

Viewpoints
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Why Turkey Needs Russia

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The downturn in Turkish-Russian bilateral relations between November 2015 and June 2016 highlighted the importance of Russia for Turkey in several key areas, inspiring Erdogan's decision to apologize for the November 2015 shoot-down of a Russian jet. Erdogan's June 2016 apology led to the mending of ties over the past 14 months. Continuing economic and security pressures, along with tense relations between Turkey and Western governments, will encourage Erdogan to maintain positive ties with Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

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It has been over a year since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan apologized to Russia for the Turkish shoot down of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015. Erdogan's decision to apologize was driven by economic, security, and foreign policy issues, and those same issues will keep pushing bilateral ties forward. During the more than six month downturn in relations, Erdogan was forced to concede that Turkey needs Russia for key economic ties, the Turkish military's ability to respond to perceived security threats in Syria, and as a counterweight to the U.S. and European governments. As Turkey's relations with western allies remain strained and the Syria crisis continues, Ankara will seek to avoid damaging ties with Moscow again. Erdogan will work to compartmentalize differences, as Turkey and Russia have a history of doing, to keep key interests on track.

Economics plays a leading role in Ankara's interest in avoiding a return of tensions with Moscow as Russia is important to the Turkish economy. Turkey's economy struggled in 2016 and it remains vulnerable due to double digit inflation, high unemployment, and a rising current account deficit.ⁱ Its economic troubles in 2016, especially in the tourism, agriculture, and construction industries, were in part linked to Russia. The tourism industry was hard hit when Moscow suspended visa-free travel with Turkey, stopped charter flights to Turkey, prohibited tour operators from selling Turkish vacation packages, and prohibited Turkish tourism firms in Russia. Russians represented ten percent of foreign visitors to Turkey in 2015 and this loss compounded the ongoing decline in tourism tied to Turkish security and stability issues. Russian tourist numbers have started to rebound in 2017 and will remain crucial for the industry as the decline in European visitors continues.ⁱⁱ

Turkey's agricultural and construction industries also felt the pinch from the downturn in relations. In the first ten months of 2015, Turkey exported over \$790 million dollars in food and agricultural products to Russia.ⁱⁱⁱ On 30 November 2015, Moscow banned the import of a number of fruits and vegetables from Turkey, which meant a major loss for Turkish farmers. In another economic blow, Moscow in December 2015 restricted Turkish companies from operating in Russia, prohibiting Turkish construction firms from working there. Following Erdogan's June 2016 apology letter, Moscow slowly lifted sanctions against Turkish businesses and food imports, though tomato imports remain a problem. Russia's continued ban on Turkish tomatoes might be a sign to Ankara that not everything is yet forgiven and forgotten. Turkish President Erdogan and other senior officials worked diligently to get all the other restrictions removed and will seek to prevent their resumption.

Energy ventures, but not imports, also faced ramifications from the shoot down incident. At the end of 2015, Russia suspended a deal to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant and plans for the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline project.^{iv} As relations have been restored over the past year, these projects have been reinstated and construction of the nuclear plant is expected to begin in 2018.^v Turkey's need for additional energy sources and its desire to develop the country into an energy hub make both of these projects priorities for keeping relations on track. Meanwhile, Turkey's import of natural gas from Russia was not affected by the tensions and Russia remained Turkey's largest gas supplier in 2015 and 2016.

Turkish security concerns also played a major role in Ankara's rapprochement with Moscow. The Turkish Government had grown increasingly frustrated with the United States and the West's Syria policy. The United States' unwillingness to directly confront Syrian regime forces, its focus on countering ISIS, and western collaboration with the People's Protection Units (YPG) through the Syrian Defense Forces aggravated Erdogan. Ankara views the YPG and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) as off-shoots of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In 2016, as the PYD expanded control along the Turkish-Syrian border and the United States considered arming the YPG, the Turkish government grew alarmed, as it did not want to see the creation of an autonomous Syrian Kurdish region on its border nor a strengthened YPG or PKK.^{vi} Erdogan knew that if he wanted to take action to counter PYD expansion in Syria he would need to work with Moscow.

Turkey's openness to working with Russia on the Syria crisis revealed a shift in Turkish priorities. Since the fall of 2011, Turkey and Russia had been on opposite sides of the Syria crisis; Ankara was focused on Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's ouster while Moscow supported the regime. Turkey's fear over the growing strength of the PYD began to outweigh its aversion to the Asad regime and necessitated better cooperation between Ankara and Moscow. In August 2016, Turkey launched the Euphrates Shield offensive, supporting Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces against ISIS, and succeeded in both taking back the town of Jarabulus and preventing Kurdish forces from gaining additional territory. Turkish plans for this offensive probably encouraged the restoration of Turkey's bilateral ties with Russia. Ankara likely sought out Moscow's acceptance of the military operation to avoid a confrontation with Russian and Syrian regime forces. Turkey also began to work closely with Russia to negotiate a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Ankara worked with Moscow to facilitate a ceasefire in Aleppo and participated in Russian led peace talks in Astana. Russia likely welcomed Turkey's new focus as it forced Ankara to be more flexible on Asad's status in future Syrian governments and offered an opportunity for greater Russian influence over Turkey.

