extrapolation of the two key case studies of current Russian-Turkish engagement: the Syrian and Libyan conflicts.

Keywords: Strategic competition, political rivalry, strategic partnership, conflict of interests.

Introduction

Since the onset of the Putin and Erdogan regimes, both regimes being defined by increasing geopolitical ambition, Russia and Turkey have entered into inescapable geopolitical competition in numerous spheres. However, this competition has, and continues to be, accompanied by the existence of crucial and tightly-shared strategic goals as well as structural incentives that ensure that, despite their numerous conflicting on-the-ground interests in various theatres, Russia and Turkey are able to ensure a level of continuity to the cooperation within their relationship.

Russia-Turkish relations has risen to become one of the key dynamics defining contemporary geopolitics in the MENA region. The often febrile nature of this bilateral relationship, manifesting in the world's most febrile region, makes it a worthy and important topic of analysis. Whether it be both nations pursuing avenues for strategic cooperation in Libya despite Turkey supporting the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya's west and Russia supporting the rival Libyan National Army (LNA) in Libya's east, or both nations being central drivers of the Astana Process to resolve the Syrian conflict despite Turkey and Russia being on opposite sides of the Idlib conflict, the bilateral relationship is clearly nuanced as well as deeply influential on the region's politics. However, just as the Russia-Turkey relationship is nearing indispensability for the MENA region, so too are both nations becoming increasingly indispensable to each other, primarily regarding their mutual interest in increasing their strategic autonomy and distance from the West.

To extrapolate the above, the article will proceed as follows. Section one will delineate the key driving trends and dynamics of the Russia-Turkey relationship: firstly, the ability for both sides to overlook their competing interests in order to pursue strategically advantageous cooperation; secondly, the shared aim of both nations to use each other to increase their respective autonomy from the West; and thirdly, the economic interdependency that incentivises both

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sides to maintain cooperation, even if the asymmetry of this interdependence, favouring Russia, has the potential to be used as leverage. Section two will then expand on these dynamics and show how they're manifesting in the current bilateral relationship through the extrapolation of the two key case studies of current Russian-Turkish engagement: the Syrian and Libyan conflicts.

Trends and dynamics of the bilateral relationship

Throughout the initial post-Cold War period while Russia kept a relatively low geopolitical profile, Turkey pursued a more ambitious regional geopolitical posture, seeking to extend its influence across much of the Balkans and former USSR (Mankoff, 2020). This move led to salient developments like Azerbaijan and Georgia being able to reduce their reliance on Russia following Turkey becoming a key security and economic partner of both (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2003); (Garibov, 2018). During this period, Turkey's push into Russia's sphere of influence also included Turkey fostering conflictual geopolitical partners to Russia in their shared region. For instance, Russia and Turkey supported opposite sides in Bosnia, Kosovo and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts during the 1990s (Rumer, 2019); (Mankoff, 2020). Upon Putin's rise to power, and Russia's eventual abandonment of efforts towards integration with the West, Russia abandoned its initial post-Cold War slumber and resumed pursuing loftier geopolitical ambitions. This pursuit centred on Russia turning its efforts towards achieving Eurasian hegemony (Mankoff, 2020), thus consolidating the Russo-Turkish relationship as one with the enduring potential for strategic competition, especially around the Black Sea littoral.

As Erdogan and Putin's terms have progressed, both have added increasing focuses on the Middle East as a key region in which they've sought to increase Turkish and Russian influence respectively. The fundamental nature of the respective Russian and Turkish strategies that have underwritten these efforts has often left them as mutually incompatible, even conflictual (*Ibid).* For Erdogan and Turkey, a strategy of increasing influence throughout the Middle East by empowering Islamist elements has been favoured, whereas for Russia, a strategy of reinforcing the secular incumbent regimes has been employed. The clearest conflagration of these incompatible strategies appeared during the Arab Spring, where Turkey's backing of, often Islamist, anti-regime elements in Libya, Egypt and Syria conflicted with Russia's stance. Syria has been the clearest instance of this policy tension between Russia and Turkey. While Moscow has been the key backer and lifeline of the Assad regime, Ankara for much of the early stages of the War demanded Assad step down, with Turkey also providing support to anti-regime militant groups ranging from the Turkmen Brigades to the staunchly Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra (Xudosi, 2019);(Idiz, 2013). In addition to the pro- and anti-regime disparity between Russia and Turkey in Syria, both nations have also fallen on either side of the Kurdish issue in the War. While Turkey's key focus in Syria has been to prevent the Kurds from strengthening themselves towards a future Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, Russia has built ties with the Kurds in order to pursue its balancing strategy (Morgan, 2019).

