Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus

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Principal Findings

What's new? After a rupture in 2015, when Turkish fighter jets downed a Russian warplane over Syria, Russia and Turkey have repaired relations. But a Turkish pivot east does not appear imminent. Ankara and Moscow still compete for influence, and their interests still collide, in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus.

Why does it matter? Anxious at Russia's increased naval capability and power projection south from Crimea, Turkey has sought a greater role for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the Black Sea. Russia and Turkey back opposing sides of the Armenia-Azerbaijan confrontation over the disputed territory Nagorno-Karabakh, potentially adding an extra layer of risk to that conflict.

What should be done? Moscow and Ankara are unlikely to resolve the region's conflicts. But by taking steps to prevent accidental clashes in the Black Sea, improve the plight of Crimean Tatars and encourage Armenia-Azerbaijan dialogue, they could use their broader rapprochement to minimise risks around regional hotspots.

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Executive Summary

Russia and Turkey have repaired relations that nearly collapsed after Turkish fighter jets shot down a Russian Su-24 warplane near the Syria-Turkey border in late 2015. Russia has since lifted most of the sanctions it had imposed on Turkey. The two countries coordinate in Syria, have relaunched energy projects and agreed to Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missiles. But Russia-Turkey rivalry is still all too evident in regions sandwiched between the two countries – the Black Sea and South Caucasus. Moscow's military build-up in Crimea and power projection across the Black Sea has increased Ankara's reliance on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in that region even as Turkey's relations with Western powers tank. Russia-Turkey competition in the Caucasus adds an extra layer of risk to hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan. That Moscow and Ankara would work to resolve regional conflicts thus appears unlikely. Nonetheless, their recent rapprochement could serve to calm flashpoints, or at least mitigate the risk of flare-ups.

Since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's June 2016 public apology for the Su-24 downing, he and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, have met more than ten times. Their improved ties owe much to Erdoğan's need for Russian backing in Syria, including in containing the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – a militant group that Turkey, the European Union and the United States list as a terrorist organisation, and which has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey.

Warmer relations also owe to Erdoğan's apparent gratitude for Putin's support during the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey and the two countries' economic ties, which provided strong incentives for both to seek an end to Russian sanctions. They reflect, too, the Turkish leadership's frayed relations with the West, particularly its anger at the U.S. for supporting the YPG in Syria and refusing to extradite Fethullah Gülen, the Turkish cleric Ankara blames for the failed putsch. Russia-Turkey rapprochement has reached such peaks as to prompt Western concern about Turkey's commitment to NATO and what some officials perceive as Ankara's pivot east.

Such fears are not groundless. But they overlook the continued struggle for influence between Moscow and Ankara in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. In the former, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea has enabled it to expand its naval capability, project power south and shift the strategic balance in its favour. The annexation has also raised Ankara's concerns about the plight of the Crimean Tatars, who enjoy historically close ties to Turkey. Turkey has responded with its own military build-up. It has encouraged NATO to deploy into the Black Sea, reversing a decades-old policy of keeping the alliance out. Ankara's strained links with Western capitals notwithstanding, in the Black Sea at least, NATO is critical to Turkey's strategic calculations.

In the South Caucasus, too, Russian and Turkish interests collide. Russia and Turkey back opposing sides of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh: Moscow has a defence pact with Yerevan (though in practice arms both sides); Ankara has a strategic partnership and mutual support agreement with Baku. That conflict's flare-up, in April 2016, coincided with the fallout from the Su-24 crisis and provoked a harsh exchange of words between Moscow and Ankara, though both chose not to

escalate and Moscow eventually brokered a ceasefire. Indeed, Turkey has been cautious to test Russia only so far in a region where Moscow seeks to be the preeminent power.

Yet any escalation over Nagorno-Karabakh will always carry some risk of sucking in the two regional heavyweights. Their competition adds to the region's militarisation. At the same time, Moscow's expanded military footprint in Syria, Armenia, Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and on the Crimean peninsula fuels Turkish fears of encirclement.

While Russia and Turkey have different, often conflicting, objectives in the region, their rapprochement might open an opportunity for the two countries to prevent flare-ups in their shared neighbourhood:

- Ankara might use its ties to both NATO and Russia to mitigate the risk of incidents in the Black Sea, which has increased as both Russia and NATO expand their presence and conduct military exercises, with Russian jets "buzzing" or intercepting NATO planes. Dialogue at all levels is essential, and Turkey might facilitate additional channels of communication.
- Prospects for resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are slim, but Moscow and Ankara could work to prevent another outburst, emphasise to both sides the long-term benefits of peace in a region crucial for transit between Asia and Europe and the Middle East and Russia, and prompt both to offer mutual concessions.
- Ankara should use its improved relations with Moscow to engage the Russian leadership on the status and rights of the Crimean Tatars.

Russia-Turkey rapprochement is good news for the Turkish economy and for citizens of both nations who suffered the consequences of Moscow's sanctions after the Su-24 crisis. Overall, too, it benefits the countries of the Black Sea and the South Caucasus regions that otherwise risked getting caught in the crossfire. Yet despite improved ties, the two countries' aims and interests still conflict across those regions' main trigger points. While improved Russia-Turkey ties in themselves will not resolve often protracted conflicts, Moscow and Ankara could harness their imperfect partnership to reduce the danger of flare-ups.

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I. Introduction

Recent Russia-Turkey relations have been full of twists and turns. A proxy conflict in Syria became a frontal clash in November 2015 when a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian Su-24 ground attack aircraft. In response, Moscow slapped harsh sanctions on Turkey. Then, in June 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan apologised and called for the two countries to patch things up.[1] Russian President Vladimir Putin's support for Erdoğan in the aftermath of the July 2016 coup attempt paved the way for rapprochement.

Since then, the two presidents have met repeatedly. After a May 2017 meeting in Sochi, the Russian resort town on the Black Sea, Putin stated, "the period of restoration in Russian-Turkish relations is now over; we are back to normal partnership".[2] Ankara and Moscow have cooperated in Syria and pursued multibillion-dollar energy projects, and Turkey has agreed to buy Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).[3] In August 2017, Turkish Minister of Economy Nihat Zeybekçi called for a trade deal with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).[4] Ankara's relations with Western allies, on the other hand, have deteriorated. Its pending purchase of Russian arms has fuelled speculation about Turkey's commitment to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).[5]

Can Russia and Turkey harness their improved ties to enhance regional stability, without jeopardising the interests of others? In 2016, when the downing of the Su-24 and Russia-Turkey relations hitting rock bottom coincided with a flare-up of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow and Ankara avoided a broader escalation over the disputed enclave.[6] In other areas, too, cooperation perhaps could contribute to greater stability.

This report examines evolving Turkey-Russia relations. It looks beyond Syria, which dominates international coverage, focusing instead on the Black Sea and the Caucasus, the turf where Moscow's and Ankara's interests have traditionally clashed. It draws on discussions with experts and officials from Russia, Turkey, NATO, the European Union and its member states, Ukraine and the South Caucasus.

[1] Andrew Roth and Erin Cunningham, "Turkish president apologizes for downing of Russian warplane last year", *The Washington Post*, 27 June 2016.
[2] Georgii Makarenko, Anzhelinka Basisini and Polina Khimshiashvili, "О чем довоговрились Путин и Эрдоган" ["What Putin and Erdoğan agreed on"], RBC, 10 March 2017.
[3] See section II.C below.
[4] "Economy minister: Turkey eyes Eurasian Customs Union", *Daily Sabah*, 18 August 2017.
[5] "Turkey's $2bn arms deal with Russia faces hurdles, and possible sanctions", *The Economist*, 30 November 2017.
[6] The April 2016 escalation saw the deadliest fighting between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces since the 1994 ceasefire. See Crisis Group Europe Reports N°239, *Nagorno-Karabakh: New Opening or More Peril?*, 4 July 2016; and N°244, *Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds*, 1 June 2017.

II. Warming Russia-Turkey Relations

The Russia-Turkey rapprochement largely reflects the two states' evolving strategic calculations away from the Black Sea and South Caucasus. In Syria, Ankara's determination to contain the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish armed group with close operational ties to Kurdish insurgents in Turkey, requires it to cooperate with Moscow. Turkish frustration at Western powers – fed by U.S. backing for the YPG; the lacklustre U.S. support for Erdoğan, from his loyalists' perspective, during the 2016 coup attempt; the U.S.'s refusal to hand over Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric based in the U.S. whom Ankara accuses of directing the failed putsch; and Western criticism of Erdoğan's domestic policies – also nudges Ankara toward Moscow. Economic interdependence, illustrated by the heavy toll of Russian sanctions on Turkey in 2015-2016, provides further impetus for closer Moscow-Ankara ties.

A. *Syria*

The evolving engagement of Moscow and Ankara in Syria's war has played an important part in reframing their relationship. For years, the conflict pitted them against one another. Erdoğan backed rebels aiming to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Putin, having long offered political support to Assad, in September 2015 deployed Russian forces into Syria to prop him up militarily. Russian air power helped regime forces reverse the course of the war and reconquer much of the country from rebels aligned with Ankara.[7] Turkey's downing of the Russian plane in November that year marked a low point in Turkey-Russia relations.

Meanwhile, the YPG – the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – went from strength to strength. It benefited in particular from U.S. support, motivated by the U.S.'s fight against the self-styled Islamic State (ISIS); the YPG formed the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces, which spearheaded U.S.-backed counter-ISIS operations in Syria. The YPG, along with its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), has established de facto autonomy over swathes of northern Syria along the Turkish border, a development Ankara sees as a major threat to its national security.[8] Moscow also has cooperated tactically with the YPG. Russian bombing raids in February 2016, for example, allowed the YPG to capture the town of Tel Rifaat in the Aleppo governorate from Ahrar al-Sham, a militia supported by Turkey.

Mounting Turkish concern about the YPG's gains – combined with Erdoğan's gradual if grudging acceptance that the Assad regime would survive the war – led to growing cooperation between Moscow and Ankara. Ankara appears to have sought

[7] On subsequent developments in the Syrian conflict, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°163, *New Approach in Southern Syria*, 2 September 2015; N°175, *Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum*, 14 March 2017; N°182, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria*, 7 February 2018; and N°187, *Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria*, 21 June 2018; as well as Crisis Group Middle East Briefings N°47, *Russia's Choice in Syria*, 30 March 2016; N°49, *Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, 8 April 2016; N°53, *Fighting ISIS: The Road to and Beyond Raqqa*, 28 April 2017; and N°56, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, 9 February 2018.

