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Managed Regional Rivalry Between Russia and Turkey After the Annexation of Crimea

SEÇKİN KÖSTEM

Abstract

This essay explores the regional rivalry between Russia and Turkey from the former's annexation of Crimea in 2014 to its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The main argument is that Russia and Turkey have maintained a managed regional rivalry. The two have continuously supported opposing sides in regional conflict theatres. At the same time, Russia and Turkey have learned to accommodate the interests and spheres of influence of each other and cooperate through various bilateral mechanisms. The essay concludes that a form of managed regional rivalry will continue to shape Russian–Turkish relations in Eurasia in the foreseeable future.

RUSSIA AND TURKEY HAVE GRADUALLY BUT SIGNIFICANTLY improved bilateral cooperation in the past decade. The two countries have expanded their cooperation in the field of energy. For example, in January 2020, the TurkStream pipeline connecting the two countries was officially launched. Moreover, Russia and Turkey have coordinated their attempts to find a settlement to the Syrian conflict, aligning their preferences at the expense of the United States. The Turkish government even acquired and tested Russian S-400 air defence systems, which resulted in its exclusion from the F-35 fighter jet programme by the United States. At the same time, however, Russia and Turkey have continued to compete for power and influence in post-Soviet Eurasia. The regional rivalry between Russia and Turkey dates to the early 1990s when Ankara started to establish closer political and economic ties with the newly independent states of the Caucasus and Central Asia, much to Moscow's chagrin.

To be sure, by the end of the decade, Turkey had scaled back its ambitions for greater influence in post-Soviet Eurasia. Yet, in the 2010s, Turkey once again emerged as an aspiring regional power with an increasingly assertive foreign policy, not least in its shared neighbourhood with Russia. This collides with Russia's long-standing drive for regional dominance. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 came as a significant external

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shock for Turkish foreign policy priorities and interests in the post-Soviet space. Most importantly, it dramatically shifted the naval balance in the Black Sea between Russia and Turkey in favour of the former (Aktürk 2014). Ankara, in turn, increased its military-strategic cooperation with Ukraine and took measures aimed at protecting the rights of Crimean Tatars, a Turkic minority with strong cultural ties to Turkey. Moscow and Ankara also took opposing positions in conflicts in Georgia, and more recently, Nagorno-Karabakh.

How can one make sense of these complex and seemingly contradictory trends in Russian–Turkish relations? The central argument of this essay is that Russian–Turkish relations after Crimea are best understood as a form of managed regional rivalry. In this relationship, Russia as the incumbent regional hegemon and Turkey as an assertive regional power with aspirations for greater influence try to understand and respect each other’s preferences while at the same time pursuing divergent ends in various conflict theatres in the post-Soviet space. It also bears noting that the two countries are not members of a common regional security organisation, which would most likely have mitigated their rivalry. Nevertheless, the high stakes involved for both created a learning process whereby Moscow and Ankara developed ways of maintaining diplomatic interaction and sustaining economic cooperation, despite strategic competition in various regional conflict theatres.

The essay analyses the key components of this managed rivalry between Russia and Turkey after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 until its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, mainly from the Turkish perspective.¹ In other words, it seeks to assess how Turkey as a regional power sought to bolster its influence in Ukraine, Georgia and the South Caucasus, while at the same time maintaining overall cordial relations with Russia.

As proposed in the special issue’s introductory essay, this study takes a multidimensional approach to analysing the managed regional rivalry between Russia and Turkey.² In brief, this approach holds that Russia’s policy towards Turkey has been shaped by its desire to weaken the transatlantic alliance and strengthen energy ties (Köstem 2021). In turn, Turkey’s domestic political transformation (Aktürk 2019; Erşen & Köstem 2020), its search for strategic autonomy from the West (Kutlay & Öniş 2021), the asymmetric interdependence between the two countries (Demiryol 2015; Öniş & Yılmaz 2016; Köstem 2018) and the Syrian conflict (Köstem 2021) can be considered intervening factors that have eased the regional rivalry and at times pushed Turkey towards closer cooperation with Russia. As evidenced in Turkey’s persistent support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkic identity and public opinion have, to a considerable degree, shaped its geopolitical aspirations and assessment of the regional order. At the individual level of analysis, the close working relationship between presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Erdoğan has contributed to consolidate bilateral ties and prevent more severe negative fallouts from regional crises.

¹This essay does not discuss the impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on Russian–Turkish relations because it was accepted for publication before the invasion.

²For a recent article addressing eclectic approaches to Russian foreign policy, see Götz and MacFarlane (2019).

The remainder of this essay proceeds as follows. The next section reviews how the existing literature has conceptualised Russian–Turkish relations. Then, the essay presents a novel concept—managed regional rivalry—to conceptualise and explain the Russian–Turkish relationship that has emerged in the post-Soviet region. In the following section, the essay analyses the managed regional rivalry between Russia and Turkey in three different conflict theatres in the post-Soviet space—Georgia, Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In each of these theatres, Russia’s hegemonic position and Turkey’s regional aspirations have been at odds, albeit to varying degrees and with varying effects. The final section concludes by elaborating on the implications of the managed rivalry between Russia and Turkey for the regional security order.

The existing literature on Russian–Turkish relations

The existing literature explores Russian–Turkish relations from historical (Hirst & İsci 2020), geopolitical (Aktürk 2006, 2014; Erşen 2011) and political-economic perspectives (Demiryol 2015; Öniş & Yılmaz 2016; Köstem 2018). One phenomenon is particularly puzzling for scholars of Russian–Turkish relations: the rather complicated nature of the relationship, which is increasingly marked by economic cooperation, on one hand, and continuing tensions over geopolitical crises, on the other. This has also made it difficult to conceptualise the form of Russian–Turkish relations from a single theoretical perspective.