The key dynamic to take away from this litany of instances of clashing tactical and strategic approaches is that Russia and Turkey – aside from the freeze in their relations between November 2015-July 2016 following Turkey's downing of a Russian jet in Turkish airspace – have consistently managed to prevent such tension from causing a break in their relations (Mankoff, 2020). This is due to the structural pillars of Russia and Turkey's international relations; primarily their increasing respective alienation from Europe and the US and Moscow and Ankara's shared understanding that Russo-Turkish ties are therefore key to enable both nations to pursue their desired strategic independence from the West (Hill & Taşpınar, 2006).

Dual strategy: autonomy from the West

Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, both Russia and Turkey pushed to build closer relations with Europe. But following the lack of success of both nations' endeavours to this end, and the rise of authoritarian leaders in Putin and Erdogan, both nations' relations with Europe declined, largely as a result of the EU's criticism of the

declining liberties in Russian and Turkish society (Jozwiak, 2017); (BBC News, 2014); (Erkoyun, 2018). As a result, both Russia and Turkey assumed similar identities as outcasts of Europe, defined by a level of certain shared grievance (Rumer, 2019). This shared identity as outsiders of Europe seemingly manifested in moves by Moscow and Ankara to increase their bilateral ties in response. For instance, every time Russia was ostracised by the West in the past two decades, Ankara strengthened its ties with Moscow. Following Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, and the West's sanctioning of Russia, Turkey expanded its relations with Russia throughout 2009-10 by reaching landmark agreements regarding the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline, the visa free regime and the High-Level Cooperation Council. These agreements lead to Putin and Erdogan declaring that the bilateral relationship could now be titled a "strategic partnership" (Shlykov, 2019, p.86). A similar trend occurred following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, as Turkey did not join the West's sanctions regime against Russia, preferring instead to prioritise its economic interests and support the nascent Russia-Turkey Turk stream project (*Ibid* p.86).

For Turkey, this shared sentiment as an outsider of Europe was augmented by the realisation that its desired vision for the Levant differed fundamentally from the vision of the US (Stein, 2019). The US decision to pursue its anti-IS campaign by partnering with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – deemed by Turkey to be an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party, long-standing insurgents and secessionists in Turkey – pushed Turkey to draw closer again to Russia in order to prevent the possibility of the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish state proximal to Turkey (Mankoff, 2020); (Keating, 2019). Turkey's feeling of abandonment by the West was exacerbated, firstly, by Western leaders' silence during and following the 2016 coup d'état attempt in Turkey (Dundar, 2020) , and secondly by the US refusal to equip Turkey with the Patriot air defence system (Koc & Taley, 2019). In both cases, Russia filled the vacuum left by the West. On the night of the 2016 coup, Putin sent Erdogan a personal message of support, leading to a tight personal bond between the leaders that saw them meet twelve times in the following two and a half years (Dundar, 2020). Additionally, following the US refusal to equip Turkey with the Patriot system, Russia stepped in to provide Turkey with the rival S-400 system.

The completion of the S-400 procurement with the understanding of the inevitability it would cause a fracture in Turkey's relations with its NATO partners left this decision by Turkey as a clear indicator of Ankara's pivot towards Moscow (Stein, 2017);(Borshchevskaya, 2016);(Rumer, 2019). The symbolic value of the S-400 deal as a snub to the West was perhaps the most salient dynamic for both Russia and Turkey. For Russia, the image of the deal was that Moscow had pushed back against the years of crippling Brussels- and Washington-imposed sanctions and had lured one of their allies into a strategically significant agreement. For Turkey, the symbolism was that it represented Ankara's strategic independence from the West, as well as it being a reminder of Turkey's strategic importance (Rumer, 2019).