[8] Crisis Group Middle East Report N°176, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, 4 May 2017.

Moscow's endorsement ahead of Operation Euphrates Shield (Fırat Kalkanı), an incursion into northern Syria by Turkish forces, in August 2016, shortly after Erdoğan's apology for the Russian jet incident and his first meeting with Putin that marked the start of the thaw in their relations.[9] Euphrates Shield allowed Turkey, together with allied Syrian opposition factions, to secure an enclave in northern Syria and divide Kurdish-controlled territory under the pretext of expelling ISIS from the area. Russia's green light for the operation may have influenced Turkey's decision not to intervene on behalf of rebels in December 2016 when regime forces, aided by Russian air power, recaptured eastern Aleppo.[10]

Erdoğan's principal goals in Syria now are to secure a stake in the country's future, to weaken the YPG to the extent possible and to prevent the establishment of a YPG/PYD-run Kurdish corridor to the Mediterranean along the Turkish border. For now, the best way to achieve these aims is to work with Putin. Russia, for its part, has used Turkey as a bridge to the anti-Assad opposition in its quest to consolidate Assad's military gains through de-escalation agreements with rebels and, eventually, to pave the way for a political solution to the war that would leave the regime in place but offer some concessions to its armed opponents.

The two countries, alongside Iran, have co-sponsored de-escalation talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana, which have already gone through six rounds. Starting in October 2017, they also coordinated the deployment of Turkish monitors on the edges of the Idlib province, a designated "de-escalation zone".[11] Most recently, Ankara appears to have arrived at some form of understanding with Moscow ahead of Olive Branch, its ongoing offensive that has ousted the YPG from much of the north-western enclave of Afrin, in which Russian military monitors were stationed.[12]

B. *United against the West*

Political upheaval in Turkey over the past year and a half has affected Ankara's relations with both Moscow and the West. Though Erdoğan had sought improved ties with the Kremlin well before the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, Putin's strong backing for the Turkish president during the attempt accelerated that process. Russian and Turkish observers even believe that Erdoğan was tipped off by the Kremlin beforehand.[13] A prominent Russian foreign affairs expert claims:

> The writing was on the wall. It is still a big question mark whether the U.S. did not know, and, if it did not, why not. In any event, Putin was being a good sport and gave Erdoğan a warning. Putin has always been against regime change – and Erdoğan appreciated this.[14]

[9] Crisis Group interview, Russian political scientist with Kremlin ties, Moscow, January 2018.
[10] Crisis Group Briefing N°47, *Russia's Choice in Syria*, 30 March 2016.
[11] Crisis Group Briefing, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit.; Sevil Erkuş, "Turkey deploys troops in northern Idlib", Hürriyet Daily News, 13 October 2017.
[12] Noah Bonsey, "No Winners in Turkey's New Offensive into Syria", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 January 2018.
[13] The story originated in Arab media and with Iran's Fars news agency. Oleg Yegorov, "Russian intelligence saved Erdogan from overthrow – Media reports", *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 21 July 2016.
[14] Crisis Group interview, Russian foreign policy expert, October 2017.

U.S. sources strongly deny the allegations, but Turkish officials nevertheless regularly voice the conviction that the U.S. was aware of the coup attempt before it occurred.[15] They blame Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric self-exiled in the U.S. since 1999, of directing the plot and executing it through his agents, who had infiltrated the Turkish military. They cite the U.S.'s post-coup refusal to extradite Gülen, who has been stripped of Turkish citizenship, as proof of collusion.[16]

Russian officials, unlike their U.S. and European counterparts, have not criticised Ankara for its wide-ranging purges in the wake of the failed coup, its crackdowns on critics and the transfer of sweeping new powers to the president through an April 2017 constitutional referendum. Ankara's grievances against the West – its anger at the U.S.'s refusal to hand over Gülen, its perception that the White House did not support Erdoğan during the coup and its annoyance at broader Western criticism at Turkey's human rights and democracy records, combined with its fury at U.S. support for the YPG in Syria – has offered Russia an opening to deepen ties to Ankara.

C. *The S-400 Deal*

Ankara also has stepped up defence cooperation with Moscow. On 29 December 2017, Turkey's Undersecretariat for Defence Industries announced that it had signed a contract with the Russian state-owned arms conglomerate Rostec for the supply of two batteries of S-400 SAMs.[17]

The S-400 transfer, scheduled for 2020, has raised eyebrows in Washington and European capitals, fuelling fears that Ankara is "pivoting" toward Moscow.[18] Top U.S. officials, such as General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, express open concern.[19] The Russian-made missiles cannot be integrated into NATO's defence infrastructure. The deal might fall under the remit of U.S. sanctions targeting parts of Russia's economy – and thus exposes Turkey to trade penalties as well.[20] The U.S. Congress has taken steps that might eventually result in Ankara being denied deliveries of advanced F-35 jets.[21]

[15] Crisis Group interviews, former high-level U.S. official, Ankara, June 2017; U.S. officials, Washington, October 2017. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, summer-autumn 2017.
[16] "Turkey should be concerned about S-400 sanctions risk – analyst", *Ahval News*, 15 December 2017.
[17] "Turkey, Russia sign deal on supply of S-400 missiles", Reuters, 29 December 2017. On 11 September 2017, Erdoğan had already declared that Turkey had made a down payment and the $2.5 billion purchase was a "done deal". Ali Ünal, "Erdoğan: S-400 is a done deal, down payment already transferred to Moscow", *Daily Sabah*, 11 September 2017. Several weeks afterward, he boasted that Turkey was interested in procuring the S-500, the next generation of anti-aircraft missile after the S-400. "Erdoğan says Turkey also interested in Russian S-500 missile system", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 13 October 2017.
[18] "The purchase of S-400s is favoured by 'Eurasianist' segments within the military who favour full reorientation to Moscow". Crisis Group interview, Turkish security expert, July 2017. See also Metin Gürcan, "The rise of the Eurasianist vision in Turkey", *Al-Monitor*, 17 May 2017.
[19] Remarks at the Aspen Security Forum. "U.S. chief of staff: Ankara, Moscow missile deal a concern", *Daily Sabah*, 25 July 2017. See also Cansu Çamlibel, "One week and 3.5 contention points with Washington", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 29 July 2017.
[20] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, October 2017 and December 2017. "Turkey could face US sanctions for S400 purchase", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 1 February 2018.
[21] Bryant Harris, "Congress splits over F-35 sale to Turkey", *Al-Monitor*, 12 June 2018.

Turkey argues that next-door Greece (also a NATO member) already has S-300s, an earlier generation of the Russian air defence system. But the circumstances around that transfer were different. Originally acquired by Cyprus, those missiles ended up on the Greek island of Crete after Turkey threatened military action against Cyprus in 1998.[22] In other words, Greece took the S-300s as a concession to Turkey, whose planes would have been in range of the projectiles had they been deployed in southern Cyprus.[23]

Rostec chief Sergei Chemezov said in February that deliveries are scheduled to start in 2019, while there are reports of a second deal in the works.[24] For a time, Ankara was pushing hard for technology transfer as part of the bargain but later backtracked on those demands.[25] Russian officials also view warily the prospect of handing over advanced know-how that might allow the purchasing state, particularly a NATO member, to "localise" production. According to Maxim Suchkov of the Valdai Club, there is unease among high-ranking officials in Moscow, though they accept the sale as "a political decision already taken".[26]

D. *Economic Drivers*

Economic interdependence also plays a role in the rapprochement. Russia views Turkey, its second most important natural gas market, as a conduit for gas deliveries to the European Union (EU). Turkey offers an alternative to Ukraine once the latter's transit contract with Russian state-controlled gas company Gazprom expires in 2019. Moreover, TurkStream, a pipeline running under the Black Sea en route to Turkey and the EU, was restarted during Putin's visit to Istanbul in September 2016.[27] Turkey's first nuclear power station, at Akkuyu, will position Russia's state corporation Rosatom, which is building the plant, as a pivotal player in the electricity market starting in the mid-2020s.[28] The S-400 missile deal could turn the Turkish armed forces into a major customer of the Russian arms industry.[29]

[22] Cyprus is the only EU member state that is neither a member of NATO nor a member of its Partnership for Peace program.

[23] Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven, 2017), chapter 5.

[24] "Q&A: Sanctioned Putin ally holds out hope that Trump will boost Russia ties", *The Washington Post,* 10 February 2018.

[25] Turkey is unhappy about the rival offers submitted by the U.S. and France/Italy for Patriot PAC-3 and SAMP/T Aster-30 missiles, respectively, as they do not include technology transfer. To pressure its NATO allies, Turkey explored the option of purchasing air defence systems from China but a deal signed in 2013 fell apart.

[26] Tweet by Maxim Suchkov, @MSuchkov_ALM, editor of *Al-Monitor*'s Russia-Middle East coverage, 11:42am, 16 September 2017. Suchkov is a non-resident expert at the Russian International Affairs Council and at the Valdai International Discussion Club.

[27] In April, the first leg of TurkStream, with a capacity of 15.75 billion cubic metres, reached Turkey's shore. According to plans, natural gas deliveries are to start in December 2019. The construction of a second leg, bound for the EU, depends on the resolution of outstanding legal disputes between Gazprom and the European Commission. Dimitar Bechev, "The Russia-Turkey gas saga continues", *Ahval News,* 1 June 2018.

[28] The first reactor should come online in 2023, the centenary of the Turkish Republic. Putin and Erdoğan oversaw the plant's ground-breaking ceremony on 3 April 2018.

[29] See Section II.C above.

The impact on Turkey of Russian sanctions imposed in 2015 after the Su-24 downing illustrate how dependent Turkey is on exports to Russia. Turkish trade with Russia plummeted by nearly a third from $23.9 billion in 2015 to $16.8 billion in 2016.[30] The slump was even more dramatic in sectors such as tourism and construction, given that Russian gas exports, accounting for the bulk of overall commerce, continued without restrictions. Turkey lost at least $10 billion, amounting to over 1 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP). Clearly, the mutually beneficial economic ties between the two countries did not shield them from the crisis provoked by the downing of the Russian jet. But those ties did provide strong incentives – together with the evolving situation in Syria and Turkey's worsening relationship with the West – for Russia and Turkey to reverse the downturn in their relations.

