



Viewpoint from Yerevan

Photo: Gayane Novikova



Russian-Turkish Relations Through the Prism of Armenia's Security Concerns

Gayane Novikova

Recent developments in Eurasia and the Middle East require a re-evaluation of the security environment and the roles of each regional and sub-regional actor. Against the background of trends in global security politics, Russia and Turkey have become key actors in the Wider Black Sea and the South Caucasus regions, as well as in Syria. Their ambitions and competition for dominance in these areas possess a permanent character; their interaction can be described as a love-hate relationship, owing to their serious disagreements on the one hand and shared strategic interests and concerns on the other hand. Russian-Turkish bilateral relations are strongly defined by their relationships with global actors, such as the US, the EU, and NATO. Any problem with any of them forces Russia and Turkey to overcome, or to neglect, their disagreements with each other and to move gradually toward a strategic partnership, – meanwhile remaining competing regional powers with overlapping and/or conflicting interests.

The current stage of their “love affair” is based on several factors:

- Turkey and Russia share frustration regarding US policies in Eurasia and the Middle East;
- Both are under US and EU sanctions, and are viewed as outsiders in international politics;
- Their ambitious and, in the meantime, problematic supplier (Russia) – consumer (Turkey) partnership in the energy field;
- A growing and strengthening bilateral military cooperation (that very much annoys the US, as well as Turkey's NATO partners);
- The personal relationships of President Vladimir Putin with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, build on their similar leadership style; it includes pronounced elements of authoritarianism and strong criticism of the West for latter's “weakness” and inability to act properly in critical situations.

The main issues that can – under certain circumstances and beyond fluctuations in the economic sphere – complicate the Russian-Turkish relationship are: a) the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 (Turkey supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine and views Russia's action as illegitimate); b) the Syrian Civil War, in which both regional powers initially supported opposing forces and currently jointly control the northern part of Syria; and c) the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia and Turkey are reshaping and recalibrating their foreign policy priorities, and invading each other's the areas of strategic

interests. Meanwhile, their interaction directly influences the regional security environment.

Competing with Russia in the South Caucasus, Turkey has been exploiting all of the contradictions that exist between Russia and Azerbaijan, and Russia and Georgia. To a certain degree it has succeeded in increasing its influence in these two regional states, above all through several economic and communication projects. The case of Armenia lies in a different plane.

Historical Memories

Among the three South Caucasus states Armenia is the most sensitive and vulnerable to any shift in Russian-Turkish relations. This vulnerability is historically grounded. The beginning of the 20th century was marked by the Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire; it reached its peak in 1915. Since that time, Turks in general are viewed by Armenians (especially, in the Armenian Diaspora) as eternal enemies; conversely Russians are perceived as saviours and liberators.

However, another factor – territorial losses as a result of Russia's politics – contributes to a cautious approach to Russia's geopolitical ambitions and to its “brotherhood” with Turkey. Two episodes embodied in the historic memory of all Armenians delineate their approach to the Russian-Turkish relationship. In March 1918, the Bolshevik government signed the separate Brest-Litovsk Treaty with three Empires – the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman, as well as with Bulgaria – to withdraw Russia from WWI. Among other territorial concessions, Russia agreed to transfer historical Armenian land, the Kars province, to Turkey.

Territorial Losses

Ataturk's revolution and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey coincided chronologically with the Bolsheviks' desire to export the Russian revolution. An alliance with Turkey was considered by Soviet Russia as strategically important. As a result, in March 1921, Vladimir Lenin and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (leaders of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, respectively) signed the Treaty of Moscow (or “Treaty of Brotherhood”), which

defined the state borders between Turkey and three Transcaucasian Republics: Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. The historical Armenian province of Nakhichevan was placed under the jurisdiction of the Azerbaijani SSR, which was much more loyal to Bolshevik Russia than Armenia. Another territory – Nagorno-Karabakh – a few months later, in June 1921, was also transferred to Azerbaijan, this time in accordance with a decision made by the Caucasus Bureau of the Russian Communist Party. Both events were accompanied by ethnic clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis and both strongly contributed to Armenians' perception of Azerbaijanis as Turks.