Asymmetric Economic interdependency

A second key factor enabling Russo-Turkish relations to endure despite their often respective competing interests has been the growing economic interdependency between both nations throughout the post-Cold War. During this period, Russia had become a crucial market for Turkish construction companies, both nations have undertaken mutual large-scale pipeline schemes, Russia has become a primary source of Turkish tourism income, and Erdogan and Putin announced in 2018 that they're planning on quadrupling two-way trade in the near term (Lelyveld, 2002);(Anadolu Agency, 2018); (Daily Sabah, 2019). Indeed, the value of this burgeoning economic relationship to both sides is highlighted by instances such as Russia committing to the major Blue Stream pipeline project with Turkey in 1998, just after Turkey seemingly deliberately did nothing to prevent Turkish Chechens providing support to the Chechen insurgency against Russia around that time (Offshore Technology, n.d.); (Brody, 1970); (Morris, 2001). The importance of the bilateral economic relationship was further revealed by Turkey's decision not to join the EU sanctions regime against Russia following its invasion of Crimea in 2014 (Hurriyet Daily News, 2017). This decision was despite Turkey's public disapproval of Russia's Crimea annexation (Unian, 2019), further evidencing Russia and Turkey's ability to preserve their relationship despite their differences.

Energy diplomacy has become one of the mainstays supporting the continuity of Russo-Turkish relations (Masumova, 2019, pp.29,35,39). Not only has Turkey become the second largest importer of Russian gas, but both nations are engaging in major joint energy projects like the construction of the TurkStream gas pipeline and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (Dilmaç, 2019, p.7). Aside from the huge economic value of these projects, both hold obvious immense strategic importance to Russia and Turkey. However, despite the mutual benefit of the bilateral economic relationship to both nations, the fact that the interdependency is asymmetric, to the favour of Russia, has been used by Moscow as political leverage in times of disagreement, again highlighting the complicated, often uneasy, nature of the overall relationship (Köstem, 2019, p.12). Following the Russian jet incident in November 2015, Russia's greater strength in the economic relationship by virtue of its structural advantages in key sectors enabled Moscow to unleash economic sanctions on Turkey. The impact of these sanctions, ranging from deadening the flow of Russian tourists to Turkey to restricting Turkish construction investment in Russia, revealed Turkey's reliance on Russian markets and resources, and therefore its greater relative vulnerability in the economic relationship, subsequently leading to Erdogan genuflecting to Moscow and seeking forgiveness for the incident (Köstem, 2019, pp.13-14).

Case studies: Syria and Libya

Table 1

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Key Russian and Turkish interests in Syria</th></tr>
<tr><th>Turkey</th><th>Russia</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Interests in direct relevance to each other</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Expelling the Kurdish YPG from the border region with Turkey. Turkey is determined to hold on to the territory it has captured in this border region in order to1) prevent extremist elements from spilling across the border, causing instability in Turkey, 2) undermine Kurdish aspirations for an autonomous or semi-autonomous Kurdish statelet in northern Syria, and 3) enable Turkey to conduct operations against the YPG east of the Euphrates River (Zaman, 2020). Turkey is signaling it is preparing to stay in this region until the issue is completely resolved, revealed through its burgeoning establishment of social and physical infrastructure, especially military (The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, 2020). Turkey's consolidation of a region in northern Syria which it controls is also aimed to enable the resettlement of the masses of Syrian refugees in Turkey who are becoming an increasing economic and political burden (Tastekin, 2020).</td><td>Gaining full control of the M4 highway (the key motorway that stretches from Syria's coast across northern Syria to the Iraqi border) in order to reboot the Syrian economy. The M4 runs through the areas of Idlib currently under Turkish influence.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Desires all land that has been captured from the YPG and Islamic State to be turned over to the Assad regime.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Pursuing Turkey's current policy of extending Ankara's influence across Turkey's region (al-Ubaidi, 2017).</td><td>Keep the Assad regime in power as it is Russia's closest ally in the region. Furthermore, Syria is the only remaining regional Russian client-state, enabling Moscow to project influence in the region (especially at the expense of the US) that it otherwise wouldn't be able to (Rumer, 2019); (Daher, 2018).</td></tr>
<tr><td>To increase Russian status as a major power on the</td></tr>
</table>