Indeed, as relations warmed, Russia lifted most sanctions in May 2017. Some limits on Turkish agricultural exports to Russia are still in place. Visa restrictions remain a hindrance for Turkish investors.[31] Moreover, Moscow still sometimes twists Ankara's arm: in August 2016, for example, it forced Turkey to grant Rosatom $3 billion in tax breaks.[32] For its part, Turkey restricts the import of Russian wheat, leveraging its position as the second most significant market for the latter.[33] Overall, however, trade between the two countries is booming. In 2017, gas deliveries to Turkey from Russia hit an all-time high, reaching 29 billion cubic metres.[34]

[30] Turkish exports to Russia shrank by 40 per cent while Russia saw a decrease of only 19 per cent. Data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (www.turkstat.gov.tr).

[31] Russia's Ministry of Agriculture removed restrictions on the import of Turkish tomatoes as late as 1 May 2018. The restrictions spurred short-lived retaliatory measures by Ankara in March-May 2017, which were repealed under direct pressure from Putin. In September 2017, Russia finally licenced some Turkish firms to send in tomatoes through May 2018. "Up to 300,000 tons of Turkish tomatoes to be granted export visa by Russia", *Daily Sabah,* 11 September 2017.

[32] "JSC Akkuyu nuclear designated strategic investor in Turkey", press release, Rosatom, 2 April 2018.

[33] Çağan Koç and Anatoly Medetsky, "Russia faces hurdles on food sales to key wheat customer Turkey", Bloomberg, 9 October 2017.

[34] "Russia's Gazprom sets annual Europe, Turkey annual gas export record at 193.9 bcm", Platts, 3 January 2017.

III. The Impact of the War in Ukraine

The Ukraine crisis has also tested Russia-Turkey relations, though not as severely as the early years of the Syrian war. The crisis has had strategic implications for both countries, given Russia's increased military presence in Crimea and Turkey's support of Crimea's Tatar minority, which opposed Russia's annexation of the peninsula in 2014.

In early 2014, massive anti-government demonstrations, known as the Maidan revolution, and clashes between protesters and security forces in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, prompted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, a Kremlin ally, to flee the country.[35] Moscow labelled Yanukovych's ouster a coup, and shortly afterward annexed Crimea, where a referendum on whether to join Russia was held on 16 March 2014. Boycotted by many pro-Kyiv voters, the referendum passed with overwhelming support. Only a handful of governments – Turkey was not among them – recognise that vote.

Moscow also backed separatist forces in Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, its support proving critical to their military gains. After those gains, the so-called Normandy Four (Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France) reached two peace deals known as the Minsk agreements, which Western powers and conflict parties still view, at least in theory, as the only way out of the conflict. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its interference in eastern Ukraine have deepened the standoff developing since the early 2000s between Russia, on the one hand, and the EU and U.S., on the other. In 2014, the U.S. and the EU imposed sanctions and other restrictive measures on Russia in response to the Crimea annexation and its meddling in eastern Ukraine; Moscow retaliated with a set of countermeasures.

Turkey vocally opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea, lending support in particular to the territory's Tatar minority, most of whom prefer to remain part of Ukraine. Erdoğan has been cautious, however, not to allow either Crimea or the Donbas conflict – which some Turkish officials portray as the responsibility of both Russia and the West – to weigh too heavily on his ties with the Kremlin. In particular, Ankara has not supported Western sanctions against Moscow.

A. *Crimea*

On 9 October 2017, at a joint press conference in Kyiv with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, Erdoğan stated, "we neither did, nor will we, recognise the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia".[36] Such declarations have been a staple of Turkish diplomacy since March 2014 and invariably include words of support for the 300,000-strong Tatar community in Crimea.[37] Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu are in close contact with Tatar leaders such as Mustafa Dzhemilev (Mustafa Abdülcemil Kırımoğlu) and Refat Chubarov, chairman of the Crimean Ta-

[35] Crisis Group Europe Report N°231, *Ukraine Running Out of Time*, 14 May 2014.
[36] "Erdogan pledges support for Ukraine's territorial integrity during Kyiv visit", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 10 October 2017.
[37] Tatars are Turkic Sunni Muslims who immigrated to Crimea starting in the 13th century. The Soviets expelled them in 1944. Some Tatars returned after the fall of the Soviet Union, when Crimea was an autonomous republic within Ukraine.

tars' exiled representative body, or Mejlis.[38] Tatar activists, too, consider Turkey a kindred state and count on its support; in the 1990s, Turkish money helped Tatars return to the ancestral land from which they were banished in 1944.[39]

Turkey has showcased its commitment to the Tatars' cause on multiple occasions. Immediately before the March 2014 referendum, Erdoğan spoke to Putin to obtain assurances that the Tatars, 70 per cent of whom boycotted the vote, would be treated well.[40] At a party rally in the town of Eskişehir, home to a substantial community of Crimean Tatar descent, Erdoğan claimed to stand up forcefully for Tatar rights during his conversations with Putin.[41] After the plebiscite, then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu held a joint press conference with Dzhemilev, pledging to pursue "determined diplomacy" while rejecting the outcome of the vote.[42] In October, TIKA, Turkey's foreign development agency, funded the opening of a Tatar Centre in Kyiv.[43] Such support increased during the 2015-2016 crisis over the jet downed over Syria. For instance, in February 2016, Turkey donated camouflage uniforms to a Tatar volunteer battalion in Ukraine's Kherson *oblast* (administration district), just north of Crimea, which had been involved in the blockade Kyiv authorities imposed on the annexed region since November 2015.[44]

Since the referendum, Turkish Airlines has suspended flights to Simferopol (the only airport in Crimea to which it flew). But Turkey has wavered regarding sea connections to the peninsula.[45] In April 2014, it banned from its ports any vessel declaring "Russian Crimea" as its domicile. In October 2016, in a partial reversal, Turkish authorities restored ferry services connecting Zonguldak to Sevastopol, a major port and the largest city in Crimea, and to Kerch on the peninsula's eastern coast.[46] Then, in March 2017, Turkey again closed its ports to traffic from Crimea.[47] Ukrainian Prime Minister Vladimir Groysman, who was in Turkey at the time, praised the deci-

[38] Çavuşoğlu met both men during his visit to Kyiv in February 2017. "Турция никогда не признает Крым российским – Чавушоглу" ["Turkey will never recognise Crimea as Russian – Çavuşoğlu"], *Ukrinform*, 10 February 2017; "Turkey rejects annexation of Crimea: Çavuşoğlu", *Daily Sabah*, 10 February 2017.

[39] Crisis Group interviews, Tatar activists, Kherson region, March 2017.

[40] "Turkey's Erdoğan tells Putin crisis must be solved by Ukrainians", Reuters, 4 March 2014.

[41] "Turkey not to leave Crimean Tatars in the lurch", Anadolu Agency, 7 March 2014. Putin and Erdoğan discussed the Tatars in a follow-up phone call in April 2014.

[42] President Abdullah Gül decorated Dzhemilev with the Order of the Republic on 14 April 2014.

[43] Starting in 1995, TIKA paid for the restoration of Tatar historic sites in Crimea. Sezai Özçelik and Soner Karagül, "Ukraine Crisis and Turkey's Policy toward Crimea", in Karol Kujawa and Valery Morkva (eds.), *2014 Crisis in Ukraine: Perspectives, Reflections, International Reverberations* (Gliwice, 2015), pp. 43-56.

[44] "Crimean Tatar battalion got help from Turkey", QHA, 4 February 2016.

[45] "Türkiye'den Kırım'a uçuşlar durdu" ["Flights from Turkey to Crimea halted"], *Milliyet*, 11 March 2014.

[46] The ferry line between Zonguldak and Kerch started operating in July 2014, while the line to Sevastopol was opened in August 2015. They were suspended after 24 November 2015. "Türkiye ve Kırım arasında yeni feribot hattı açıldı" ["New ferry line between Turkey and Crimea launched"], Sputnik, 22 August 2014.

[47] "Turkish sea blockade of Crimea was confirmed", QHA, 10 March 2017.

sion.[48] About a quarter of the vessels blacklisted by Kyiv (as of 15 August 2016) for sailing to Crimea are owned by Turkish entities (though registered under different flags), which had long been a problem between Kyiv and Ankara: sea trade from Turkey in violation of sanctions has thrived since 2014 and did not abate during the jet crisis.[49] It seems that Turkish-owned ships registered in other jurisdictions continue to break the ban.[50] For instance, in February, a Turkish cargo vessel under Moldovan flag called in the port of Feodosia, ostensibly for repairs after an accident at sea.[51]

Despite Turkey's rejection of Moscow's annexation of Crimea, its support for the Tatars and its limits on shipping, Ankara has been reluctant to let the Crimea annexation overshadow its relations with Russia. It refuses to join Western sanctions and keeps a clear distance not only from the EU's strategy toward Moscow but also, in rhetoric if not substance, even from that of the West as a whole, notwithstanding its membership in NATO.[52] "Turkey knows this is something between Russia and the West … and it will keep quiet and let them work it out", said Gülnur Aybet, an international relations professor who has become a senior adviser to Erdoğan.[53] Ankara's reluctance to lend its support to Western measures against Moscow aggravates its squabbles with the West. "Turkey's refusal to side with the EU sanctions is one among several hurdles in the negotiations for updating the Customs Union", according to one European diplomat in Brussels.[54]

The Crimea issue also has limited domestic appeal in Turkey. With the partial exception of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which has traditionally focused on Turkic communities abroad, no major actor has paid the matter much attention. The hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens with origins in Crimea have limited bearing on Ankara's foreign policy.

For its part, the Kremlin has largely ignored Turkish concerns regarding Crimea. In 2014, it banned Tatar leaders Dzhemilev and Chubarov from entering the peninsula, despite their relationship with Erdoğan.[55] An unofficial monitoring mission

[48] "Groysman welcomes Ankara's decision to ban Turkish ships from visiting Crimea", *Kyiv Post*, 14 March 2017.

[49] Andriy Klymenko, "The effectiveness of the maritime sanctions in relation to the occupation of Crimea", *Black Sea News*, 20 December 2016; Andriy Klymenko, Olha Korbut and Tatyana Guchakova, "Blacklist: 260 foreign ships that entered Crimea over period of annexation as of August 15, 2016", *Black Sea News*, 12 September 2016. On smuggling, see Alya Shandra, "Ankara bans Turkish ships from entering Russian-occupied Crimea. Again", Euromaidan Press, 18 March 2017.