Conceptualising bilateral ties as a form of ‘virtual rapprochement’, Bazoglu Sezer (2000, p. 62) argued that ‘a hard kernel of mutual fear, mistrust, and suspicion’ would shadow the growing cooperation between Moscow and Ankara. Bazoglu Sezer’s ‘virtual rapprochement’ incorporated ‘managed geopolitical rivalry and economic cooperation verging on interdependence’ (Bazoglu Sezer 2001, p. 63). At the same time, Bazoglu Sezer (2000) argued that Turkey’s growing influence in Eurasia would be an irritant for Russia, which continued to see the region as its ‘back yard’ in the post-Cold War period.³ Approaching the issue from a neorealist framework, Aktürk (2006) argued that the eradication of the Russian threat in the post-Cold War period had made it possible for Russia and Turkey to develop a ‘strategic partnership’ over multiple issue areas. Similarly, Erşen (2011) referred to a ‘multidimensional partnership’ emerging in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Russian–Turkish relations have also often been central to debates on the reorientation of Turkey’s foreign policy priorities in the twenty-first century and the mutual frustration in Moscow and Ankara regarding US foreign policy practices in the Middle East and Eurasia.

Building on this, some scholars have highlighted the cooperative nature of Russian–Turkish relations. For example, in an influential piece, Hill and Taspınar (2006) argued that Russia and Turkey constituted an ‘axis of the excluded’ that wanted to prevent greater US interventionism in the Middle East and the Black Sea region. More recently, Kubicek similarly argued that both Russia and Turkey are ‘revisionist states, seeking

³Bazoglu Sezer also referred to a ‘managed competition’ between Russia and Turkey without defining the concept.

changes to the existing global order' (Kubicek 2021, p. 233). This revisionism creates a pragmatist outlook towards overcoming geopolitical disagreements (Kubicek 2021). Relatedly, various scholars have pointed out that Russia has been instrumental in Turkey's 'pivot to Eurasia' (Erşen & Köstem 2019) and its search for strategic autonomy in 'a post-Western world' (Kutlay & Öniş 2021). For the Turkish government, Russia has been an important partner as its relations with its transatlantic allies, not least the US, have deteriorated (Balta & Çelikpala 2020). In extension, Köstem (2021) has shown that Russia and Turkey have formed an 'informal geopolitical alignment' in Syria despite the stark contrast in their objectives. Some observers have even referred to Russian–Turkish cooperation as a 'strategic partnership', yet without specifying what the term entails or how exactly Russia and Turkey will cooperate in attaining 'strategic' goals (Balta 2019).

Other scholars have focused more on the tensions in Russo–Turkish relations. For example, Bechev (2017, p. 160) has drawn attention to the delicate balance that Turkey has to strike given its NATO membership and desire to maintain a 'shared responsibility' with Russia in the Black Sea. In his view, Russian–Turkish rapprochement is best understood as a 'marriage of convenience'. In a similar vein, Baev (2019, p. 48) suggests that Turkey has pursued an 'ambiguous strategic rapprochement' with Russia, which is increasingly challenged due to tensions over Syria, the power imbalance between the two 'Black Sea powers', and the fact that Turkey is a NATO ally.

Several scholars have sought to capture the ambivalent state of Russo–Turkish affairs. For example, Aydin (2020) uses the term 'competitive cooperation' to highlight the complex and often contradictory nature of their relationship. According to Aydin (2020), while the two countries disagree on a host of issues, 'for the first time in a long time, they see each other from a positive perspective'. Similarly, Isachenko (2021) refers to 'conflictual cooperation' to describe the relationship between the two. In a related vein, Secieru *et al.* (2021) argue that 'cooperative rivalry' best characterises the nature of Russian–Turkish relations. While these attempts to capture the ambivalent state of Russian–Turkish affairs are insightful, they stop short of developing a comprehensive conceptual and analytical approach. Building on the existing scholarship, the next section seeks to fill that gap.

Managed regional rivalry: a conceptual framework

First, the starting point of my conceptual framework is that any regional hegemon and aspiring regional power are likely to have competing material interests. Aspiring regional powers often seek to enhance their geopolitical power and economic interests through forming strategic partnerships with secondary regional countries. Towards that end, aspiring regional powers engage in cooperation with regional countries, which they deem close partners, through economic, diplomatic and military channels. Aspiring regional powers are also likely to take an active part in a regional crisis, by either playing a mediatory role or by directly supporting one party at the expense of the other. Typically, these efforts by aspiring regional powers are countered by the incumbent regional hegemon, which seeks to prevent secondary regional states from pursuing closer relations with alternatives centres of power in its own perceived sphere of influence. To maintain its preponderance over smaller neighbours, a regional hegemon tends to resort to military

measures and economic statecraft. Regional hegemon also expect bandwagoning behaviour from regional states ‘against possible challenges or threats’ (Lake 2009, p. 10).⁴ Finally, regional hegemon play the role of a major powerbroker in regional crises, which could draw in extra-regional powers. After all, outside intervention by extra-regional powers in ‘neighbourhood’ affairs is undesirable from the perspective of a regional hegemon.

Second, the concept of managed regional rivalry suggests that direct conflict between the regional hegemon and an aspiring regional power is rare as the two gradually develop mechanisms of institutional interaction and learn how to accommodate each other’s demands and interests. The establishment of institutionalised mechanisms of cooperation, the creation of channels of communication between key decision-makers, mutual respect for each other’s national security and the continuation of regular economic exchange are signs of a managed rivalry. Minimising the risk of direct conflict is especially important for the weaker party in the dyad, which in this case is the aspiring regional power, because the stronger party can weaponise the interdependence between the two. Therefore, one would expect the regional power to make bilateral and multilateral efforts to maintain close contact with the regional hegemon, while at the same time making inroads into the regional hegemon’s perceived sphere of influence.

Third, regional rivalry is ameliorated by a set of economic and political factors. This includes economic interdependencies, which under certain circumstances can reduce the likelihood of armed conflict.⁵ In addition, domestic political regimes and ideologies can also play a role in managing rivalry. In times of crises, ideologically like-minded governments can choose to align their foreign policy priorities despite diverging material interests. In a recent article, Haas (2021) argues that shared material interests can bring ‘frenemy’ states together despite ideological differences. Conversely, ideological affinity or closeness of regime types can occasionally bring geopolitical rivals together, especially during times of perceived threats to regime security and domestic political stability. Finally, close relations between individual decision-makers also help to manage tensions between regional rivals. This is especially the case with authoritarian leaders, who use foreign policy as a source of domestic political popularity.

