

RUSSIA AND TURKEY: A CURE FOR SCHIZOPHRENIA

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Russia's present relations with Turkey can be best described as schizophrenic. On the one hand, the Turks and the Russians have never had such amicable contacts—and on such an order of magnitude—as since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Shuttling small-retail Russian traders have turned Istanbul into a major hub of their commercial operations, whose volume rivals the official commercial turnover between the two countries. Antalya, along with other seaside resorts on the Turkish Mediterranean, has replaced the Crimea as the favourite vacation address for those Russians who can afford to go on holiday. Turkish construction workers are literally giving a new look to Moscow by building new dazzling business headquarters for Russia's new rich—or rebuilding the seats of political power, such as the State Duma or the once-shelled White House of the government. Thousands of Russian military officers who have returned from Germany and their family members are lucky to reside in modern living quarters built for them by Turkish workers—with Bonn's money. In a word, the Russians and the Turks have never been intermingling and co-operating so closely, and for so much mutual advantage, in the economic sphere as in the last five or six years.

The opposite side of the ledger is almost as disturbing as the first one is encouraging. With the end of the Cold War, the scene appears to be set for a revival of the 400-year-old competition, and even for an advent of something which heretofore had been a marginal factor, namely, a clash of civilisations, Christian Orthodox and Moslem, with Russia and Turkey more or less assigned the mission of chefs de file for the respective sides. With eight wars fought between the two countries from the eighteenth through the early twentieth century, Turkey's role as Russia's 'natural' geopolitical rival was 'discovered'. Now, it is argued, Ankara is only too eager to take revenge upon Moscow for its historical defeats and, by easing Russia out of its former provinces, recreate a neo-Ottoman sphere of influence from the Balkans to Lake Balkhash, Kazakhstan. 'Pan-Turkism' is dreaded along with 'Islamic fundamentalism', Turkish involvement is suspected in Chechnya, and Turkish influence is seen as making inroads in Tatarstan and Crimea.

Thus, in a very simplified way, the question regarding the future of Russo-Turkish relations may be posed as follows: Which will ultimately prevail, geopolitics and geo-strategy or geo-economics?

As things stand today, there is no clear answer yet to this question. Both countries are in the process of redefining themselves and reassessing much of the historical baggage from most of the century. Both face new, and more complicated international environments. Both face serious domestic challenges to their territorial integrity. In some new ways, however, both remain important to each other even if they no longer share a common border. Whereas during the decades of the Cold War, the relationship between Moscow and Ankara was subsumed within the global Soviet-American confrontation, it has now assumed a distinct autonomy and, moreover, is rightly regarded as the centrepiece of an emerging regional system focused on the Black Sea and the Caspian.

This article shall attempt, as a first step, to take stock of the problems and opportunities existing in Russo-Turkish relations and examine them through the prism of perceived national interests and stated foreign and security policy goals. This will make it possible to contrast reciprocal concerns, and categorise them as to their relative significance. Not attempting a study in comparative political psychology, the article will only identify the demons of the past which are best exorcised before they dim the politicians' views. Last but not least, we shall point to the opportunities, primarily in the economic sphere, which could not only continue to have a soothing effect on the development of the bilateral relationship but may assume a leading role in shaping the future of Russo-Turkish ties.

THE INVENTORY OF PROBLEMS

After the demise of Marxism-Leninism, it is traditional geopolitics that has, for the time being at least, become the new point of reference for Russia's foreign policy. Russian politicians are searching for new friends and allies, and are trying to spot new potential adversaries. Seen from this angle, it is difficult to put Turkey into the former category.

Thus, one major set of problems between Turkey and Russia today is geopolitical in nature. For slightly less than two centuries, the two countries had had a common border in the Transcaucasus and struggled for domination of the Black Sea. For Russia, this struggle was a continuing march of glory from 1768 through 1878. After seventy years of relative stability starting 1921, there now again exists a buffer zone between the two countries, composed of newly independent and de facto neutral states, and the political configuration of the Black Sea basin is far less hegemonistic than it has been for centuries. Will there be a resumption of the historical Russo-Turkish competition for the new 'gray area', especially in the Caucasus?