Key Russian and Turkish interests in Syria	
Turkey	**Russia**
Interests in direct relevance to each other	
	international stage. Russia's military intervention and its subsequent dictating of the War's status quo is advertising Russian power, regional diplomatic indispensability, and is consolidating Moscow's position as a central actor and partner in the region's politics (Daher, 2018); (Rumer, 2019).
	Exploiting the geopolitical opening to establish Russian influence caused by the instability in Syria occurring during the same era that the US is withdrawing from the region.
Interests not in direct relevance to each other	
	Consolidate Syria as the crucial staging zone for the projection of Russian military power across the region. Russia's intervention in Syria on the side of Assad has enabled Moscow to establish the permanent Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia (over which it now has sovereignty). The deployment of the S-400 air defence system to Hmeimim means Russia has established a strong anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) capability over the eastern Mediterranean and Levant, meaning other militaries must now coordinate their actions there with Russia (Reuters, 2018); (Mizokami, 2018);(Rumer, 2019). Additionally, Russia's intervention led to a deal to expand Russia's naval base at Tartous (Russia's only warm-water port) which thus magnifies Russia's operational capacity across the Mediterranean (TASS, 2016);(DW News, 2017); (Nordland, 2017).

Table 2

Key Russian and Turkish interests in Libya	
Turkey	**Russia**
Interests in direct relevance to each other	
Both Turkey and Russia are set to acquire energy and construction contracts to the value of billions of dollars in post-conflict Libya (Rumer, 2019); (Gumrukcu, 2020); (Raghavan, 2020). For Turkey especially, this centrality in the reconstruction will be a crucial injection of life into the flagging Turkish economy (Bilen, 2020).	
Ankara is pursuing discussions with the GNA to secure future ongoing use of the Misrata naval base and the al-Watiya air base (Coskun & Gumrukcu, 2020). This will provide Turkey with increased power projection across the Mediterranean and into Africa, as well as increasing Turkey's leverage over Arab and European interests in the area.	Being an indispensable player in the settlement to the conflict could see Russia be able to secure access to Libyan ports, or even a rumoured permanent base (Barmin, 2017). This would magnify Russian naval power projection capability across the Mediterranean, significantly challenging the current US domination of the area and enabling Russia to challenge the southern flank of NATO (Gorenburg, 2019).

Key Russian and Turkish interests in Libya	
Turkey	**Russia**
Interests in direct relevance to each other	
Turkish regional policy is to support the various branches and offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Libyan Justice and Construction Party falls under this Turkish policy of Islamist solidarity, especially as it was inspired by the incumbent Turkish Justice and Development Party.	Russia aims to limit the spread of Muslim Brotherhood influence in all territories, including Libya, due to fears such expanding influence may embolden or empower the Chechens, who share the same ideological tenets (Yakis, 2020).
Turkey's presence in Libya could give Ankara the ability to dictate the flow of migrants from North Africa into Europe. This would provide Turkey with additional leverage over European states in the same manner that Turkey holds now regarding the flow of Syrian refugees through Turkey into Europe.	Russian presence in Libya could enable Moscow influence over the flow of migrants into Europe, which the Kremlin could utilise as a tool to destabilise the EU (Mackinnon, 2020).
Turkey considers Libya, under GNA control, to be a primary candidate for a key long-term regional partner (Gumrukcu, 2020).	Russia's relationship with the LNAis viewed as an important avenue for Moscow to simultaneously strengthen cooperation with Cairo, who is a key backer of the LNA (Rumer, 2019).
Interests not in direct relevance to each other	
As part of an unofficial quid pro quo for Turkey intervening in Libya on behalf of the GNA, both actors signed an agreement that expanded Turkey's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the resource-rich eastern Mediterranean. In order to completely ensure the realisation of this deal, the GNA would need to have full control of Libya, not just the western region (Allahoum & Traina, 2020). This expanded Turkish EEZ, and the extensive oil and gas reserves it holds, would enable Ankara to pursue its desired path of lowering its energy imports which is causing structural problems for Turkey's economy(Sabah, 2020).	

