

Turkish-Russian Relations : Partnership By Alienation.

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In the late 19th century Ottoman statesmen used to say that Turkey does not have a policy toward Russia. They would add that Turkey does the exact opposite whatever Ambassador Ignatiev would be saying. On Dec. 9, 2005, at the 85th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Turkish Republic, Ambassador Piotr Stegny presented Russia's prestigious medals to prominent Turkish politicians, academics and businessmen.

Indeed, given the violent and bitter history of Turkish-Russian relations, the Russian role in the Eastern Question and the dismemberment of Ottoman Turkey, as well as the Cold War, the ceremony signified in itself a remarkable turnaround in bilateral relations between the two countries.

The main driver behind the deepening of the Turkish-Russian relationship is the growing trade dimension as well as the energy relationship that is centered on the infamous Blue Stream project.

Bilateral trade grew steadily and is currently at an all-time high with \$11 billion in 2004 and \$15 billion in 2005. The trade volume is expected to reach \$25 billion in 2007. As a consequence, Russia has become Turkey's second-largest trading partner after Germany. Also, Turkey has become the primary tourism destination for Russians, while Russians are only second to Germans visiting Turkey. Helped by an easy visa regime, the number of Russian tourists grew from 1.2 million in 2003 to 1.5 million in 2004 and 1.9 million in 2005.

The deepening of political dialogue between Russia and Turkey dates back to the signing of the "Eurasia Action Plan" in 2001 between then-foreign ministers Ismail Cem and Igor Ivanov.

Undoubtedly, the Turkish Parliament's refusal to allow U.S. troops to invade Iraq from the north in March 2003 helped Russia to be more forthcoming as Turkey proved its independent credentials. In 2005 President Putin and Prime Minister Erdogan met four times, including a seven-hour private meeting on the Black Sea. The two foreign ministries have established regular political dialogue, described by a Turkish diplomat as the "most regular and substantial" the ministry has with any country. Turkey and Russia cooperate closely in the Black Sea/Caucasus region and provide support to each other in multilateral platforms such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).

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The United States, Romania, Ukraine and Georgia are in favor of a larger NATO role there. Ankara and Moscow act in concert to prevent extra-regional powers from penetrating the region. Hence, Turkey wants to reinvigorate the BSEC and develop BLACKSEAFOR as well as Operation Black Sea Harmony. Also, Ankara counsels more patience for Georgian and Ukrainian membership in NATO. In short, the struggle for influence in the Black Sea/Caucasus region is between the pro-status quo powers and the U.S.-led states that want to transform the region and integrate it fully with Euro-Atlantic structures and the broader Europe.

Turkish-Russian relations are not without problems. Russia vetoed a critical U.N. Security Council resolution prior to the Cyprus referendum on the Annan plan in 2004. Moscow continues to block a report submitted to the Security Council by the secretary-general.

The report, which urges the international community to eliminate the isolation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (KKTC), is a critical report for the Turkish government. The admission of the report in the Security Council would be a diplomatic victory for Turkey, for it would acknowledge the continuing intransigence of the Greek Cypriots. Another problematic issue has been the Russian Duma's resolution on the Armenian "genocide" in April 2005. Turkey deplored the resolution and underlined the irony of the passing of the resolution "by the parliament of a country that should know best what occurred in 1915." Frequent bans on the importation of Turkish products on health safety grounds also strain relations, albeit at a lower level. In 2005 Russia banned the importation of Turkish poultry products, fruit, vegetables and flowers.

Energy dependency is also becoming a central issue. Until recently Turkish energy dependence on Russia was not a public issue. However, the recent row between Russia and Ukraine over the price of gas rudely reminded Turkish decision-makers about their own vulnerability and has precipitated a new debate on Turkish energy dependency.

Public jitters increased when during the midst of the row Alexei Miller, Gazprom's CEO revealed the price Turkey pays for Russian gas.

Turkish public opinion turned critical about Turkey's dependency and was angered to find out that Turkey is consuming the most expensive gas in Europe. The revelation of the high price also explained the attitude of Turkish energy authorities who until recently treated the price as a state secret.

Should current trends continue, the Turkish-Russian relationship is about to become a structural factor in the region. As has been detailed, the relationship started out as a modest trade relationship but quickly evolved with the addition of the energy dimension.

External factors such as the European Union's reluctance to embrace Turkey as well as the frustration with the United States over the Iraq war have helped the relationship acquire a political and strategic dimension. Ultimately, Turkey's deepening relationship with Russia should be read within the context of a distinct sense of alienation. Should current pressures on Turkey from Iraq as well as the EU continue, the Turkish-Russian partnership may grow into something more consequential. Their sense of alienation from the West has brought them closer. Their relationships with the West will determine how they fare together.

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