In essence, the concept of managed regional rivalry heeds recent calls for developing multicausal, eclectic and analytically diverse approaches for explaining the dynamics of Russian–Turkish relations (Balta 2019; Balta & Çelikpala 2020). The concept of managed regional rivalry draws our attention to the geopolitical issues over which Moscow and Ankara are at odds in Eurasia. The reason for this prioritisation is that in the post-Soviet space, their interests clash more often than they overlap, and the two countries find themselves supporting opposing parties and political outcomes in virtually every geopolitical conflict in the region.⁶ This is not a new trend, as the 1990s also witnessed an

⁴See also Götz (2016, pp. 302–6).

⁵For a discussion, see Copeland (2015).

⁶In the case of Russian–Turkish rivalry, Turkey’s NATO membership complicates the picture and plays the role of an irritant for Russia (Baev 2019). This is because one of the main foreign policy priorities of the Kremlin has been to prevent NATO expansion in the post-Cold War period (Marten 2018). The fact that Turkey is a NATO member and a staunch supporter of the transatlantic alliance creates a multilayered context that goes beyond bilateral relations between Russia and Turkey.

attempt by Turkey to seek a leadership role in the Caucasus and Central Asia, which was countered by Russia's gradual but decisive reassertion of its regional hegemony (Bazoglu Sezer 2000, 2001; Aktürk 2006). Over the past two decades, the two have learned to prevent the spiralling of disagreements into conflicts (Aydin 2020; Secrieru *et al.* 2021) and developed mechanisms to manage the rivalry in the post-Soviet space. The next section uses this framework to analyse how the managed rivalry between Russia and Turkey has unfolded in three post-Soviet conflict theatres: Georgia, Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Understanding managed regional rivalry through regional crises

Georgia: a rehearsal for deeper regional rivalry

Since the early 1990s, Georgia has played a crucial role in Turkey's policy towards the Caucasus and Central Asia. In addition to being a neighbouring state, Georgia constitutes a land bridge between Turkey and Azerbaijan as well as the newly independent Central Asian states. Turkish decision-makers thus came to value Georgia's stability and supported the country's political, economic and military modernisation with the goal of helping it move towards European and NATO standards (Aydin 2004). In fact, Ankara has consistently supported Georgia's bid for NATO membership. The reason is simple. Having a geopolitically aligned NATO member on its eastern front was seen by Turkish foreign policymakers as a major asset. Thus, Turkey strongly supported NATO's decision at the Budapest Summit of 2008 to promise that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of the alliance at an unspecified point in the future. Tbilisi, in turn, saw closer military cooperation with Turkey as a way of reducing its security dependence on Russia (Bazoglu Sezer 2000, p. 71).

While seeing Turkey as a counterweight to Russia, Tbilisi has also been careful not to rely so much on Turkish support in case of a possible conflict.⁷ The Russo–Georgian war of 2008 was a significant test for Russia's coercive hegemony and Georgia's vulnerability. It was also a first warning call for Turkish decision-makers about Russia's decisiveness in reasserting its regional hegemony through military means. After the war, Ankara proposed a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform to ease regional tensions and bring Russia and the regional states together under one institutional roof (Çelikpala 2010; İşeri & Dilek 2011, p. 47). However, the initiative failed to deliver any significant outcomes. As a result, Ankara was caught between 'the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia in the highly sensitive agenda of Black Sea security' (Aydin 2009, p. 281). This was because the US and NATO wanted to increase the alliance's naval presence in the Black Sea to counterbalance Russia, which contradicted Turkey's attempts to maintain the *status quo* presented by the Montreux Convention of 1936.⁸

For Turkey, however, Georgia has remained a crucial neighbour. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the

⁷Zoom interview with Professor Emil Avdalani, European University, Tbilisi, 12 January 2022.

⁸The Montreux Convention restricts the passage of naval ships of non-Black Sea states through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. On disagreements between Turkey and the US on the increasing presence of NATO ships in the Black Sea from 2006 to 2008, see Aydin (2009).

Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway constitute important legs of Turkey’s efforts to connect with Eurasia. Georgia thus stands at a critical location for Turkey’s Middle Corridor Initiative, which aims to enhance economic connectivity between Central Asia, the Caspian basin and Europe (Atlı 2019; Köstem 2019). It is also worth pointing out that Turkey has consistently been Georgia’s top trade partner in the past decade. Building on two decades of close cooperation and policy coordination, in 2012, Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan initiated a trilateral cooperation mechanism that focused on deepening cooperation in multiple spheres, including tourism, logistics, trade, customs cooperation and, most importantly, defence ties.⁹

Indeed, after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Ankara became more vocal about its support for Georgia’s bid for NATO membership, despite the problems this would entail given the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as the Russian military presence in the two separatist provinces. For instance, at the World Economic Forum summit in Davos in January 2020, Turkey’s minister of foreign affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, openly criticised the alliance for not having initiated an accession plan for Georgia, arguing, ‘we are criticised for having relatively better relations with Russia as a neighbour, but our Western friends are not agreeing to invite Georgia because they don’t want to provoke Russia’.¹⁰ Georgia’s former prime minister and current minister of defence, Irakli Garibashvili, has on various occasions stressed the importance of Turkey as a strategic partner to accomplish his country’s goal of becoming a member of NATO.¹¹

Turkey has also beefed up its defence cooperation with Georgia in the post-2014 period. The military education and technical expertise offered by Turkey has significantly contributed to bring the Georgian military closer to NATO standards. For example, in December 2019, Georgian Minister of Defence Irakli Garibashvili and his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar, signed a military-financial cooperation deal as a result of which the Turkish government extended \$17 million to the Georgian Ministry of Defence to carry out a military logistics reform.¹² Moreover, since 2015, the special forces of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey have been conducting annual military exercises called ‘Caucasian Eagle’, the last of which took place in Ankara in August 2021.¹³ In October 2017, Azerbaijan’s minister of defence and the chiefs of staffs of

⁹‘Trabzon Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Turkey’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye, 8 June 2012, available at: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/trabzon-declaration-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan_-georgia-and-the-republic-of-turkey_-08-june-2012_-trabzon.en.mfa, accessed 10 January 2021.

¹⁰‘Turkish Foreign Minister Calls for Enlarged NATO, Georgia Membership’, *Reuters*, 23 January 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-davos-meeting-turkey-georgia/turkish-foreign-minister-calls-for-enlarged-nato-georgia-membership-idUSKBN1ZM1HB>, accessed 8 January 2021.