Strategic competition: Competing on the ground interests over laid by desires for strategic alignment

As is evidenced from Table 1, Russia and Turkey hold numerous starkly competing interests in the Syrian conflict. Perhaps no greater manifestation of this was the confrontation in Idlib in February 2020. Here, Turkey carried out artillery and drone strikes against Syrian soldiers and air defence systems procured from Russia as well as downing two Syrian jets in retaliation for Russian planes bombing Turkish positions in Idlib's south and Russian sanctioning of Syrian attacks on Turkish troops in the province (Gall, 2020);(Roblin, 2020). While Russia and Turkey have managed to temporarily deescalate their standoff in Idlib (President of Russia Website, 2020), and Russia is seemingly tolerating Turkey's control of various parts of northern Syria for now, both issues remain unresolved and will become an obstacle to the Assad regime achieving its, and Russia's, goal,of re-establishing regime control over the entirety of Syria (Suchkov, 2020); (Haid, 2018); (Mankoff, 2020); (Salacanin, 2020). On the other hand, any continuance of the Assad regime's assault on Idlib to re-establish control would cause more masses of Syrian refugees to flood over the border into Turkey, an outcome that is politically a non-starter for Erdogan, illustrating why Ankara felt severely let down by Moscow when it supported Assad's assault on the province (Salacanin, 2020). As such, the Russia-Turkey Idlib issue,

indicative of many other issues in their bilateral relationship, has no apparent diplomatic solution, and is being left in an uneasy pause (Mankoff, 2020) to enable both sides to pursue other shared objectives while perhaps waiting for the wider status quo to change to enable a way out.

The continuance of Russo-Turkish cooperation in Syria despite, firstly, the damaged trust that Ankara holds towards Moscow following the Idlib conflict and Russia's past support for Syrian Kurdish groups during the War (Köse, 2020); (Salacanin, 2020); (UNIAN, 2018);(Grove & Kesling, 2016), and secondly, Moscow's suspicion of Ankara for failing to properly commit to upholding its promise to clear Idlib of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham extremists (Idiz, 2020), is symptomatic of the wider bilateral relationship. It highlights the transactional and compartmentalising (Köse, 2020);(Atlas, 2020). as opposed to trust- and values-based, nature of their relationship, with this nature enabling the subsequent ability to manage 'micro' tensions for the sake of macro objectives. Signs of this transactional dynamic became even clearer in June 2020 when the Turkish defence minister described some of the extremist actors, that Turkey has ostensibly been backing, as saboteurs of the cease-fire. This, as it followed Turkey's new policy of transporting and transferring significant numbers of extremists out of Idlib and into the Libya conflict zone, seemed to hint that Turkey is moving towards abandoning some of these previous extremist allies, who are key obstacles to Russia's objectives (Sayed, 2020). The logic here is that Turkey could remove the extremists from the zone in which they most hinder Russia,Idlib, into the zone in which Russia has less of a resolute stance but where Turkey could still use them for its benefit, Libya.

As the above illustrates, despite such competing interests Russia and Turkey have still cooperated on the macro level and shown a continuous desire to settle their disagreements in Syria due to their sharing of key macro objectives regarding the conflict (al-Ubaidi, 2017) as well as their mutual need of each other to pursue their strategic alignment distant from the West (Mankoff, 2020). These macro objectives largely pertain to, firstly, ensuring Syria's territorial integrity is as close to the status quo ante as possible, and secondly, bringing the conflict to as swift a conclusion as possible(Mankoff, 2020); (al-Ubaidi, 2017). This latter aim is not shared by the third leading member, Russia and Turkey being the other two, of the Astana Process that is aimed to reach a Syrian political settlement: Iran. While Russia and Turkey hold strong desires to prevent the further conflagration of instability and sectarian divides expanding from Syria into the surrounding region, Iran does not hold such reservations, as it will enable Tehran to thrive on the upheaval and pursue its Shia Crescent strategy, whereby it will consolidate a belt of influence stretching from Tehran across to Lebanon. When the fact that Iran's ongoing military presence in Syria after the conflict is likely to be a foregone conclusion due to Iran being the indispensable supplier of pro-Assadboots on the ground (Boms & Cohen, 2019); (Jones, 2019); (Rumer, 2019) it becomes clear how Ankara and Moscow will need each other to balance against the likely destabilising Iranian approach that represents a stark challenge to both nations' desired regional status quo of stability.