Ankara's security concerns over the potential for an autonomous Syrian Kurdish controlled region along the Turkish border and the strengthening of PKK forces motivates Turkey to work with Moscow, as well as Washington, on the Syria crisis. While unable to convince either Russia or the United States to adopt Turkey's perspective on the YPG and PYD, the Turkish government will maintain dialogue with both in an attempt to protect its agenda. Erdogan sees Russia as a dominant force in the crisis and will continue to work with Moscow in the hope of influencing the future of Syria. Ankara will push to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria and limit the power and influence of Syrian Kurds. Erdogan has repeatedly stated that Turkey will never allow the establishment of a Syrian Kurdish state in northern Syria.^{vii} Turkey is possibly working on a deal with Russia and Iran on Kurdish-controlled Afrin and the city of Idlib, with Ankara working to get groups it backs to retreat from Idlib in exchange for Turkey having more leeway to take action against YPG forces in the Afrin region.^{viii}

Beyond the Syria issue, Erdogan also sees Russia as a useful counterweight to relations with the West. While the U.S. and European governments have increasingly voiced concerns over the Turkish government's diminishing respect for human rights and the rule of law over the past four years, Turkey has counted on Russia to avoid offering judgement on Turkish domestic policies. Following the July 2016 failed coup attempt, Russian President Vladimir Putin extended his support to Erdogan and has not questioned the Turkish government's crackdown

on journalists and political opponents. As Erdogan has cultivated and improved ties with Putin, he has taken a more combative and confrontational approach with Europe. Erdogan likely wants to signal to Europeans that Turkey has other allies it can turn to when western partners are unsupportive. Turkey's talk of buying the Russian S-400 air defense system is driven in part by Ankara's desire to curry favor with Moscow, as well as to show NATO members that Turkey is an independent actor willing to make decisions that run counter to what the alliance would expect from members.

Rapprochement has led to major improvements in Turkish-Russian ties, but irritants remain. Both leaders will likely maintain a level of distrust, especially on issues tied to Syria. Russia's refusal to label the PYD or the PKK as terrorist organizations while pressing for the inclusion of PYD representatives at Syrian peace talks will play into tensions.^{ix} Senior Turkish officials have repeatedly objected to the inclusion of the PYD in the negotiations. However, Erdogan's irritation over Washington's continued support to the YPG, his anger at European governments' attitudes on Turkey, and Russia's key role in the Syria crisis will push Ankara to preserve and potentially expand positive ties with Moscow.

The author is an employee of the United States Government, which is funding her fellowship at the Wilson Center. All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis in this work are those of the author and do not reflect an official position or views of the Government or of the Wilson Center.

ⁱ Mustafa Sonmez, "The Turkish Economy's Mysterious Rebound," 23 June 2017, Al-Monitor.

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/turkey-economy-surprise-rebound.html>

ⁱⁱ IMF News. "Turkey's Economy Hit By Declining Tourism," 23 February 2017.

<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/02/21/NA230217Turkeys-Economy-Hit-By-Declining-Tourism>

ⁱⁱⁱ Hurriyet Daily News, "Russian risk pressing Turkey's economy," 7 December 2015.

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/russian-risk-pressing-turkeys-economy-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=92143&NewsCatID=344>

^{iv} Reuters, "Factbox: Impact of Russian sanctions on trade ties with Turkey," 27 July 2016.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-ties-fac-idUSKCN0ZD27M>

^v Hurriyet Daily News, "Turkey, Russia strike strategic Turkish Stream gas pipeline deal," 10 October 2016. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-russia-strike-strategic-turkish-stream-gas-pipeline-deal.aspx?pageID=238&nID=104822&NewsCatID=348>

^{vi} Amberin Zaman, "Turkey in uproar over McGurk," 1 August 2017, Al-Monitor. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/mcgurk-syrian-kurds-turkey.html>

^{vii} Time Arango and Eric Schmitt, "Turkey Uneasy as U.S. Support of Syrian Kurds Grows," 29 June 2015. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/30/world/middleeast/turkey-uneasy-as-us-support-of-syrian-kurds-grows.html>

^{viii} Semih Idiz, "Turkey hints at new operation in Syria," 8 August 2017, Al-Monitor. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/turkey-syria-is-ankara-preparing-for-a-new-operation.html>

^{ix} Hurriyet Daily News, "After the US, Russia also pressing Turkey on the YPG," August 9, 2017. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/after-the-us-russia-also-pressing-turkey-on-the-ypg.aspx?pageID=238&NID=116505&NewsCatID=409>

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