For Russia, this would be an attempt to arrest, and hopefully reverse its general withdrawal from its long-time outposts and age-old borders, long presumed to be immutable. Many Russians wonder, where this retreat will eventually stop, unless Moscow decides to be more assertive. In the first instance, Moscow relinquished control over its Warsaw Pact subordinates, such as Bulgaria and Hungary. In the second episode, it accepted the independence of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. In the third act, it fought—and lost—a war against the Chechens, resulting in that republic's de facto separation from the Russian Federation itself. Will this latest politico-military debacle usher in a new round of Russian retreat, this time from the rest of the Moslem Northern Caucasus? What are Russia's interests in the region: to promote post-Soviet integration with a view to establishing a Moscow-led confederacy? This seems increasingly unlikely. To reconstitute Russia as a power centre wielding control over its former borderlands? But Moscow is hardly capable of performing this feat now or in the foreseeable future. Accept the realities and, while taking more blows to its position and pride, adopt a low profile, withdraw still further unto itself and become introvert? For many, this would signify the end of Russia—as they know it.

Most members of the Russian political class view Turkey as one of the main beneficiaries of the Soviet collapse. Without much effort, Ankara has suddenly regained access to the former southern underbelly of its neighbour. Long gone are the days when Western-oriented Moscow leaders saw Ankara as a stabilising force in the former Soviet south, projecting benign Western influence. Now it is difficult for the geopolitically-minded Russians not to see Turkey as a rival out to pick up more of the pieces of their former realm. These 'geopoliticians' now make up a majority in the State Duma, across all lines. The principal difference among them appears to be whether Turkey is to be taken as a largely independent actor or as a regional proxy of the remaining superpower, the United States.

Within this world-view, new-old divisions are emerging. Turkey, in quasi-alliance with Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia (and the US and NATO on the horizon), is seen as pitted against Russia and Armenia. Too weak and disorganised, Moscow has failed to create an association of 'spiritually related peoples' (a euphemism for Orthodox Christendom), with many of the potential members like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova 'defecting to the West'. As if traditional geopolitics were not enough, Turkey's closure of the Black Sea straits to large oil tankers, and the prospect that at least some pipelines from the Caspian will bypass Russia, have served as clear signals that Russia is being 'rolled back'.

Logically, this geopolitical view leads either to capitulation or attempts at revisionism. It treats Russia as the aggrieved party, unjustly suffering at the hands of more successful rivals and competitors.

Another, second set of issues is geo-strategic. The regional military balance, which in the past allowed Russia to feel rather uncomfortable, has become totally upset. With the Warsaw Pact and the USSR having disintegrated, the Black Sea has, to many Russian military experts, become a NATO lake. As Russia and Ukraine are quarrelling over the division of the Black Sea fleet and the status of Sevastopol, the fleet itself is rapidly degrading. The growth of the Turkish Navy which, the Russians fear, may by the year 2000 outstrip the Black Sea Fleet by 2 to 1, and the ever more frequent 'flag-

showing' visits by US naval ships and Partnership for Peace exercises underline the harsh reality: Russia has been turned into a naval underdog.

The Navy, of course, has traditionally played an auxiliary role in Russian military strategy in the region. The Russian army has lost key positions in many areas and is a shadow of its former self. Divided up among the successor states of the USSR (with a large chunk going to Ukraine), constrained from the outside by the flank limitations under the CFE treaty, which many in Russia regard as unjust and discriminating, it has suffered tremendously internally from the lack of reform, desperate shortage of funding and an unprecedented loss of morale. Military integration with other CIS states has been anything but a success story. The officially proclaimed strategic partnership with Ukraine, which implied some form of response to a Turkish challenge, isn't working. The presence of Russian forces in Georgia is becoming problematic due to the deadlock in solving the Abkhaz conflict. Azerbaijan, its CIS membership notwithstanding, is seen as Turkey's de facto ally. Russia is left with Armenia, with which it even lacks a common border and which is by far a net consumer of Russian-provided security. In both Abkhazia and Karabakh, Russia has been unable to come up with acceptable settlement formulas, and has come under fire from both sides. What worries some people in Russia is the prospect, however hypothetical, of Turkish peacemakers replacing the Russians in places like Abkhazia.

The next set of issues is geopolitics with an economic icing. These relate to the Caspian oil routing bypassing Russia, and the prospects of turning the Caspian into a new Persian Gulf, where the US would compete with Russia for domination, relying on Turkey as its principal regional ally.

Thus, the areas of potential conflict appear wide. It is important to note that they concern not so much Russia and Turkey themselves as the countries located between them. This 'in-between area' includes some of the world's most volatile regions, such as the Caucasus, Central Asia, the northern Black Sea littoral (Crimea), and to some extent the Balkans. Competition and rivalry for political influence and economic advantage between Russia and Turkey in each of these regions will probably continue, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. However, the modalities of this competition can and must be addressed, leading to agreement on an informal code of conduct.