As is illustrated in Table 2, the case of the ongoing Libyan conflict again is a situation in which Russia and Turkey's specific conflict-related interests are more so disparate than they are aligned. However, while Turkey and Russia are backing opposite sides of the conflict, they have, like Syria, not let this get in the way of dialogue or their broader relationship (Duclos, 2020). Russian support of the General Haftar-ledLNA has primarily been in the form of supplying Russian mercenaries from the Wagner group: an ostensibly private, but in fact Kremlin-controlled group (Allahoum & Traina, 2020); (Reynolds, 2019). This modality of support enables Moscow to pursue its interests while still being under the umbrella of plausible deniability of Russian state involvement, and also while giving Russia the ability to easily disengage or change tact if necessary(Luhn & Nicholls, 2019); (Rumer, 2019). This tactic has enabled Russia to pursue on-the-ground interests and objectives that are conflicting with Turkey's, while still enabling Russia to work with Turkey to pursue shared macro or regional geostrategic objectives. In other words, what has been seen in Russia-Turkey cooperation in the Astana Process is again being seen in the Libya conflict management process: a macro-framework of cooperation enabling alignment of regional foreign policy interests that is largely able to transcend continued on-the-ground disagreements, or at least ensure they don't become fatal for the relationship.

Cooperating to increase their regional leadership at the expense of the West

This modus operandi just mentioned has been embodied in the development of peace talks over Libya, in which Moscow and Ankara are the key drivers pushing to bring the conflicting sides to the negotiating table (Allahoum & Traina, 2020). Russia and Turkey have established themselves as the key brokers and mediators for the LNA (the eastern Libyan faction) and the GNA (the western Libyan faction), enabling Moscow and Ankara to have unrivalled influence over the status quo of the resolution (Duran, 2020). For instance, Russia's central role in promoting a novel initiative to broach the GNA-LNA divide – that has so far been unbroachable due to Haftar's intransigence – that involves abandoning Russia's support of Haftar and instead promoting the Speaker of Parliament for the LNA-aligned House of Representatives to become the new representative of the eastern faction is opening the door to future western-eastern negotiation, of which Russia and Turkey will be likely kingmakers (Megerisi, 2020); (Walsh, 2020); (Mackinnon, 2020). Russia and Turkey's leadership of the Libyan situation here is giving both nations the initiative, and therefore potential leverage, over European governments, who don't wish to be sidelined in the Libyan resolution and are thus now increasingly pushing their cases in both Moscow and Ankara (Duran, 2020). If a resolution to the conflict is reached, and Russia and Turkey have been the lead instigators of the resolution process, then both nations will be able to establish spheres of influence in Libya (Allahoum & Traina, 2020); (Duclos, 2020). While Moscow and Ankara would naturally prefer to be the sole or dominant foreign influence, both seemingly realise that concluding the conflict in such a manner is incredibly unlikely, therefore leaving cooperation as necessary to accrue some influence over the regional order they otherwise would not have.

This previous point relates to the reality that, for much of Turkey and Russia's presence in the MENA region, both nations need each other's complicity to achieve their desired regional order (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2019, p.66); (Erşen, 2017, pp.94-95). For instance, Turkey, in the likely event that the conflict concludes through some form of unity government between east and west, will need Russia's support to ensure the eastern elements of the government permit Turkey to follow through on the potentially lucrative EEZ deal it signed with the GNA (Yakis, 2020); (Gurcan, 2020). Similarly, Russia's withdrawal of its Wagner mercenaries in Libya, thereby decreasing pressure on the Turkey-backed GNA forces, is being largely interpreted as Moscow's recognition that Haftar, even with Russian-backing, is a losing bet, and Russia's best hopes in Libya instead lie in being able to coordinate a path ahead with Turkey (Yakis, 2020); (Allahoum & Traina, 2020). There is a comparable status quo in Syria, because, while Russia holds more influence over the conflict than Turkey, Moscow still needs Ankara's complicity going forward if Russia's aims of enduring Syrian stability are to be reached (Köse, 2020). While Russia's intervention in Syria has clearly established Russia as a central geopolitical influence across the Middle East, its influence is still insufficient to dictate outcomes. This is due to the fact that, while Russia has positioned itself as an actor whose consent is crucial on regional issues, Russia is unable to drive solutions on the issues itself due to its insufficient power and economic clout (Rumer, 2019). Accordingly, it needs regional powers who are able to align, to some extent, with Russia's strategic aims. For this, it necessitates Turkey's mounting significance key role in this formula,accordingly.