At present, several issues in the Russian-Turkish relationship directly influence Armenia's strategic interests and security. The absence of bilateral Armenian-Turkish diplomatic relations and Russia's role as the main external security provider for Armenia aggravate and complicate the situation even more.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Without going into the details, it should be mentioned that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1991-1994 war in Nagorni Karabakh (between the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the former Autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, and the newly-independent Republic of Azerbaijan) revived Armenians' painful historic memories. During the Karabakh war, Turkey provided military and economic assistance to Azerbaijan and, very significantly, in 1993 unilaterally closed its border with Armenia. The Armenian-Azerbaijani border is also closed. Although Turkey's attempt to participate directly in the war was prevented by Russia, it continues to intervene actively into the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiation process under the aegis of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, the US, and France are its co-chairs), blaming it all for being ineffective in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkey supports Azerbaijan's efforts to change the format of the MG by including Turkey (and Germany) as its co-chair. Even more, Turkey demands, as a precondition for opening the border with Armenia a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict exclusively on the basis of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

If Turkey unambiguously takes sides and continues fully to support Azerbaijan despite existing bilateral disagreements, Russia could not allow itself to make a choice. Therefore, it has supported both parties to the conflict during the war; it has become a mediator and, ironically, it supplies offensive and defensive weapons to both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Against this background, the intensifying Russia-Turkey military cooperation poses some serious concerns in Armenia. The most recent developments are related to a deployment of the first part of the Rus-



Photo: Kremlin

Putin and Erdoğan giving a joint press conference following talks in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, 22 October 2019

sian S400 TRIUMF air defence system at Mürted Air Base in Ankara province. Rumours exist that the second batch of this missile defence system can be deployed close to the Armenian border. Upon request from the Turkish side its delivery has been postponed for a while. However, on 1 November 2019, Turkey acknowledged that it received an offer from Russia to buy its Sukhoy SU-35S fighter jets. (Armenia's arsenal includes the S300 missile defence system and Sukhoy SU-30SM jets.)

Gradually strengthening its positions in the South Caucasus, Turkey is also trying to balance the Russian military presence in this region (the 102nd Russian military base is stationed in Armenia) initiating preparations for building its own military base in Nakhichevan (Azerbaijan). In accordance with the Azerbaijani-Turkish Protocol, signed on 3 July 2016, the Azerbaijani government allocated "buildings and structures in Gizil Sherg military town, and one terminal building located in the airfield in Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev settlement" for the use of the Turkish Armed Forces. The existence of a Turkish military base in close proximity to the Armenian border will pose a security threat if an overt conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan breaks out.

The Syrian Challenge

Syria has become a new serious challenge in the Russian-Turkish interaction. However, it contains also an "Armenian" segment. On 8 February 2019, Armenia deployed its humanitarian mission in Syria. Transportation and security of 83 Armenian specialists were carried with Russia's assistance. Turkey's offensive operation, which started on 23 October 2019, in northern Syria against the Kurdish-led militia alliance, revived certain memories among Armenians; some sources called it "genocide." This operation has brought to the surface concerns regarding the lives and safety of several hundred Armenian families living in this area. Presumably upon the request of the Armenian government, Russia persuaded Turkey to exclude from their jointly-controlled zone the town of Qamishli, where from 420 to 450 ethnic Armenian families still live, according to various sources.

In sum, the fight against terrorism (remains of ISIS, in particular) constitutes the only issue where Russian, Turkish, and Armenian interests coincide. In all other cases, especially regarding any possible developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia should be very cautious in evaluating any shift in Russia-Turkey bilateral relations. The Armenian government is working on a new National Security Strategy that hopefully will address current dangerous trends. A draft was discussed in November 2019.

Destroyed Azeri IFVs in Nagorno-Karabakh



Photo: Nicholas Babayan