The basis for that is not discouraging. Already, both Moscow and Ankara have exercised a fair amount of restraint, whether with respect to Chechnya or Kurdistan. In the future, neither side stands to gain from encouraging separatism in the other's territory, or indeed anywhere in the region. For all its economic presence in the Transcaucasus, Turkey has not seriously attempted to establish a military presence there. Rather than siding completely with Ankara, Baku has been mostly playing on Russian-Turkish rivalry for its own benefit.

Perhaps more importantly, however, both countries have come to recognise their own and each other's limitations. Unlike 1918-21, Russia is not about to reconstitute itself as an empire hanging over Turkey. Its recent peacemaking operations, for all the problems related to them, could in no way be compared to the 1921 march of the Red Army to 'Sovietize' Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. By the same token, the fears of Turkish expansionism, so widespread in Russia in 1992-93, calmed down when it was seen that, even the position of the newly-independent states aside, Turkey's current and likely future resources will not suffice for creating a Turkic bloc. At the same time, both Moscow and Ankara have become fully conscious of the other's power of denial.

OPPORTUNITIES

Geopolitics is not the only new arrival on the Moscow scene, and perhaps it is not new at all. What is really novel is the fact that private economic interests are—for the first time in Russia's history—making a real impact on the country's foreign policy. The change can at times be dramatic: only a few weeks separate General Constantin Pulikovski's ultimatum, in Grozny, threatening to level the city, from the start of Boris Berezovski's diplomacy, stressing economic incentives in negotiations with the Chechens. Both the Lukoil company and Gazprom advocate economic pragmatism, whether with regard to extracting and transporting the Caspian Sea oil or building gas pipelines.

Orthodoxy and geopolitics matter little to these new actors—as little, perhaps, as military balances do for Rosvooruzhenie, the Russian arms export agency. It sells tanks and air defence systems to Cyprus, submarines to Iran, fighter planes to Bulgaria and Hungary, and has plans to expand weapons exports to Syria, and resume them to Iraq once the sanctions are lifted. At the same time, Turkey has become the first NATO country to have received deliveries of Russian armed helicopters and army fighting vehicles. Rosvooruzhenie has offered it co-production of Russia's best attack helicopter, the KA-50 Black Shark. Even a politician with a carefully kept 'patriotic' image as Moscow's mayor Yuri Luzhkov, actively works to promote Russo-Turkish trade.

For the present, it appears, these new trends are not strong enough to effect a radical break with the inherited traditions of Russian foreign policy overnight. The direction of change, however, can be observed even now. Russia's foreign ministry has had to soften its position on sharing the wealth of the Caspian, moving closer to Lukoil's. Moscow had to drop its original demand that all oil from Azerbaijan should be transported across Russian territory. The scandal which broke out in early 1997 over ostensibly unauthorised arms deliveries to Armenia has come to signify not so much a tilt to Azerbaijan as the start of a fundamental reappraisal of Russian security policy in the Transcaucasus.

In this light, a two-pipeline solution looks perfectly feasible, provided that Russian, Turkish, Western and local interests, from Armenia to Azerbaijan to Georgia to Chechnya are given a share. The oil factor, which often was an apple of discord, could yet become a factor of stability-building in the Caucasus, and an incentive for Russo-Turkish co-operation.

These trends are likely to become more pronounced when Russia's economy starts to pick up, which might happen around the year 2000. Bilateral co-operation may well fit within the pattern of multilateral co-operation around the Black Sea basin. The Black Sea Economic Co-operation project can provide a suitable framework for such co-operation. An important factor here will be, that neither Turkey nor Russia appear set for economic preponderance in the region: the centre of gravity, and of attraction for all states in the area, including the larger ones, will be the European Union.

CONCLUSIONS

In the future, Russia's place in the world shall be determined not by a 'central' relationship with a major power, be it the United States, or China, or Germany, or even some combination of power centres, as seems to be the conventional wisdom in Moscow these days. In the future, Russia will increasingly feel the need to fit in with various regional combinations—to the west, east, and south of its borders. Thus, relations which will emerge between Russia and her close neighbours to the west, east and south will assume new importance. Among the countries of the southern tier, Turkey clearly stands out. As to Turkey, it is no longer simply a flank state of the Western alliance. Ankara finds its new immediate environment rich in challenges, but also containing many new opportunities. Over time, this will probably push both countries to a more balanced and a generally positive relationship. Exploiting these opportunities, Turkey and Russia will be increasingly conscious of their limitations. There will be no 'Turkish century'. There will be no independent global power centre with Moscow as its capital. The nearest pole of attraction has already emerged, and its pull will grow, drawing Ankara and Moscow in the same direction: the European Union.