¹¹‘Turkey, Strategic Partner of Georgia’, *Azernews*, 24 October 2014, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/region/72362.html>, accessed 25 December 2020.

¹²‘Within the Official Visit to Turkey, Minister of Defence of Georgia Meets his Turkish Counterpart’, Ministry of Defence of Georgia, 25 December 2019, available at: <https://mod.gov.ge/en/news/read/7676/-within-the-official-visit-to-turkey-minister-of-defence-of-georgia-meets-his-turkish-counterpart->, accessed 8 September 2022.

¹³‘Kafkas Kartali-21 Tatbikati’, *M5 Savunma Strateji*, 12 August 2021, available at: <https://m5dergi.com/savunma-haberleri/kafkas-kartali-21-tatbikati-tamamlandi/>, accessed 15 September 2022.

both Georgia and Turkey signed a military partnership agreement, envisaging closer cooperation in the fight against terrorism and increased collaboration in the defence industry realm.¹⁴ In 2018, a trilateral military exercise was conducted, simulating, among other things, an attack on the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline (Avdaliani 2020). The exercise demonstrated the importance that the three countries place on the security of the energy infrastructure.¹⁵

Turkey's growing strategic partnership with Ukraine

From the early 1990s onwards, Turkey's relations with Ukraine became gradually closer on several levels. Ukraine was a founding member of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation organisation (BSEC), which was launched in 1992. In addition to an increased level of economic cooperation during the 1990s and 2000s, successive Turkish governments saw Ukraine as an important partner to balance Russian naval power in the Black Sea. In 2011, the two states established the High-Level Strategic Council, demonstrating the importance they attached to building closer politico-military relations.¹⁶

Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of eastern Ukraine constituted a critical juncture for Russian–Turkish relations and the security architecture in the Black Sea region and, by extension, Turkey's relations with Ukraine. In the post-Soviet period, Russia and Turkey had established a rough naval balance in the Black Sea. In 2001, the two countries even started to conduct joint naval operations with the establishment of the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (Blackseafor).¹⁷ This naval balance and common understanding between Russia and Turkey reached a point where Turkish governments in the mid-2000s rejected US requests to increase NATO's naval presence and activities in the Black Sea (Aydin 2009; Çelikpala & Erşen 2018). This decision was driven by the notion that 'regional ownership' among Black Sea states should prevail as opposed to Western dominance (Çelikpala & Erşen 2018, p. 74). In terms of international law, the idea of regional ownership rested on Turkey's strict adherence to the Montreux Convention of 1936. BSEC consolidated this idea and created an institutional avenue for Russia and Turkey to strengthen and broaden their bilateral relationship. At the same time, Turkey aimed to preserve a balance between NATO and Russia by initiating the Operation Black Sea Harmony in 2004; in addition to NATO member Romania, Russia and Ukraine also participated. At the time of writing, the Turkish Navy sustains

¹⁴'Turkey Signs Defense Deal with Georgia, Azerbaijan', *Anadolu Agency*, 17 October 2017, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkey-signs-defense-deal-with-georgia-azerbaijan/940225>, accessed 8 September 2022.

¹⁵Turkey's defence exports to Georgia have been growing but remain relatively small compared to its exports to Azerbaijan and Ukraine. According to estimates, in 2019, Turkey sold to Georgia defence products worth around US\$4 million (Avdaliani 2020).

¹⁶'Establishment of Bilateral Relations between Ukraine and Turkey', Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Turkey, 26 August 2012, available at: <https://turkey.mfa.gov.ua/en/embassy/564-politichni-vidnosini-mizh-ukrajinoju-i-turechchinoju>, accessed 8 September 2022.

¹⁷'BLACKSEAFOR', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/blackseafor.en.mfa>, accessed 8 September 2022.

Operation Black Sea Harmony while there is little information on the participation of other states.¹⁸ At the same time, Turkey opposed the extension of the Operation Active Endeavor—a naval operation conducted by NATO in the Mediterranean—to the Black Sea in 2006 (Aydin 2009, p. 280). While the Russia–Georgia war of 2008 was an early warning for Turkish decision-makers of Moscow’s hegemonic ambitions in the post-Soviet space, the annexation of Crimea clearly demonstrated that Russia wanted to re-establish its naval superiority in the Black Sea.

Until 2014, the Russian Black Sea Fleet had mostly consisted of non-functional ships. This changed after the annexation of Crimea, as Moscow announced a massive modernisation programme for the naval base in Sevastopol, aiming to upgrade and strengthen its Black Sea Fleet. Since then, the fleet has received a significant number of new submarines and ships ‘equipped with highly capable long-range missiles’ (Gorenburg 2018). The naval base in Sevastopol also became a vital staging point for Russian operations in Syria and Libya. Alarmed by this shift in the naval balance, in May 2016 President Erdoğan stated that NATO’s invisibility in the Black Sea had turned it into a ‘Russian lake’ (Çelikpala & Erşen 2018, p. 81). Moreover, with Russia’s intervention in Syria in September 2015, Turkey was effectively surrounded by three Russian anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) spheres.¹⁹ Anti-access (A2) ‘challenges prevent or degrade the ability to enter an operational area’, whereas area denial (AD) ‘refers to threats to forces within the operational area’ (Gordon IV & Matsumura 2013, pp. 1, 2). Therefore, Russian A2/AD spheres potentially prevent adversaries from deploying armed forces and carrying out attacks or other military operations in those spheres (Schmidt 2017). Understandably, this exacerbated Turkey’s security concerns (Çelikpala & Erşen 2018, p. 85).

Ankara thus faced harsh choices in its relationship with Moscow after the annexation of Crimea. On one hand, it did not recognise the referendum held in the peninsula in March 2014 and consistently referred to the annexation as a ‘blatant violation of international law’.²⁰ On the other hand, the Turkish government did not join the sanctions imposed by the European Union on Russia (Hellquist 2016). Instead, it has continued to search for ways to deepen its economic cooperation with Russia (more on which below). According to Balta and Çelikpala (2020), Turkey’s ‘soft stance’ on the annexation of Crimea can be explained by its will to prevent an escalation with Russia and by its ongoing tensions with both the US and the EU.