[50] "Türkiye, Kırım'a uğrayan gemilerin kontrolünü sıkılaştıracak" ["Turkey to tighten control of ships that stop by Crimea"], Sputnik, 12 October 2017.

[51] Viktoriya Veselova, "Крушение в «серой зоне»: как турецкое судно застряло у берегов Крыма" ("Wreck in the 'grey zone': How a Turkish vessel became stuck on Crimea's shore", Krym Realii (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), 5 February 2018.

[52] According to Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu, "[w]e have no commitment to join EU sanctions …. Every country must consider its own interests". "Turkey refuses to join anti-Russia EU sanctions for economic reasons", Sputnik, 2 February 2015.

[53] 'Turkey waiting for Russia, West on Ukraine problem", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 12 May 2014.

[54] Crisis Group interview, Brussels, August 2017.

[55] Dimiter Kenarov, "Putin's peninsula is a lonely island", *Foreign Policy*, 6 February 2015. The authorities also banned the head of Crimea's QHA news agency, Ismet Yüksel, who holds Turkish citi-

dispatched by the Turkish government in April 2015 and allowed in by the Russians registered violations of Tatar rights to free speech, property and access to native-language education. Though Erdoğan handed the mission's 21-page report to Putin during a June 2015 meeting in Baku, it was subsequently dismissed by the Russian foreign ministry.[56]

After Russian authorities had initially attempted, without much success, to co-opt the Mejlis, in April 2016, Crimea's Supreme Court outlawed the body as an "extremist organisation", pointing to its links with Turkish ultra-nationalist groups such as the Grey Wolves as well as the pan-Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir.[57] Reports cite repression, including imprisonment and confinement in mental institutions, of Tatar activists opposed to the region's incorporation into Russia.[58] Moscow also has pursued a divide-and-rule strategy toward the Tatars. In October 2014, it formed the so-called Interregional Social Movement of the Crimean Tatar People, or Qirim, led by Remzi Ilyasov. A former member of the Mejlis, Ilyasov left to become deputy speaker of annexed Crimea's State Council (the parliamentary body of the Republic of Crimea within the Russian Federation). He has frequently called on Turkey to recognise the peninsula's merger with Russia.

That said, Turkish lobbying, combined with the Russian-Turkish rapprochement, has had some impact in Crimea. Ukrainian authorities credited Erdoğan for the Russian authorities' release, on 25 October 2017, of Akhtem Chiygoz and Ilmi Umerov, both deputy Mejlis chairmen, after three years in jail, and for Moscow's permitting the departure of both men for Turkey.[59] Their release suggests Turkey's quiet diplomacy and persistence can pay off – at least on some issues. Certainly, Crimean Tatars have no better advocate. Ankara should build on improving relations to lobby Russia for further concessions. Deals on the situation of the Crimean Tatars are advantageous to Russia, too: the domestic boost they give Erdoğan draws him closer into Moscow's orbit, while the costs to Moscow are small.

zenship. In October 2014, Dzhemilev was elected as member of the Rada (Ukraine's parliament) from Poroshenko's party.

[56] "Что написано в отчете по правам человека, переданном Эрдоганом Путину?" ["What is written in the report on human rights given to Erdogan and Putin?"], QHA, 30 June 2015; "Moskova: Türk heyetinin değerlendirmeleri bizi hayal kırıklığına uğrattı" ["Moscow: The assessments of the Turkish government disappointed us"], *Hürriyet Daily News*, 20 June 2015.

[57] The Russian Federation's Supreme Court confirmed the ruling on 29 September 2016.

[58] "Situation of Human Rights in the Temporarily Occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol (Ukraine)", UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 2017; "Крымские татары: год с Россией" ["Crimean Tatars: A year with Russia"], BBC (Russian), 18 March 2015; Ilya Azar, "Настоящая реабилитация: Как в России преследуют крымских татар: репортаж Ильи Азара" ["Real rehabilitation: How Crimean Tatars are persecuted in Russia: Reportage by Ilya Azar"], *Meduza*, 30 March 2016; Madeline Roache, "Russian authorities 'imprisoning Crimean Tatars in psychiatric hospitals'", *The Guardian*, 28 March 2017.

[59] Matthew Kupfer, "Turkey: Erdoğan negotiates release of Crimean Tatar leaders imprisoned by Russia", *Eurasia Net*, 26 October 2017.

B. *Donbas*

Turkey has largely steered clear of serious involvement in the four-year-old conflict between Russia and Ukraine over the breakaway region in Donbas. Ankara supports the Minsk agreements, and Ertuğrul Apakan, former undersecretary at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has served since April 2014 as head of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.[60] Many Turkish officials regard Russia and the West as equally culpable in the conflict. "The U.S. has itself to blame", a Turkish diplomat remarked in June 2014, adding, "it gave Russia carte blanche in Ukraine by not intervening in Syria" – an allusion to the Barack Obama administration's decision not to strike Assad regime targets in 2013 despite the regime's use of chemical weapons after an explicit U.S. warning against it.[61] During the early stages of the crisis, some Turkish commentators alleged that Western powers had helped stoke the Maidan protests and were using democracy promotion to contain Russia in its neighbourhood.[62]

At the same time, Turkish leaders have occasionally used the Ukraine conflict to score rhetorical points against Russia. When Erdoğan slammed Putin for commemorating the centennial of the Armenian genocide in late April 2015, he pointed to Russia's invasion of Crimea and interference in Donbas.[63] Turkey also declared plans by Russian-backed Donbas separatists in July 2017 to rebrand the so-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic as "Malorossia" ("Little Russia", a term applied to Ukraine in the Tsarist era) a violation of Ukrainian territorial integrity.[64] Moreover, while Moscow uses the Donbas conflict as leverage to keep Kyiv in check, Ankara prefers a stronger Ukraine which could act as an ally in the region. Thus far, however, it has not publicly suggested that Moscow take steps to de-escalate that conflict.

[60] During his visit to Kyiv in February 2015, Erdoğan deflected a journalist's question as to whether Turkey was willing to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. Hilâl Kaplan, "Erdoğan: Turkey supports Minsk ceasefire agreement in Ukrainian crisis", *Daily Sabah*, 23 March 2015.

[61] Comment made during a workshop on "Implications of the Ukrainian Crisis for Eastern Europe", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, Ankara, 2 June 2014. Summary at: http://sam.gov.tr/workshop-on-implications-of-ukrainian-crisis-for-eastern-europe.

[62] "İşte Ukrayna'daki 'muhalefet'in liderleri" ["These are the leaders of Ukraine's 'opposition'"], *Sol*, 21 February 2014.

[63] Semih Idiz, "Russia's recognition of Armenian genocide strains ties with Turkey", *Al-Monitor*, 28 April 2015.

[64] "'Little Russia' proclamation violates Ukraine's territorial integrity, foreign ministry says", *Daily Sabah*, 20 July 2017.

IV. The Black Sea: A Struggle for Supremacy

A. *Russia's Military Build-up*

Ankara's hushed reaction to Crimea and Donbas conceals its alarm over the expanding Russian influence and military build-up in the Black Sea. In the words of a Turkish official:

> The Russian military presence has increased everywhere: in Crimea, in Armenia, in the Eastern Mediterranean … Russia benefits from the continuation of problems, [of] frozen conflicts. There are conflicts everywhere that they influence.[65]

The seizure of Crimea tilted the balance of power between Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea toward Moscow. After March 2014, Russia's de facto coastline grew from 475km to 1,200km or about 25 per cent of the sea's total shorefront.[66] That nearly equals the length of Turkey's shore, which is 1,785km or about 35 per cent of the total coastline.

The Crimean port of Sevastopol, parts of which Moscow previously leased from Ukraine, has long provided Russia with a natural deep-water port centrally located in the Black Sea basin. Major littoral cities, including Istanbul, Samsun, Trabzon, Constanta (Romania) and Varna (Bulgaria), are within easy reach, less than 1,000km away. Since 2013, Sevastopol has been a springboard for Russian forays through the Bosphorus into the Mediterranean and for the so-called Syria Express, which supplies Russian forces in Syria.

After the Crimea annexation, Russia has further boosted its military presence on the peninsula – not only in Sevastopol but also at the port of Feodosia and in Soviet-era facilities scattered around the peninsula.[67] Vladimir Putin claimed to have "turned Crimea into a fortress" in a documentary aired by the Russia-1 TV channel on the first anniversary of the annexation in March 2015.[68] Having unilaterally revoked the restrictions under the 2010 Kharkiv Pact signed with Ukraine, Moscow is adding fifteen to eighteen new vessels to its Black Sea Fleet by 2020 (including multipurpose frigates and advanced submarines equipped with high-precision cruise missiles). It has advantages in the air, too, thanks to its S-300 and S-400 SAMs deployed on the peninsula. "Russia has developed a very strong anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability in the Black Sea", commented General Philip Breedlove, then NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe, in 2015. "Essentially their [anti-ship] cruise

[65] Crisis Group interview, Ankara, June 2017.

[66] That does not count the 300km of coastline belonging to Abkhazia, a region that broke away from Georgia in 1999 and declared independence. It was recognised by Russia and a handful of other states in 2008. Russia deployed S-300 batteries to this region when reinforcing its military presence in Crimea. Crisis Group interview, de facto Abkhazian official, Sukhumi, August 2017. For more about the Russian military presence in Abkhazia, see David Batashvili, "Russia troop deployments menace Georgia", Civil.ge, 4 April 2017.

[67] Luke Harding, "Ukraine extends lease for Russia's Black Sea fleet", *The Guardian*, 21 April 2010.