Conclusion

As evidenced, the Russia-Turkey relationship is being largely driven by three central dynamics: firstly, the ability for both sides to overlook their competing interests in order to pursue strategically advantageous cooperation; secondly, the shared aim of both nations to use each other to increase their respective autonomy from the West; and thirdly, the economic interdependency that incentivises both sides to maintain cooperation, even if the asymmetry of this interdependence, favouring Russia, has the potential to be used as leverage.

When looking at the multitude of conflicting on-the-ground policies between both actors, especially across the MENA region, one would be justified in thinking Moscow and Ankara would have a heated rivalry, with both actors being unable to sit at the same table. However, the key structural pillars and macro objectives of both nations' foreign policy are more in sync than they are at odds. Therefore, while Russia and Turkey have numerous disagreements born

from the manner in which they pursue these pillars and objectives, both nations find it possible to establish some means to maintain an underlying cooperation, as both realise this alignment on the macro is more valuable than being intransigent on their conflicting on-the-ground interests.

It is important not to overstate the tightness, or endurance, of the partnership, however. While both nations have shown a consistent ability to overlook their disagreements at the 'micro' level to pursue macro cooperation, it seems like Russia-Turkey cooperation has reached somewhat of a zenith, as the number of available big-ticket cooperative mechanisms – be they flagship energy deals or peace process forums like Astana – nearing exhaustion (Shlykov, 2019, p.86). As such, the recent history of instances of broken trust in the bilateral relationship combined with the quantity of hot conflict zones in which both nations occupy opposing camps, means there is the genuine possibility thatan overstep or misstep could spark direct conflict, unable to be resolved or swept under the rug by virtue of higher-level interests in cooperation. But for now, taking all the above into consideration, perhaps the best pithy summary of the Russia-Turkey relationship is one of tactical competition but strategic alignment, driven less by trust and values and more by shared objectives.

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تصور التنافس الاستراتيجي السياسي بين روسيا وتركيا

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ملخص

ارتفعت العلاقة بين روسيا وتركيا لتصبح واحدة من الديناميكيات الرئيسية التي تحدد الجغرافيا السياسية المعاصرة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا. إن الطبيعة الحميمة في كثير من الأحيان لهذه العلاقة الثنائية، والتي تظهر في أكثر مناطق العالم حموية، تجعلها موضوع تحليل جديرًا ومهمًا. ومن هنا، يثير البحث مسألة ما هي الاتجاهات والديناميكيات المحركة الرئيسية التي تحدد العلاقات الثنائية ضمن مثل هذه المنافسة الاستراتيجية السياسية المعقدة؟ وعليه فإن الفرضية تقوم على أساس بأن هناك ثلاثة اتجاهات وديناميكيات دافعة رئيسية تحدد الثنائية تحدد الاتجاهات والديناميكيات الرئيسية الثلاثة للثنائي: أولًا، قدرة كلا الجانبين على التغاضي عن مصالحهما المتنافسة من أجل متابعة التعاون المفيد استراتيجيًا؛ ثانيًا، الهدف المشترك لكلا البلدين لاستخدام بعضهما بعض لزيادة استقلاليتهما عن الغرب؛ وثالثًا، الاعتماد الاقتصادي المتبادل الذي يحفز كلا الجانبين على الحفاظ على التعاون، حتى لو كان عدم التناسق في هذا الاعتماد المتبادل لصالح روسيا، لديه القدرة على استخدامه كرافعة. بعد فحص هذه الاتجاهات التاريخية، بعد ذلك سيتوسع التحليل في هذه الديناميكيات ويوضح كيف تظهر في العلاقة الثنائية الحالية من خلال استقراء دراستي الحالة الرئيسيتين للمشاركة الروسية التركية الحالية: الصراعين السوري والليبي.

الكلمات الدالة: التنافس الاستراتيجي، المنافسة السياسية، الشراكة الاستراتيجية، تعارض المصالح.

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