Despite the ups and downs in Russian–Turkish relations in recent years, Turkey has consistently pursued a cooperative policy towards Ukraine and even developed an official strategic partnership with it. An important dimension of this is the native Crimean Tatar

¹⁸‘Operation Black Sea Harmony’, *Turkish Naval Forces*, available at: <https://www.dzkk.tsk.tr/Harekat/icerik/operation-black-sea-harmony>, accessed 13 September 2022.

¹⁹The other two are Armenia and Crimea.

²⁰‘Press Release Regarding the Referendum Held in Crimea in 2014’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, 16 March 2016, available at: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-63_-16-march-2016_-press-release-regarding-the-referendum-held-in-crimea-in-2014.en.mfa, accessed 23 November 2020.

population, a Turkic and Muslim minority with strong ties to Turkey. Following Russia's annexation, Crimean Tatar community leaders and activists took refuge in Kyiv as Russia banned the activities of the Crimean Tatar National Assembly on charges of 'extremism'. As of September 2014, Crimean Tatar political leaders Mustafa Dzhemilev and Refat Chubarov were banned from entering Crimea by Russian authorities (Aydin & Sahin 2019, p. 47). Both Dzhemilev and Chubarov have played an important role in strengthening relations between Kyiv and Ankara in the post-annexation period. In the words of a Crimean Tatar activist, since 2014, Crimean Tatars in Turkey have even presented themselves as part of the 'Ukrainian diaspora'.²¹ While the Turkish government's ability to directly influence the Crimean issue has been very limited, President Erdoğan was reported to be personally involved in the case of two Crimean Tatar politicians, Akhtem Chiygoz and Ilmi Umerov, who were convicted on separatism charges. In October 2017, both were released from a prison in Russia and flown to Ankara. Later on, both flew to Ukraine from Turkey.²² It is also noteworthy that in June 2020, the Ukrainian cabinet appointed a diplomat of Crimean Tatar origin, Emine Dzhepar, as the first deputy minister of foreign affairs. Since her appointment, Dzhepar has frequently visited Turkey.²³

In parallel, Ukraine and Turkey have taken steps to deepen their economic cooperation. After a decade-long negotiation process, the two sides signed a free trade agreement (FTA) in February 2022 during Erdoğan's visit to Kyiv.²⁴ That said, it should be noted that after the annexation of Crimea, bilateral trade between Turkey and Ukraine significantly decreased, mainly because many major Ukrainian industrial production sites were located in the Donbas region. According to official Turkish statistics, bilateral trade reached \$5.7 billion in 2013 then fell to \$3.1 billion in 2016. There were some signs of recovery as the volume of trade reached \$5 billion again in 2019, \$4.6 billion in 2020 and \$7.4 billion in 2021.²⁵ Under these circumstances, the FTA will most likely contribute to intensifying the interdependence between Turkey and Ukraine and consolidate the emerging strategic partnership between the two countries. Still, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine will inevitably lead to a dramatic decline in Turkey's trade ties with Ukraine in the next few years. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Andriy Sybiha, Ukraine's former ambassador in Ankara, expected bilateral relations

²¹Zoom interview with Crimean Tatar activist, 6 January 2021.

²²'Umerov, Chiygoz Arrive in Turkey, To Go to Ukraine', *Kyiv Post*, 25 October 2017, available at: <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/umerov-chiygoz-arrive-turkey-go-ukraine.html?cn-reloaded=1>, accessed 23 November 2020.

²³In August 2020, Dzhepar announced that Ukraine would like observer status at the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (then Turkic Council, now Organization for Turkic Cooperation) ('Ukraine Seeks to Obtain Observer Status in Turkic Council', *Ukrinform*, 7 August 2020, available at: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3077509-ukraine-seeks-to-obtain-observer-status-in-turkic-council.html>, accessed 15 December 2020).

²⁴'The Agreement on a Free Trade Area between Ukraine and Turkey is the Result of Three Decades of Cooperation and Friendship between the Two Countries—Volodymyr Zelenskyy', President of Ukraine, 3 February 2022, available at: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ugoda-pro-zonu-vilnoyi-torgivli-mizh-ukrayinoyu-j-turechchin-72705>, accessed 8 September 2022.

²⁵'Foreign Trade', Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (TÜİK), 2022, available at: <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=dis-ticaret-104&dil=1>, accessed 8 September 2022.

to expand in the near future to include cooperation in space, nuclear energy as well as other industries.²⁶ With the ongoing war, the Turkish and Ukrainian governments have had to postpone their common desire to enhance cooperation in multiple spheres.

Ukraine's most recent National Security Strategy document, which was signed by Zelenskyy in September 2020, also includes Turkey as a 'strategic partner' alongside Azerbaijan, Georgia, Lithuania and Poland.²⁷ The most important component of this officially declared strategic partnership was growing cooperation in the defence industry. According to a Ukrainian diplomat who served in Ankara, Ukrainian governments saw Turkey as a counterbalance to the Russian military build-up in the Black Sea. In other words, Kyiv considered military cooperation with NATO member Turkey as an important factor bolstering Ukraine's national security.²⁸ Indeed, during Zelenskyy's visit to Istanbul in October 2020, the two governments signed a military cooperation agreement.²⁹ Perhaps most importantly, however, Ukraine started purchasing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from Turkish private defence firm, Baykar. Turkish drones demonstrated their superiority over Russian-made defence systems in Libya, Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, so much so that Baykar's Bayraktar TB-2 UAV became known as the 'Pantsir Hunter', the Pantsir being the Russian surface-to-air anti-aircraft artillery system (Kasapoğlu 2020b).

Turkey's leading state-owned defence firm, ASELSAN, has been exporting military radios to the Ukrainian army since 2017. In 2019, the company opened a local production facility in Kyiv. In addition, Baykar's forthcoming Akıncı (Raider) drones will be equipped with Ukrainian-made Ivachenko-Progress AI-450 T turboprop engines (Kasapoğlu 2020b). In 2019, Baykar and Ukrspetsexport, a state-owned Ukrainian arms trading company, founded a joint venture, the Black Sea Shield, to focus on aerospace engines and missile technologies.³⁰ In September 2020, ASELSAN opened a subsidiary in Ukraine with the purpose of boosting marketing and business development.³¹ Officials from Turkey and Ukraine have also been exploring the potential for joint production of engines for Turkish UAVs and technology transfer from Ukraine to Turkey on space research and development.³² Moreover, a few months after the abovementioned military cooperation agreement of October 2020, Ukraine's minister of defence, Andrii Taran, and

²⁶Zoom interview with Andriy Sybiha, Ukraine's former ambassador to Turkey, 14 January 2021.