[68] Kira Latoukhina, "Путин рассказал про 'вежливых людей' в Крыму" ["Putin talked about the polite people in Crimea"], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 15 March 2015.

missiles range the entire Black Sea, and their air defence missiles range over about 40 to 50 per cent of the Black Sea".[69]

B. *NATO's Response*

Russia's projection over the Black Sea adds to NATO's worry over its actions in Crimea and Donbas, particularly given the concerns of the alliance's littoral members, which include Romania and Bulgaria as well as Turkey. At NATO summits in Wales in September 2014 and Warsaw in July 2016, the alliance pledged to those three members that it would maintain in the Black Sea a "Tailored Forward Presence". This presence rests on, first, frequent exercises and visits by U.S. and other allies' naval ships from outside the region; and, second, the deployment of a multinational brigade in Romania.[70]

Prior to the Ukraine crisis, NATO focused its Black Sea strategy on non-traditional security threats, such as terrorism and illegal trafficking. After the Crimea annexation, however, its prime concern is Russian expansionism. In 2014 alone, as part of NATO's Atlantic Resolve operation, U.S. warships spent a total of 207 days in the Black Sea, compared to two short visits in 2013. In 2017, the U.S. led eighteen exercises in the area, including the Sea Breeze multinational exercise co-led with the Ukrainian navy and Saber, a massive land-based drill involving some 25,000 soldiers from 23 allied and partner countries, including Georgia and Ukraine.[71]

NATO members are making a sustained push to anchor the alliance institutionally in the Black Sea, a policy Turkey supports. In February 2016, Romanian Defence Minister Mihnea Ioan Motoc proposed the establishment of a permanent naval task force by Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria, with German, Italian and U.S. logistical and direct military support. Though Bulgaria vetoed the plan before the July 2016 Warsaw summit, Turkey was in favour, illustrating its shifting posture. In any case, the alliance has taken incremental steps toward reinforced cooperation. On 16 February 2017, NATO defence ministers endorsed an enhanced presence "on land, at sea and in the air" and authorised the Standing Naval Forces, the allied immediate response unit, to deepen links with allies in the Black Sea.[72]

Russia's actions and NATO's response raise the risk of some form of confrontation, even if accidental. Instances of Russian fighter jets "buzzing" U.S. warships and intercepting NATO planes in the Black Sea have been common since 2014. Heavier naval traffic has already led to one incident. On 27 April 2017, a Russian intelligence

[69] "Joint statement of the NATO-Ukraine Commission", press release, NATO, 13 May 2015.
[70] Boris Toucas, "NATO and Russia in the Black Sea: A new confrontation?", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 March 2017. Since 2006, the U.S. has operated joint military facilities with Romania and Bulgaria, including Mihail Kogălniceanu near Constanta where the NATO multinational framework brigade is stationed.
[71] Martin Egnash, "U.S. plans massive exercise in Black Sea region", *Stars and Stripes*, 10 June 2017.
[72] For example, four British Typhoon deployed for four months in 2016 at the Mihail Kogălniceanu base on Romania's coast to conduct NATO air policing. "British Typhoon jets arrive in Romania for NATO enhanced air policing", Allied Air Command Public Affairs Office NATO, 25 April 2017. U.S. F-15 fighter jets deployed to Bulgaria on a similar mission. "NATO's enhanced air policing measures begin in Bulgaria", Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe Public Affairs Office, 9 September 2016.

vessel en route to Syria sank off Turkey's Black Sea coast, not far from Istanbul, after a collision with a merchant ship coming from Constanta, Romania.[73] Allied exercises in the Black Sea sometimes take place alongside even larger-scale Russian drills.[74] Violations of NATO members' airspace, or instances of Russian jets flying on the very edge of that airspace, are frequent.[75]

C. *Turkey's Changing Security Posture*

Until the annexation of Crimea, Ankara believed its interests in the Black Sea best served by keeping the U.S. at arm's length. From 2001 onward, Ankara and Moscow promoted Black Sea Harmony and the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (Blackseafor), maritime security initiatives that sought to reduce risks of confrontation by excluding NATO from of the Black Sea.[76] Black Sea Harmony, in particular, emerged as an alternative to NATO's Active Endeavour mission, an operation targeting transnational terrorism and smuggling. Newer NATO members Romania and, less overtly, Bulgaria lobbied for the extension of Active Endeavour into the Black Sea. Older NATO member Turkey, by contrast, largely sought to accommodate Russia's security concerns. During the August 2008 war in Georgia, for example, Turkey barred two U.S. hospital vessels, the USNS *Comfort* and *Mercy*, from crossing through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea.[77]

The Crimea annexation prompted a rethink. In May 2016 – that is, before reconciling with Putin – Erdoğan claimed to have told Jens Stoltenberg, NATO secretary general, that the "Black Sea has almost become a Russian lake. If we don't act now, history will not forgive us".[78] Although Ankara has deepened security ties with Moscow, these fears remain. According to a leading Turkish security expert, "the perception of threat [posed by Russia] remains high. Turkey's strategy is aimed at balancing Russia".[79] The underlying attitude is summed up by Professor Mustafa Aydın, the doyen of Black Sea studies in Turkey:

> NATO's current objective is to find a credible yet unthreatening strategy to deter Russia in its eastern and southern flanks. It is clear that further militarisation of the Black Sea will create an unstable environment that can bring Russia and NATO to the brink of a potential conflict. Though nobody benefits from such an escalation, we should remember that force projections in international relations,

[73] "Russian intelligence ship sinks off Turkey's Black Sea coast", Reuters, 27 April 2017.
[74] Ian Brzezinski and Nicholas Varangis, "The NATO-Russia exercise gap … Then, now, & 2017", Atlantic Council, 25 October 2016.
[75] Damien Sharkov, "Bulgaria concerned by spike of Russian airspace violations", *Newsweek*, 25 July 2016.
[76] Suat Kınıklıoğlu and Valeriy Morkva, "An Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations", *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2007), pp. 533-553.
[77] Beyond the Black Sea, it accepted – unlike others in NATO – Putin's decision to pull Russia from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty in late 2007. It also declined to react strongly to the resumption of Russian reconnaissance flights at the edges of Turkish airspace.
[78] Sam Jones and Kathrin Hille, "Russia's military ambitions make waves in the Black Sea", *Financial Times*, 13 May 2016.
[79] Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, July 2017.

which are not countered properly, would eventually lead to further force projections and an eventual showdown.[80]

As a result, despite increased friction between Ankara and its Western allies and improving Ankara-Moscow ties, Russia's expansion makes the NATO alliance more and more significant for Turkey in the Black Sea. Ankara has to reckon with hard facts. Before 2014, Turkey had the edge: its navy had a combined tonnage of 97,000 as against 63,000 tonnes for Russia's Black Sea Fleet; the Turks had fourteen submarines to Russia's one, and overwhelming superiority in amphibious vessels (54 to seven).[81] Russia's build-up has altered the balance. Turkey retains an edge only in amphibious warfare ships, due to France's decision to cancel the sale to Russia of two Mistral-class vessels in 2015.[82]

Ankara still views preservation of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which limits the presence of outside naval powers in the Black Sea, as a core national interest (in fact, NATO ships from non-littoral states rotate in and out of the sea to comply with the 21-day limit set by that convention). But leaning on NATO – and thus allowing in more ships – is now a logical choice, irrespective of Turkey's rift with the U.S. and Europe.

In parallel, Turkey is modernising its armed forces and seeking to boost its indigenous defence industry. The MILGEM (National Ship) project, which had stalled for years, is again a clear priority. On 3 July 2017, Turkey inaugurated the *Kınalıada*, a corvette equipped to fight submarines.[83] Having acquired two new tank-landing ships, MILGEM's next phase involves the construction of a new class of frigates.[84] Erdoğan has reiterated Turkey's intention to build its own aircraft carrier (to be deployed in the Mediterranean, rather than in the Black Sea). Observers in Moscow watch closely; as Vladimir Komoedov, head of the Russian Duma's defence committee and former commander of the Black Sea Fleet (1998-2002) put it, "Russia needs to take into account the strengthening of Turkey's navy, irrespective of the constructive nature of the relationship".[85]

[80] Mustafa Aydın, "Power struggle in the Black Sea", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 30 March 2017.
[81] "Военные расходы в Черноморском регионе" ["Military expenses in the Black Sea region"], Russian International Affairs Council, 20 June 2016. In December 1991, Ankara allowed the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* to pass through the Dardanelles (in contravention of Montreux's terms) to join Russia's Northern Fleet, only too happy that the threat from Moscow had subsided, allowing it to focus on its rivalry with Greece in the Aegean.
[82] Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and Dmitry Medvedev oversaw the deal for the sale of two Mistral assault ships in January 2011. Following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, in September 2014, President François Hollande "froze" the sale. In August 2015, France agreed to pay Russia back, effectively cancelling the agreement.
[83] Turkey's goal is to source 65 per cent of the inputs domestically. "Turkey launches fourth corvette built as part of national ship project", *Daily Sabah*, 3 July 2017.
[84] Lale Sariibrahimoğlu, "Turkey begins construction of first Istanbul-class frigate", *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 23 January 2017.
[85] Nikita Kovalanko and Yekaterina Korostichenko, "Турции рановато мечтать об авианосце" ["It is too early for Turkey to dream about an aircraft carrier"], *Vzglyad*, 3 July 2017.

D. *Turkish-Ukrainian Relations*

Turkey and Ukraine have enjoyed close security cooperation, which has continued despite improved Russia-Turkey ties. The relationship was again highlighted in October 2017 by Erdoğan's visit to Kyiv for a session of the High-Level Strategic Council, an annual political dialogue format that has brought the two presidents and cabinets together since 2011.

As its frustration grew over Russia's 2015 Syria intervention, Turkey leaned more clearly toward Ukraine, notwithstanding the cautious balance it has traditionally struck with Moscow.[86] In February 2016, during then Prime Minister Davutoğlu's visit to Kyiv, officials from both sides agreed to cooperate in designing and manufacturing aircraft engines, radar units, military communication and navigation systems.[87] Advanced technology projects, such as phased space rockets, ballistic missile systems and even cruise missiles, are also under discussion. The Ukrainian navy, greatly diminished after the Russian seizure of Crimea, has been training with its Turkish counterpart, most recently in an air defence exercise at Odessa in April 2017.[88]

Kyiv also shows an interest in Turkey's defence industrial projects. In March 2017, Vladimir Groysman, Ukraine's prime minister, signed a preliminary memorandum of understanding over the supply of engines for Turkey's Altay battle tank.[89] A Ukrainian security expert saw no contradiction between Ankara's cooperation with Kyiv, on the one hand, and Moscow, on the other: "For the Turks, this is business – and if anyone will make business work, it is them".[90]

Ties to Ukraine also provide Turkey with backup technology transfer and know-how. As Metin Gürcan, a Turkish security analyst, puts it: "Ukraine is the nearest and most willing potential partner to help Turkey overcome the interruptions in military technology transfer from the U.S. and Europe because of frequent political disagreements".[91] While that might be overly ambitious, Ukrainian industries could help Turkey develop its naval force. In turn, Turkey provides a lucrative market for the Ukrainian contractors who have suffered losses after cutting ties to their traditional partners from Russia's military-industrial complex.[92]

The strategic logic of tighter Turkey-Ukraine ties is straightforward: each sees the other as a counterweight to Moscow. As a Russian journalist covering Turkish affairs

[86] As an example of Turkey's balancing with Moscow, before visiting Poroshenko in March 2015, Erdoğan called Putin to touch base. Semih Idiz, "Erdoğan's delicate balancing act in Kiev", *Al-Monitor*, 24 March 2015.