²⁷'Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy No 393 2020', Prezydent Ukrainy, 14 September 2020, available at: <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3922020-35037>, accessed 23 December 2020.

²⁸Skype interview with anonymous Ukrainian diplomat, 10 October 2020.

²⁹'Turkey, Ukraine Sign Military Cooperation Agreements', *VOA*, 16 October 2020, available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_turkey-ukraine-sign-military-cooperation-agreements/6197240.html, accessed 15 December 2020.

³⁰See, 'Foundation History', *Black Sea Shield*, available at: <https://blackseashield.com/foundation-history.html>, accessed 13 September 2022.

³¹'Turkey's Leading Defense Firm ASELSAN Forms Company in Ukraine to Boost Cooperation', *Daily Sabah*, 3 September 2020, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/turkeys-leading-defense-firm-aselsan-forms-company-in-ukraine-to-boost-cooperation>, accessed 15 December 2020.

³²'Ukraine Eyes More Joint Defense Projects with Turkey', *Anadolu Agency*, 3 February 2020, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/ukraine-eyes-more-joint-defense-projects-with-turkey/2132853>, accessed 20 December 2020.

the head of Turkey's Presidency of Defence Industries,³³ Ismail Demir, reached an agreement to produce four Turkish Ada-class corvettes in Ukraine's Okean shipyard.³⁴

Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the use of Turkish drones by Ukraine had already emerged as an irritant to Moscow. According to Andrey Kortunov (2020), Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, the growing military cooperation between Ankara and Kyiv and the potential that Turkish drones would be used in eastern Ukraine were a thorn in Moscow's side. Similarly, in October 2021, the Kremlin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that the delivery of Turkish drones to the Ukrainian military could risk destabilising the region.³⁵ Peskov's statement was a rejoinder to Ukraine's announcement that it had used Turkish Bayraktar drones in Donbas for the first time in October 2021.³⁶ To make matters worse, at least from Russia's perspective, the head of Ukraine's presidential office, Andriy Yermak, announced in December 2021 that Ukraine had started to produce its own Bayraktars.³⁷

In fact, Turkish drones have proved to be effective in Ukraine's defence against Russian invasion as well. In June 2022, Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov was reported to have said that Ukraine received 50 Bayraktar TB2 drones since the start of the invasion.³⁸ Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones have been particularly useful in destroying Russian

³³Presidency of Defence Industries is affiliated with the Turkish Presidency and is the Turkish government's main bureaucratic agency that manages procurement and coordinates relations between various defence industry actors.

³⁴See, 'Russian Share of Turkish Gas Imports Falls as LNG Rises', *Anadolu Agency*, 5 June 2020, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/russian-share-of-turkish-gas-imports-falls-as-lng-rises/1866403>, accessed 20 December 2020. In response to the growing Ukrainian-Turkish defence ties and strategic partnership, in November 2020, Russia for the first time conducted a naval exercise with Egypt, one of Turkey's main rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean, in the Black Sea ('Korabli v Oborone: V Chernom more pervye proidut ucheniya s VMS Egipta', *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 16 November 2020, available at: <https://rg.ru/2020/11/16/reg-ufo/rossijskie-moriaki-vpervye-provedut-ucheniia-v-chernom-more-s-vms-egipta.html>, accessed 7 January 2021). Both Egypt and Russia backed General Khalifa Haftar in Libya's civil war, while Turkey offered active military and diplomatic support to the UN-recognised Government of National Accord; see, 'Russia Backs Egyptian Peace Initiative for Warring Factions in Libya Conflict', *Reuters*, 8 June 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-security-russia-idUKKBN23F1CP>, accessed 13 September 2022.

³⁵'Kremlin Says Turkish Drones Risk Destabilizing Situation in Eastern Ukraine', *Reuters*, 27 October 2021, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kremlin-says-turkish-drones-risk-destabilizing-situation-east-ukraine-2021-10-27/>, accessed 14 January 2022.

³⁶'In Ukraine's 1st Combat Use, Bayraktar TB2 Destroys Russian Armament', *Daily Sabah*, 27 October 2021, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/in-ukraines-1st-combat-use-bayraktar-tb2-destroys-russian-armament>, accessed 14 January 2022.

³⁷See, 'Na Ukraine zapustil proizvodstvo bezpilotnikov Bayraktar', *RBK*, 25 December 2021, available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/61c6571c9a79479875ae1306>, accessed 14 January 2022. One month prior to this, Erdoğan had proposed a mediatory role for Turkey between Ukraine and Russia over the brewing confrontation in Donbas. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, clearly ruled out that possibility, arguing that Russia was not even a party to the conflict in the region ('MID RF otsenil vozmozhnost' Turtsii stat' posrednikom mezhdru Rossiei i Ukrainoi po Donbassu', *TASS*, 1 December 2021, available at: <https://tass.ru/politika/13077035>, accessed 14 January 2022).

³⁸'Ukraine Received 50 Turkish Bayraktar TB2 Drones since Russian Invasion', *Middle East Eye*, 8 September 2022, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-tb2-bayraktar-drones-fifty-received>, accessed 8 September 2022.

artillery systems and armoured vehicles.³⁹ Viewed as a whole, the intensifying defence cooperation between Ukraine and Turkey has the potential to play an important role contributing to counter Russia's military superiority in the Black Sea.

Second Karabakh war: dawn of a new regional balance?

The conflict over Karabakh has been the most critical arena of Russian–Turkish rivalry in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, it is also the conflict theatre in which Turkey has the greatest weight due to its close diplomatic, economic and military ties with Azerbaijan. Turkey closed its borders with Armenia in 1993 as Armenian forces occupied the city of Kalbajar in Azerbaijan. In 2009, the then Turkish minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, initiated a reconciliation process, which resulted in the signing of a protocol for normalisation of relations between the Turkish and Armenian governments. However, the protocol was not ratified in either Turkey or Armenia due to heavy nationalist pressure in both countries and the security assurances that Turkey had offered to Azerbaijan regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Hill *et al.* 2015, p. 132).