[87] Burak Ege Bekdil, "Turkey and Ukraine pledge 'strategic' defense industry cooperation", *Defense News*, 21 February 2016.

[88] Metin Gürcan, "Turkey-Ukraine defense industry ties are booming", *Al-Monitor*, 1 May 2017.

[89] One possible contractor is the Engine Design Bureau in Kharkiv.

[90] Crisis Group interview, Ukrainian expert, Kyiv, September 2017.

[91] Gürcan, "Turkey-Ukraine defense industry ties are booming", op. cit.

[92] Turkey still relies on Western companies; the contract for the Altay tanks, for instance, will likely go to BMC, a politically connected Turkish company partnering with German military technology supplier Rheinmetall. Mehmet Cetingulec, "Turkey's Altay tank project not ready to roll after all", *Al-Monitor*, 19 June 2017. Russian experts also recognise the benefits to Turkey of Ukrainian cooperation in terms of reducing dependence on Western contractors. Crisis Group phone interview, Russian foreign policy expert, August 2017.

argues, "Turkey is investing in pressure points to even the field with Russia".[93] The same logic applies to commercial relations. In March 2017, Ukrainian Prime Minister Groysman and Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım finalised an agreement enabling Turks and Ukrainians to travel between their countries with ID cards as opposed to passports (as is already the case between Turkey and Georgia).[94] Talks on a free trade deal reportedly also have advanced.[95]

[93] Crisis Group phone interview, Russian expert on Turkey, 28 June 2017.
[94] "Turkey, Ukraine sign passport-free travel deal to boost tourism", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 14 March 2017.
[95] "Turkey, Ukraine move closer to free trade deal", *Daily Sabah*, 23 May 2017.

V. South Caucasus: Risks and Opportunities

The South Caucasus is another region in which Russian and Turkish interests clash. Since the early 1990s, Ankara, playing up its credentials as a NATO member and economic powerhouse closely aligned with the EU, has pursued a three-way partnership with Azerbaijan and Georgia focused on security and defence, infrastructure and energy.[96] The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, along with the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (inaugurated on 12 June 2018) and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (which is under construction), together would complete the Southern Gas Corridor intended to link the Caspian Sea gas fields to consumer countries in the EU. A recently inaugurated railroad runs from Kars, in eastern Turkey, through Georgia to Baku, and is touted as part of the new Silk Road connecting Europe and China while bypassing Russia.[97]

That said, Russia remains a key power in the region and exerts enormous influence over Armenia, Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and to a lesser degree, over Azerbaijan and Georgia itself. For now, Turkey acknowledges Russia's advantage, and avoids direct confrontation even as it deepens cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia.[98] While broader Russia-Turkey rapprochement is unlikely to signal major shifts in a region in which the two countries largely compete, it might offer opportunities to reduce risks of another flare-up between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the contested enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.

A. *Nagorno-Karabakh*

The protracted conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh poses a particular challenge to Russia-Turkey relations. Russia has close ties to Armenia, through a bilateral defence cooperation treaty and through the Russia-sponsored Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Armenia is a member.[99] Moscow, however, also sells weapons to Baku, and has been seeking closer ties with Azerbaijan, including through trilateral Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran cooperation.[100] Turkey's bilateral Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support (2010) with

[96] Fiona Hill, Kemal Kirişçi and Andrew Moffatt, "Retracing the Caucasian circle: Considerations and constraints for U.S., EU and Turkish involvement in the South Caucasus", Policy Paper, Brookings Institution, 15 July 2015. Ankara and Tbilisi signed a free trade agreement in 2007, abolishing visas two years later and then lifting passport requirements in 2011.

[97] "Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railways officially launched", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 30 October 2017.

[98] During Russia's short war against Georgia over South Ossetia in August 2008, Ankara chose not to directly challenge Moscow, despite its close ties to Georgia. Erdoğan opted for conciliation, through the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform aimed at restarting multilateral dialogue, and sought to keep the U.S. away from the Black Sea to avoid escalation.

[99] CSTO membership entails a more far-reaching security commitment than the mutual assistance treaty between Turkey and Azerbaijan. For instance, it entitles Armenia to acquire armaments at the prices Russia charges its own military. See "Russia, Armenia sign extended defense pact", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 20 August 2010.

[100] Crisis Group Report, *Nagorno-Karabakh: New Opening or More Peril?*, op. cit.

Azerbaijan obliges the two countries to assist each other using "all possibilities" in the event of military attack on either by a third country.[101]

In early April 2016, Nagorno-Karabakh saw its most dangerous upsurge of violence since Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire in May 1994. An Azerbaijani offensive won minor territorial gains, inflicted heavy losses on both sides and briefly galvanised diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.[102] The escalation, facilitated by Baku's beefed-up military capabilities, unleashed a war of words between Russia and Turkey at a time when the Su-24 downing had already soured relations.

Erdoğan chastised the Kremlin for siding with the Armenians rather than acting as an honest broker in its capacity as one of the three co-chairs of the OSCE-led Minsk Group (other co-chairs are the U.S. and France; Turkey is a permanent member along with seven other OSCE participating states, including Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the OSCE Troika, comprising the current, past and incoming chairmanships in office), and lamented that group's impotence.[103] Top Russian officials, including Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, accused Turkey of fanning the flames by channelling military aid to Azerbaijan, drawing parallels to Turkey's "meddling" in Syria.[104] The testy exchange between Ankara and Moscow was misinterpreted internationally as full Turkish backing for Baku's military adventurism; in all likelihood, Turkey was reluctant to take the risk of getting too involved.[105]

The angry exchanges did not fuel a major escalation: only days after the outbreak of hostilities, Moscow summoned the Armenian and Azerbaijani military chiefs of staff, renewing a ceasefire in less than a week. Ankara, which was overstretched domestically and in the Middle East, and in any case had no intention of taking on Russia in the region, opted to keep a low profile. Nonetheless, were the conflict to escalate again, the risk that the two regional powers get inadvertently sucked in remains.

B. *Military Build-up*

Though the last flare-up between Azerbaijan and Armenia was contained fairly quickly, Turkish and Russian relations with the two countries add an extra layer of risk in what is already a heavily militarised region. Baku has scaled up its forces in Nakhchivan, an exclave separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by a slice of southern Armenia, deploying artillery, multiple-rocket launchers and special forces there, in proximity to Yerevan. The Azerbaijani and Turkish militaries also held joint exercises in the province, which shares a short stretch of border with Turkey.[106]

[101] Article 2 of the agreement stipulates that the form and volume of such assistance shall be agreed without delay. The full version of the agreement (in Azerbaijani language) is available at www.e-qanun.az/framework/21158.
[102] Crisis Group Report, *Nagorno-Karabakh: New Opening or More Peril?*, op. cit.
[103] "Russia, not Turkey, taking sides in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, says Erdoğan", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 6 April 2016.
[104] "Turkey must stop meddling in other states' affairs, end support of terrorism, Russia says", Reuters, 4 April 2016.
[105] That was acknowledged by Russian experts, too. Sergey Markedonov, "Russia-Turkey Relations and Security Issues in the Caucasus", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 30 May 2016.
[106] Zaur Shiriyev, "Azerbaijan building up forces in Nakhchivan", *Eurasia Net*, 10 August 2017.

For its part, in January 2016 – weeks after the Su-24 incident – Russia upgraded its military presence in Armenia, stationing Mi-24P attack and Mi-8MT transport helicopters at the Erebuni military airfield outside Yerevan.[107] In September 2016, the Armenian army showcased a new 9K720 Iskander short-range ballistic missile system acquired from Russia.[108] Two months later, Russia and Armenia agreed to set up a joint group of armed forces, with a mandate that includes repelling attacks against Armenian territory.[109]

Yerevan's motivation for the arms build-up is mostly to deter another Azerbaijani offensive; the joint group of forces does not envisage deploying inside Nagorno-Karabakh or along the line of contact. But both the build-up and the joint group also appear to be a signal from Russia to Turkey in the context of their regional standoff that Ankara should stay away in the event of renewed violence in or around the enclave. Moscow's close defence cooperation with Yerevan also means that it has expanded its military footprint along nearly all of Turkey's borders: it has sold Iskander ballistic missiles to Armenia to Turkey's east; installed the same system at Hmeimim air base in north-western Syria to Turkey's south; and after 2019, may deploy it in Crimea to Turkey's north.[110]

While Turkey has avoided public criticism of Russian aid to Armenia, it has deepened links with regional allies to hedge against Russia in the Caucasus as it has done in the Black Sea, and pursued close bilateral military cooperation with Azerbaijan.[111] In May 2016, the Turkish defence minister resumed meetings with his Azerbaijani and Georgia counterparts, an initiative dating back to the June 2012 Trabzon Declaration (the first such meeting took place in 2013).[112] A meeting among the defence ministers in May 2017 was followed a month later by a three-nation military drill near Tbilisi.[113] In April 2018, the three defence ministers signed a memorandum that envisions closer trilateral defence partnership.[114] This comes on top of Turkey's already well-established bilateral military cooperation with Azerbaijan. Turkey has long provided training to the Azerbaijani army and the two armies have held joint exercises of land forces. Since 2014 joint exercises have been expanded to include air

[107] The deployments coincided with a bombing campaign intended to cut a corridor from besieged eastern Aleppo to Turkish territory.
[108] Eduard Abrahamyan, "Armenia's new ballistic missiles will shake up the neighborhood", *The National Interest*, 12 October 2016.
[109] Nikolai Litovkin, "Russia and Armenia to create joint defence force in Caucasus", *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 16 November 2016.
[110] The Iskander-M is the variety used by the Russian army with a range of 500km; the one exported to Armenia ranges 280km.
[111] Crisis Group interviews, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, Ankara, June 2017.
[112] Nerdun Hacioğlu, "Türkiye, Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan askeri işbirliğini derinleştiriyor" ["Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia deepen military cooperation"], *Hürriyet Daily News*, 15 May 2012. The agreement expanded an earlier trilateral security deal from April 2002.
[113] "Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey launch military drills near Tbilisi", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 5 June 2017.
[114] "Azerbaijani, Georgian, Turkish defense ministers sign cooperation memorandum", Civil.ge, 2 April 2018.

forces and special forces, and annual joint trainings are held in Nakhchivan.[115] Azerbaijan is also a major consumer of Turkish defence products.[116]

C. *Positive Steps?*

Whether Turkey and Russia can use their rapprochement to reduce risks of another flare-up over Nagorno-Karabakh remains to be seen. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, each with powerful regional allies, in Moscow and Ankara respectively, overlaps with tense Turkey-Armenia relations and with grievances dating back to Ottoman times. This multilayered dynamic makes any progress on Nagorno-Karabakh particularly difficult.