Russia, on the other hand, has been a close ally of Armenia, which is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Moreover, Russia has a significant military presence in the country. In the eyes of Turkish and Azerbaijani governments, the Russian military unit located in the Armenian town of Gyumri, a few kilometres away from the Turkish border, was one of the main reasons why Azerbaijan lost the war of 1992–1994 (de Waal 2013, pp. 213–15).

During the past three decades, various Turkish governments have consolidated Turkey's quasi-alliance with Azerbaijan through diplomatic and economic means as well as through growing military ties (Köstem 2019). As Armenia has relied heavily on Russian security guarantees, Azerbaijan has pursued a strategic hedging approach *vis-à-vis* Russia, allowing it to retain a maximum of flexibility (Valiyev & Mamishova 2019). The divergent interests of Turkey and Russia came to the forefront with the outbreak of clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia in September 2020. Ankara openly declared support for Azerbaijan in its military campaign to regain the territories that had been under Armenian control since 1992, while Moscow urged and eventually convinced the parties to agree to a ceasefire.

The nature of the two regional rivals' involvement in the 2020 war thus differed to a significant extent. Although the Armenian government repeatedly called on Russia to take active measures to help stop the Azerbaijani offensive, Russian officials argued that the war was taking place on Azerbaijan's territory.⁴⁰ From the Kremlin's perspective, because Armenia was not under attack, there was no need to trigger the CSTO charter that would entail a Russian military engagement. President Putin himself made it clear that he did not want to alienate any side of the conflict as Russia was home to millions of Armenians

³⁹After Ukraine “Whole World” is a Customer for Turkish Drone, Maker Says’, *Reuters*, 30 May 2022, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-tb2-bayraktar-drones-fifty-received>, accessed 8 September 2022.

⁴⁰See for instance, ‘Interview with Rossiya 24 Channel’, President of Russia, 7 October 2020, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/64171>, accessed 7 July 2022.

as well as Azerbaijanis.⁴¹ The Kremlin's approach was in line with its shifting position over the conflict in recent years, which included increased recognition of Azerbaijan's demands. Since 2017, under the so-called 'Lavrov Plan', Moscow had been proposing a solution that included the return of several *raiony* around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan and the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force (de Waal 2020).

Turkey, on the other hand, has played an assertive role in the conflict, actively supporting Azerbaijan. In that context, it should be noted that Azerbaijan's offensive came at a time when Turkish foreign policy was becoming more and more assertive in various regional conflict theatres. This assertiveness rested first and foremost upon the experience that the Turkish military had gained in Syria and Libya. While the exact involvement of Turkey in the recent Karabakh war is unknown, there have been reports that Turkish military officers, even generals, actively offered advice to their Azerbaijani counterparts and might have guided the offensive (Gressel 2020). It has also been claimed that Turkey brought F-16s to act as a deterrent and clear the skies for Azerbaijani drone strikes during the war (Gressel 2020). Allegations that Turkey deployed Syrian mercenaries to fight alongside the Azerbaijani army also surfaced but have been consistently denied by Baku (Valiyev 2020). Still, according to an Azerbaijani security analyst, the Turkish military's support in logistics and intelligence determined the fate of the war.⁴² In August 2020, the armed forces of Azerbaijan and Turkey held a two-week long joint military exercise, during which the Turkish military entered the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan. The presence of Turkish forces in Nakhchivan likely played a deterrent role against both Armenian forces and a potential Russian military involvement in the conflict.⁴³ In addition, Turkish military's intelligence support was important in determining the location of Armenian forces on the ground. It is also clear that Turkish UAVs possessed by the Azerbaijani military proved to be very effective in defeating the traditionally organised Armenian military on the ground. In many ways, Azerbaijan's drone campaign against Armenian defences was similar to the Turkish military's Operation Spring Shield in the Idlib province of northwestern Syria in winter 2020.⁴⁴

Given the lack of an active military response by Russia, Azerbaijan's military campaign went ahead just as many Turkish security analysts and politicians had expected. Within six weeks, Azerbaijan was able to capture several *raiony* from Armenian forces and went as far as the town of Shusha, only 15 kilometres away from the *de facto* capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert. Russia's non-interference notwithstanding, Moscow effectively prevented the complete capture of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijani forces by brokering a ceasefire between Yerevan and Baku on 9 November 2020. Accordingly, Armenia

⁴¹'Interview with Rossiya 24 Channel', President of Russia, 7 October 2020, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/64171>, accessed 7 July 2022.

⁴²Skype interview with Azerbaijani security analyst, 9 January 2021.

⁴³Skype interview with Azerbaijani security analyst, 9 January 2021.

⁴⁴Despite the hype about Azerbaijan's arms imports from Turkey, according to a recent SIPRI report, Azerbaijan only accounted for 5% of Turkey's total arms exports between 2000 and 2019 (Béraud-Sudreau *et al.* 2020, p. 8). Between 2016 and 2020, Azerbaijan imported 69% of its arms from Israel ('Arms Transfers to Conflict Zones: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh', SIPRI, 30 April 2021, available at: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh>, accessed 12 September 2022).

agreed to withdraw from all the seven *raiony* that it had occupied since the early 1990s; Azerbaijan also got to keep Shusha. In order to oversee the ceasefire, a 2,000-strong Russian peacekeeping force was deployed to the area and the Lachin corridor that connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. The agreement also foresees the opening of a road corridor connecting the autonomous region of Nakhchivan to mainland Azerbaijan.⁴⁵ If realised, this corridor would open up a land passage for Turkey to the Caspian basin and ease the transportation of Turkish goods to Azerbaijan, potentially contributing to higher volumes of bilateral trade and Turkish investments. As part of the November 2020 declaration, Azerbaijan took control of the Lachin corridor in August 2022, while the construction of the Zangezur corridor that will connect Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan continues, as of writing.⁴⁶

Turkey also plays a role in monitoring the ceasefire agreement, although the original text of that agreement makes no reference to Turkey.⁴⁷ On 12 November, the Russian and Turkish ministers of defence, Sergei Shoigu and Hulusi Akar, signed a memorandum establishing a centre to monitor the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan. After the Russian–Turkish memorandum, the Turkish parliament approved troop deployments for the peacekeeping observation centre.⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, Turkish political parties of various ideological backgrounds took a unified stance in support of Azerbaijan. After all, Turkish public opinion and the political elites regard Azerbaijan as a brotherly nation and part of the ‘Turkic World’ (Köstem 2017). Upon invitation of Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev, Erdoğan attended the victory parade in Baku in December 2020. The joint centre was established in January 2021 in Aghdam, a town captured by Azerbaijani forces during the war and hosts 60 troops (mostly officers) each from Russia and Turkey. This means that the Turkish presence in the joint monitoring centre is miniscule compared to the 2,000-strong Russian peacekeeping force.