Yet there is precedent, albeit limited, for Ankara and Moscow working together to ease regional tensions. In 2007-2009, Russia supported Turkey's and Armenia's "football diplomacy", culminating in the effort to normalise ties and unblock the border that Ankara closed in 1993 in connection to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh.[117] That temporary thaw between Yerevan and Ankara led to the October 2009 signing of the two Zurich protocols, which envisaged the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the two countries and the opening of the Turkey-Armenia border. That thaw, which may have been partly linked to the reset at the time of Russia-U.S. relations, was quickly reversed, as Ankara, in an expression of support to Baku, maintained that progress on border opening should be linked to Armenia's return of Azerbaijani territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh to Baku's control.

A decade later, Moscow offered to facilitate the normalisation of relations between Armenia and Turkey. Foreign Minister Lavrov observed in a March 2017 interview with the Yerevan-based *Regional Post* that the Russian Federation "would most certainly welcome the opening of the Armenian-Turkish segment of the EEU's external border for free movement of people, goods and services", a step that would establish a territorial link between the Moscow-led EEU and the EU-Turkey Customs Union. Turkish officials also have extended olive branches. In April 2017, Turkey launched an EU-funded demining operation along the border with Armenia; the same month, the Armenian aviation authority granted Pegasus Airlines, a Turkish budget carrier, a licence to fly three times a week between Yerevan and Istanbul.[118] A

[115] Zaur Shiriyev, "Azerbaijan's security perceptions: Old challenges with new faces", Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, June 2016.

[116] Azerbaijan's weapons imports from Turkey include armoured vehicles, self-propelled multiple rocket launchers, guided rockets. Azerbaijan became the first foreign buyer of Turkish high-speed electromagnetic interference anti-drone systems. Azerbaijan and Turkey have developed several joint military industrial initiatives; the latest one with Turkish Roketsan entails the joint production of rockets. "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database", SIPRI, at http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_trade_register.php; "Turkey's Roketsan supplies Azerbaijani Armed Forces with guided missiles", APA, 28 September 2016.

[117] Technically, the border was never open; there was only one weekly train between Kars and Gyumri in Soviet times. In April 1994, Ankara decided not to sign the protocol that would have opened the border.

[118] Sibel Utku Bila, "Turkey faces demining delays", *Al-Monitor*, 9 January 2015; Rashid Shirinov, "Turkey to demine areas bordering Azerbaijan, Iran, Armenia", *Azernews*, 5 April 2017. Another Turkish company, AtlasGlobal, also flies the route five times a week. Turkish-Armenian trade takes place through Georgia, with volumes reaching $200 million. Tourists can obtain visas at the airport

few months later, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu backed the so-called "Lavrov plan" for the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, though both the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis subsequently rejected the scheme.[119]

Today's improved Russia-Turkey relations might at least open opportunities to head off new outbreaks of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh. More fundamental progress toward the settlement of the conflict appears unlikely, however. Armenia is reluctant to link Russia-Turkey relations to either its own relations with Baku or the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement process. In September 2017, President Serzh Sargsyan said he would revoke the Zurich protocols before leaving office in April 2018, the month his last presidential term ended – though he subsequently became prime minister – if Ankara did not return the Turkey-Armenia normalisation process to the bilateral track, involving neither Russia nor demands for Armenian concessions on Nagorno-Karabakh.[120] Armenia revoked the protocols in March 2018.[121]

The new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who was propelled to power by April 2018 mass protests that forced Sargsyan to stand down, has not wavered from this position. He is broadly seen as espousing a tough stance on Nagorno-Karabakh and unwilling to consider any return of land to Azerbaijan, Ankara's main precondition for continuing its process of normalising relations with Yerevan and a non-negotiable requirement for any rapprochement with Baku.[122] Visiting Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh's main city, in June Pashinyan reiterated his predecessors' offer to establish diplomatic relations with Turkey, but "without preconditions".[123] He also mentioned his determination to press for "international recognition of Armenian genocide" – massacres that took place on the territory of present Turkey a century ago, another sticking point between Yerevan and Ankara, which denies the events amounted to genocide.[124] Ankara has reacted cautiously to Pashinyan. During a talk at Chatham House, a London think tank, Erdoğan appealed to the Armenian government to show "common sense" and work for the region's stability.[125] Turkey is in wait-and-see mode.

Overall, Erdoğan has little incentive at home to improve relations with Armenia. Doing so risks being counterproductive for him: it would jeopardise the support of nationalist constituencies and of the nationalist MHP, which, after the June 2018

or at border crossings. Civil society ties are well developed. Fiona Hill, Kemal Kirişçi and Andrew Moffatt, "Armenia and Turkey: From Normalisation to Reconciliation", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2015), pp. 127-138.

[119] David Shahnazaryan, "A conflict of interests in Nagorno-Karabakh", Stratfor, 28 July 2017.

[120] "Statement by the President of the Republic of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the general debate of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly", Office of the President of the Republic of Armenia, 20 September 2018.

[121] "Press release regarding the claims of Mr. Edward Nalbandian, minister of foreign affairs of Armenia", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, 14 December 2017; also "Armenia scraps agreement to normalise relations with Turkey", *Middle East Eye*, 1 March 2018.

[122] Eduard Abrahamyan, "Pashinyan stiffens Armenia's posture toward Karabakh", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10 May 2018.

[123] "PM: Armenia ready to establish diplomatic relations with Turkey", NEWS.am, 9 May 2018.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ayla Jean Yackley, "Erdoğan calls for 'common sense' from new Armenian government", *Eurasia Net*, 17 May 2018.

elections, he will need to rely on for a majority in the Turkish parliament.[126] Besides, he is more likely to expend political capital with nationalists over the more pressing Kurdish issue rather than opening a second front over Armenia.

If Armenians are wary about the give-and-take between Ankara and Moscow, Azerbaijan, which has strived to stay on good terms with both countries, has welcomed Russo-Turkish rapprochement. President Ilham Aliyev shared the stage with Erdoğan and Putin at the October 2016 World Energy Congress in Istanbul, which saw the restart of the TurkStream pipeline and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. That said, Baku – like Yerevan – would not necessarily welcome a Russian-Turkish peace initiative in Nagorno-Karabakh. This would be especially true if it perceives that Moscow is calling the shots and Ankara playing along.

While convincing Armenians and Azerbaijanis to move toward a lasting settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a tall order, Russia and Turkey could nonetheless use their combined political weight to forestall a new flare-up. According to a prominent Russian expert, "even the absence of escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh would be a big achievement".[127] Deterring the sides from the use of force and even pushing behind the scenes for substantive and honest discussions of a possible peace deal might be feasible. Neither Moscow nor Ankara would be served by a fresh outbreak of violence.

D. *Abkhazia*

Another area where Russian and Turkish interests could collide is Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia. Located on the Black Sea, the region sought to secede from Georgia in a 1992-1993 war, unilaterally declared independence in 1999, and was internationally recognised by Russia and a handful of other countries in 2008. Since then it has hosted Russian troops; Russian missile systems, including the Iskander-M and S-300, were deployed there in 2014.

Ankara, too, has a special relationship with Sukhumi, Abkhazia's de facto capital, due largely to the well-organised Abkhaz and Circassian diasporas in Turkey. It has been careful not to let these ties interfere with its relations with Georgia and has never signalled it might recognise the breakaway region. But it has kept the option of engagement with Abkhazia open. Since the Georgian-Abkhaz war, it has maintained commercial and sea transport links to the breakaway entity and allowed Abkhazia's representation office to operate in Istanbul. Ankara also has not prevented private Turkish investment in the region. In fact, Turkey has been Abkhazia's second biggest trading partner after Russia, with investment in coal, tourism and agriculture.[128] These links are prized in Abkhazia, where some de facto officials have called for diversifying the region's foreign partnerships rather than relying solely on Russia.[129]

Tbilisi has traditionally been wary of Turkey's links to Abkhazia but – especially in recent years – Ankara has managed to navigate both relationships fairly smoothly.

[126] "MHP leader Bahceli hails 'historic' success in Turkey's elections", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 25 June 2018.
[127] Crisis Group interview, October 2017.
[128] Crisis Group interviews, businessmen and de facto officials, Sukhumi, August 2017.
[129] Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz diaspora representatives, Istanbul, June 2017.

Some Georgian politicians have even expressed a cautious interest in encouraging these links, particularly in trade, as a potential counterweight to Russia.[130]

The 2015 Su-24 crisis prompted Moscow to push Abkhaz leaders for the first time to openly side with Russia against Turkey.[131] Sukhumi imposed an embargo on some Turkish produce – although the Abkhaz claim to have taken care to target only insignificant items.[132] Members of Turkey's Abkhaz diaspora had problems entering the region via Russia on their Turkish passports. Some Turkish investors had to take down the Turkish flags in front of their factories and offices.[133] But these developments were quickly reversed as Ankara-Moscow relations improved, illustrating the region's profound sensitivity to shifting geopolitical winds.[134]

In early 2017, the EU started exploring options for extending the benefits of its free trade area with Georgia to businesses in Abkhazia.[135] It is still unclear whether modalities for this expansion can be found when neither the Georgians nor the Abkhaz will make any move that could have implications for the breakaway region's political status, often to the detriment of practical cooperation. Nor is it clear whether Russia would tolerate that level of EU engagement. Turkey, on the other hand, has implicitly supported EU efforts by suggesting it would be in Ankara's interests if a greater variety of outside actors engaged with the conflict region.[136]

Overall, the carefully calibrated engagement of Ankara and Turkish investors in Abkhazia has benefited the population without crossing either side's red lines. It has not, in other words, introduced additional friction with Moscow. Ankara should continue to tread that fine line.

[130] Sergi Kapanadze, "Turkish trade with Abkhazia: An apple of discord for Georgia", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 14 December 2014.
[131] Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz, summer 2017.
[132] Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz de facto officials, Sukhumi, 2015.
[133] Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz, April 2016.
[134] Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazian de facto officials, Sukhumi, August 2017.
[135] Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°249, *Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Time to Talk Trade,* 24 May 2018.
[136] Crisis Group interviews, EU officials and diplomats, Brussels and Tbilisi, August and November 2017.

VI. The North Caucasus Factor

The North Caucasus is another sore spot. Ankara has strong historical links to the region given that Turkey has long been home to its diaspora communities. More recent exiles, many of which are Salafi Muslims known as *muhajirs*, now live in Turkey after having been driven out of their homes because of their faith.[137] These include people from various parts of the North Caucasus (mostly the republics of Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Circassia), as well as from the Volga/Urals region and elsewhere in Russia. These communities, which point to growing intolerance and state persecution in Russia that intensified in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, sought refuge in Turkey, mostly in Istanbul's conservative districts.[138]

For years, Russia and Turkey had upheld an implicit bargain. Turkey would remain neutral regarding the conflict in Chechnya in return for Russia downgrading its ties to the Kurdish insurgency, the PKK. Since 1999, successive Turkish governments have denied supporting Chechen separatists. Turkish companies have done business in Chechnya despite being subjected to forms of pressure and extortion by the republican leadership.[139] In an apparent quid pro quo, Russia abstained from supporting the PKK; in late 1998, it refused PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan asylum, shortly before his capture by Turkish commandos in Kenya.

Russia's intervention in Syria and occasional cooperation with the YPG upended this understanding. As Turkey and Russia found themselves on opposing sides in Syria, Ankara had less incentive to address Russian concerns over the 10,000-15,000 mostly Muslim émigrés in Istanbul carrying Russian Federation passports. Cooperation at the level of security and law enforcement has been rudimentary, both before and after the 2016 reconciliation. Turkish police have arrested suspects based on information from Russia, apprehending 99 Russian attempting to join ISIS in 2015.[140] In the aftermath of the bomb attack at Istanbul's Atatürk airport on 28 June 2016, police rounded up at least 50 Russian Muslims suspected of ISIS involvement.[141] But Turkish authorities rarely extradite *muhajirs* that Moscow claims have links to militant groups in Russia, instead sending most Russian nationals to third countries.[142]

The gulf between Moscow's perceptions and those of Ankara is clear. Moscow views the émigré community as a hotbed of Islamist radicalism, citing its alleged links to jihadists in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere.[143] It points to individuals recruited in Turkey

[137] The exact number is hard to establish, as many reside in Turkey illegally. Many Russian Salafis resettled to Turkey from Egypt after the military coup deposing President Mohamed Morsi in June 2013.

[138] For more on Russian Muslims in Turkey, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°238, *The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad*, 16 March 2016.

[139] Crisis Group interview, Russian expert, May 2017.

[140] Olga Ivshina, "Российский след в турецких взрывах: правда и вымысел" ["Russian track in Turkish explosions: Truth and fiction"], BBC (Russian), 5 July 2016.

[141] The state eventually tried 46 people for the bombing. According to a news report, "sixteen out of the 46 defendants in the trial are citizens of the Russian Federation". "Atatürk Havalimanı'ndaki terör saldırısı davası", *Karar*, 15 November 2017.

[142] Crisis Group phone interview, Russian expert, spring 2017.

[143] See Crisis Group Report, *Exported Jihad,* op. cit. About 3,000-5,000 citizens of the Russian Federation are believed to be fighting in Syria and Iraq. Many of them have passed through Turkey.

into jihadist movements, including, for example, Akhmed Chatayev, a Chechen thought to have masterminded the Istanbul airport attack, as well as the militants who carried out the strike, who were nationals of Russia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.[144] The main suspect in the April 2017 St. Petersburg metro bombing was an ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan who had spent time in Turkey.[145]

Turkish authorities, on the other hand, tend to look favourably on the *muhajirs* and have granted some political asylum.[146]Russia-born Salafis typically are staunch supporters of Erdoğan and his party, in contrast to the North Caucasus diaspora that arrived during the 19th century, which leans toward the secular opposition. Moreover, Turkish authorities suspect the involvement of Russian security services in the assassinations in Turkey of prominent Chechens.[147] Following the most recent incident in January 2015, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç explicitly blamed Russia. "We know that the hand of a well-known organisation in Russia has killed five Chechens in Istanbul", he said. "However, we have not been able to catch the criminals, because the crimes were carried out at a highly professional level".[148]

The vast majority of *muhajirs* are non-violent. Many are members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which rejects ISIS's violence.[149] Community activists claim that Russia has often blacklisted and pressed criminal charges against Russian nationals residing in Turkey without conclusive evidence.[150] Russian law enforcement agencies pressure Turkish authorities to hand over people on its list, in accordance with a December 2014 agreement to cooperate on criminal matters.[151]

Continued Russian efforts to pressure Turkey into cracking down on the *muhajirs* will likely remain a thorn in the side of bilateral ties. Ankara can be expected to make sporadic arrests and deportations but stop short of fully meeting Russian demands. While Russia might soften its position as it reclassifies Salafi militias in Syria (such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam) it previously labelled terrorists as "moderate opposition", the *muhajir* question illustrates the limits of security cooperation between the two governments.

[144] "The Struggle with Islamic State that Turkey Hoped to Avoid", Crisis Group Commentary, 2 July 2016; see also Ilya Koval, "Chatayev: The man suspected of the attack in Istanbul", Deutsche Welle, 2 July 2016.
[145] Akbarzhon Djalilov, "Подозреваемый в теракте в Петербурге был депортирован из Турции" ["Suspect in the terrorist attack in St. Petersburg was deported from Turkey"], Radio Svoboda, 11 April 2017.
[146] Typically, Russian Muslims wishing to settle in Turkey enter the country as tourists and then apply for one-year residence permit, which is extendable.
[147] Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Another Chechen emigré murdered in Turkey", *Eurasia Daily Monitor,* 6 March 2015.
[148] Ibid.
[149] William Scates Frances, "Why ban Hizb ut-Tahrir? They're no ISIS – they're ISIS's whipping boys", *The Guardian*, 12 February 2015.
[150] Alieva and Ivshina, "Российские мусульмане в Турции: против Москвы, но не в ИГИЛ" ["Russian Muslims in Turkey: Are against Moscow, but not in ISIL"], op. cit.
[151] "Putin-Erdogan meeting round-up", TASS, 3 May 2017.

VII. **Conclusion**

Improved Turkey-Russia ties are good news for the Turkish economy and for citizens of both nations who suffered the consequences of Moscow's sanctions after the Su-24 crisis. It is better, too, for the countries of the Black Sea and the South Caucasus regions that Russia and Turkey are no longer locked in confrontation.

Yet notwithstanding the recent rapprochement, the two countries diverge in their aims with regard to those regions' main pressure points. They disagree in Ukraine, particularly over the status of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars. Russia's force projection across the Black Sea has upset Ankara enough to prompt it to enable NATO's entry into those waters, reversing a decades-old policy of keeping the alliance out. While both Moscow and Ankara were careful not to fuel the latest flare-up over Nagorno-Karabakh, their interests in the South Caucasus nonetheless conflict and their weapons supply and deployment intensify a build-up in an already heavily militarised region. Nor have they found common ground on the question of the Russian Muslim diaspora in Turkey.

Optimally, improvements in overall relations would lay the groundwork for Russian-Turkish cooperation that could bring greater stability to the Black Sea region, help repair relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and improve the plight of Crimean Tatars. Among potential measures, the two sides could establish military-to-military contacts to avoid accidents involving the two naval forces in the Black Sea. Turkey could provide further aid to the Crimean Tatars; Russia could allow it to do so. The two countries could coordinate efforts to persuade Armenians and Azerbaijanis to avoid any military escalation, take confidence-building steps or even entertain compromise. While there are important obstacles to having Russia and Turkey seize the opportunity to create such a virtuous cycle, they should at a minimum prevent regional conflicts from derailing bilateral cooperation.

Brussels/Ankara/Moscow/Kyiv/Baku/Tbilisi/Yerevan,
28 June 2018

Appendix A: Map of the Black Sea and South Caucasus Regions

Appendix B: Map of Ukraine

Appendix C: Map of Georgia with Breakaway Regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Appendix D: Map of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Zone in a Regional Context

Appendix E: Acronyms

A2/AD	Area Access/Access Denial
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SAMs	Surface-to-air missiles
YPG	Peoples' Protection Units

Appendix F: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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June 2018

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Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Balkans

Macedonia: Defusing the Bombs, Europe Briefing N°75, 9 July 2015.

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Chechnya: The Inner Abroad, Europe Report N°236, 30 June 2015 (also available in Russian).

North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (IV): Economic and Social Imperatives, Europe Report N°237, 7 July 2015 (also available in Russian).

The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?, Europe Report N°238, 16 March 2016 (also available in Russian).

Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds, Europe Report N°244, 1 June 2017.

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The Ukraine Crisis: Risks of Renewed Military Conflict after Minsk II, Europe Briefing N°73, 1 April 2015.

Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine, Europe Briefing N°79, 5 February 2016.

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Can Peacekeepers Break the Deadlock in Ukraine?, Europe Report N°246, 15 December 2017.

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Turkey

A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks, Europe Briefing N°77, 17 December 2015 (also available in Turkish).

The Human Cost of the PKK Conflict in Turkey: The Case of Sur, Europe Briefing N°80, 17 March 2016 (also available in Turkish).

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Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions, Europe Report N°248, 29 January 2018 (also available in Turkish).

Turkey's Election Reinvigorates Debate over Kurdish Demands, Europe Briefing N°88, 13 June 2018.

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Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°72, 20 January 2015 (also available in Russian).

Stress Tests for Kazakhstan, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°74, 13 May 2015.

Kyrgyzstan: An Uncertain Trajectory, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°76, 30 September 2015.

Tajikistan Early Warning: Internal Pressures, External Threats, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°78, 11 January 2016.

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Uzbekistan: In Transition, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°82, 29 September 2016.

Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°83, 3 October 2016 (also available in Russian and Kyrgyz).

Uzbekistan: Reform or Repeat?, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°84, 6 December 2016.

Uzbekistan: The Hundred Days, Europe and Central Asia Report N°242, 15 March 2017.

Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries, Europe and Central Asia Report N°245, 27 July 2017 (also available in Chinese and Russian).

The Rising Risks of Misrule in Tajikistan, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°86, 9 October 2017 (also available in Russian).

Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°87, 14 March 2018 (also available in Russian).

Appendix H: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees

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