According to Trenin (2020), Russia avoided a collision with Turkey by not siding with Armenia directly. The war disturbed the post-Soviet regional order in the South Caucasus and added to its complexity in security, diplomatic and societal terms. In the changing regional order, Turkey will undoubtedly play a growing role as Azerbaijan’s key security partner. Ankara is also reported to be demanding a military base in Azerbaijan, the realisation of which will enhance Turkey’s foothold in the region (Daly 2021). At the same time, the new peacekeeping force has enabled Russia to revitalise its hegemonic role as the key security provider in the South Caucasus. The regional order thus continues to be highly complex, as the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh is still unclear and the

⁴⁵ ‘Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation’, President of Russia, 10 November 2020, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>, accessed 15 December 2020.

⁴⁶ ‘Azerbaijani Forces Take Over Strategic Town Linking Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh’, *RFE/RL*, 26 August 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-lacin-nagorno-karabakh-control-32006090.html>, accessed 13 September 2022.

⁴⁷ ‘Zayavlenie Prezidenta Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki, Prem’er-Ministra Respubliki Armeniya i Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, President Rossii, 10 November 2020, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/64384>, accessed 22 December 2020.

⁴⁸ ‘Parliament Ratifies Motion to Send Turkish Troops to Azerbaijan’, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 18 November 2020, available at: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-parliament-gives-nod-to-karabakh-troop-deployment-160131>, accessed 12 September 2022.

stakes for Russia are higher now given its direct military presence in the conflict area. Moreover, while Russia is a co-chair in the Minsk Group, Turkish and Azerbaijani officials have grown increasingly sceptical of the group due to its ineffectiveness in the past three decades (International Crisis Group 2022, p. 9).⁴⁹ In 2021, Reporters Without Borders accused Russia of preventing international media sources from entering Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵⁰ In a 2022 report, the International Crisis Group (2022, p. 6) reported that Russian peacekeepers numbered 1600, operating 27 checkpoints, located primarily along key roads within Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh, and along Lachin corridor and the rest of the single road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

Ankara and Baku cemented their alliance with the Shusha Declaration of June 2021.⁵¹ Moreover, in January 2022, Turkey and Armenia held the first talks in Moscow on a potential normalisation of bilateral relations. Unlike the talks held in Geneva in 2009, this time Azerbaijan was not opposed to Turkey's dialogue with Armenia. In the future, Turkey will likely seek to reap the benefits of its active support for Azerbaijan to gain a seat at the negotiation table. That could be realised with a 'quasi-transfer of the Astana format from Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh' (Isachenko 2020).⁵² How much Russia is willing to accommodate an assertive Turkey in the South Caucasus remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the regional rivalry between Russia and Turkey. The main finding is that Russia and Turkey have maintained a managed regional rivalry. The two continuously supported opposing sides in regional conflict theatres. At the same time, Russia and Turkey have learned to accommodate each other's interests and spheres of influence and to cooperate through various bilateral mechanisms.

In the past decade, Ankara has been in search for strategic autonomy from the West, while Russia has emerged as the West's geopolitical challenger. Several observers have suggested that Erdoğan and Putin both are revisionist leaders who demand a greater role for their states in international politics, and that this might move bilateral relations beyond pragmatism.⁵³ However, as this essay has shown, disagreements over Georgia, the Black Sea, Crimea, Ukraine and Karabakh have prevented a closer security partnership between the two. It should also be noted that the rivalry between Russia and Turkey goes beyond the post-

⁴⁹The Minsk Group was created in 1992 under the umbrella of the OCSE to facilitate a negotiated and peaceful solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The group is co-chaired by France, the United States and Russia.

⁵⁰'Russian Peacekeepers Deny Foreign Reporters Access to Nagorno-Karabakh', *RSF*, 9 April 2021, available at: <https://rsf.org/en/russian-peacekeepers-deny-foreign-reporters-access-nagorno-karabakh>, accessed 12 September 2022.


⁵¹For the text of the Shusha Declaration, see, 'Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey', *Azertac*, 17 June 2021, available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Shusha_Declaration_on_Allied_Relations_between_the_Republic_of_Azerbaijan_and_the_Republic_of_Turkey-1809375, accessed 18 January 2022.

⁵²Similar to the conflict in Syria, Russia and Turkey have managed their regional rivalry in the South Caucasus without intervention by the United States or the European Union. One important reason behind this is the diminishing US and EU interest in the South Caucasus.

⁵³For instance, see Kubicek (2021).

Soviet space and includes areas and issues in the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and, most importantly, Libya. In the eastern Mediterranean, Moscow strives to maintain a balance between the position of Greece and Cyprus, on the one hand, and Turkey's claims to its rights for exploration of natural resources, on the other. In Libya, similar to the conflict theatres in the post-Soviet space, Russia and Turkey support opposing sides and prefer divergent outcomes. Finally, Russia has strong relations with Turkey's rivals in the Middle East: Egypt and United Arab Emirates.

What does this mean for the future? At a time of declining US power and influence in international politics and given the EU's lacking willingness and ability to engage in the geopolitical crises in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East, Russia and Turkey will continue to play key military and diplomatic roles in those crises. They will continue to support opposing sides in regional conflicts, but at the same time come together at the negotiation table as demonstrated in Syria and Karabakh. While Russia has learned to take into account the demands and practices of an increasingly assertive Turkish foreign policy, Turkey has learned to deal with Russia and its ambitions without support from the West. This form of managed rivalry has become a key feature of the security environment of the wider Black Sea area and will most likely continue to shape Russia–Turkish relations in the years to come. The effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the managed rivalry between Russia and Turkey are yet to be seen.

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