

Turkey-Russia: partnership of convenience

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The visit of the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, to Turkey on 10 October signals a return to the instrumental partnership which relations between Moscow and Ankara had been characterised by before the freeze caused by Turkey shooting down a Russian bomber in Syria in November 2015. The intergovernmental agreement signed during the visit to build the Turkish Stream gas pipeline testifies to both sides' desire to restore economic ties at the level they were before the crisis. In the political sphere, the regeneration of their tactical partnership means their mutual rapprochement will above all be used to strengthen the position of both countries vis-a-vis the West, as well as a willingness to enter into a partial compromise in their policies regarding Syria. At the same time, though, there is no visible prospect for transforming the relationship into a deeper strategic partnership or a lasting political alliance. This is precluded by both states' fundamentally different policy objectives towards Syria, and Ankara's unwillingness to exit the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Intergovernmental agreement on Turkish Stream

During President Putin's visit to Istanbul, an intergovernmental agreement was signed on the construction of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline (a project which had originally been announced in December 2014, after Russia withdrew from plans to construct the South Stream gas pipeline). Talks on this project had in fact been suspended in December 2015 due to the Russian-Turkish political crisis, although Gazprom did not back down from plans to build a gas pipeline. The revived project provides for the construction of two lines of the pipeline (each with a capacity of 15.75 bcm), one of which is to be used for the supply of gas to the Turkish market, and the other for the transit of Russian gas via Turkey to European customers. The current plan is less ambitious in relation to the original assumptions; in 2014, it was assumed that the plan would include four branches with a total capacity of 63 bcm of gas annually (but even in October 2015 Gazprom announced plans to limit the total capacity to 32 bcm).

The signed agreement is largely general in nature, and the adoption of a formula that relates to the construction of two lines of the pipeline is only a superficial success for Russia. Earlier the Turkish side had advocated signing separate agreements: firstly, for the construction of a pipeline to the Turkish market, and subsequently, a separate one on the issue of the transit pipeline. Gazprom, for its part, had hoped for the signature of a single agreement for all the planned branches. The content of the intergovernmental agreement reveals, however, that the construction of the transit pipeline will require the signature of an

additional protocol. In the agreement, it was decided that the offshore part of the gas pipeline will be built by Gazprom, while the Turkish companies and a Russian-Turkish joint venture (the transit line) will build the land pipeline. The agreement does not, however, specify many of the project's technical or financial details (such as the route or the cost of implementation). However, the parties have also agreed the mechanism for calculating the discount on gas supplies to Turkey via Turkish Stream (the details are to be the subject of further negotiations), although this will not resolve the current Russian-Turkish dispute over prices. For the past two years Ankara has demanded discounts for the existing gas supplies. On 11 October, the chairman of Gazprom declared that any discount might be linked to an increase in the volume of Russian supplies to Turkey (of around 2 bcm). In the coming months, we should thus expect the continuation of the negotiating process, which could delay the pace of talks on the details of the implementation of the Turkish Stream project.

Notwithstanding the above uncertainties, it seems that the construction of at least one of the lines of the gas pipeline, the one aimed at the Turkish market, is likely by the year 2020. Firstly, the Russian side has shown great determination to systematically reduce its transit dependence on Ukraine over the coming years; one line of Turkish Stream would allow Gazprom to turn off its Ukrainian route as its deliveries onto the Turkish market came online (currently this route transmits around 14.5-15 bcm of gas annually). Secondly, Turkey is also interested in the construction of the new gas pipeline; Turkish Stream would create another direct channel for gas imports from Russia, after Blue Stream. Thirdly, to build at least one line of Turkish Stream, Gazprom could use the pipes that were originally used for the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline. Fourthly, Russia has already developed its gas infrastructure in the south of the country to an extent that will allow gas exports via a new pipeline under the Black Sea.

However, the prospects for implementing the other (transit) line remain unclear. Gazprom's previous agreements with European partners are merely preliminary, an example of which is the memorandum (in February this year) signed by Gazprom and the Italian company Edison (controlled by the French company EDF) and the Greek company DEPA to supply Russian gas via the Black Sea and other (unspecified) countries to Italy and Greece. It is unclear – and this is confirmed by the rather general wording used in the intergovernmental agreement – whether the land extension of the other line of Turkish Stream would run from Turkey to Greece, or from Turkey to Bulgaria (speculation periodically appears in the media about the South Stream project's reactivation in a modified form). However, it should be expected that in the coming months, Russia will step up its diplomatic offensive in southern European countries, trying to persuade them to orient their own plans for expanding the gas infrastructure in a manner which fits in with the second line of Turkish Stream.

The Turkish-Russian game around Syria

In the political sphere, both sides – despite the substantial differences about the role Bashar al-Assad would play in Syria's future – are working above all to reach a compromise that would allow them to achieve their current priority aims in Syria. For Ankara, this means sabotaging Kurdish aspirations to create a quasi-state in north-eastern Syria; and for Moscow, to achieve a breakthrough in the civil war by getting the regime to retake Aleppo.

This, however, is a fragile compromise, and its parameters are the subject of continual bargaining.

For Ankara, this phase of intensive cooperation with Moscow is aimed at developing more room for manoeuvre to implement the Turkish political projects in Syria. The principal goal of the Turkish authorities is to neutralise the Syrian Kurds, and in the longer term to create a security zone in the north of the country, as Ankara has demanded for several years. These activities aim to inhibit the Syrian Kurds' aspirations to link up the separate Kobane and Afrin cantons which directly border Turkey. In the course of Operation Euphrates Shield, which the forces of the Turkish army and the Syrian opposition have been running since 24 August, the first of these goals has been achieved. To implement the second, Turkey needs to occupy a wider territory reaching some tens of kilometres into Syria. Turkey's leaders have already declared that the aim of the operation is to occupy around 5000 km². Such an area would become the effective base for Turkey's Syrian clients, who at the same time would neutralise the Kurdish forces run by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – whom Turkey considers as the Syrian branch of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The talks held in the presence of the chiefs of staff of Russia & Turkey and the head of the Turkish intelligence interviews may therefore be aimed at developing a common *modus vivendi*, under which the Russians would refrain from fighting the opposition in areas of the Turkish sphere of influence.

In the wider perspective, from Ankara's point of view, cooperation with Moscow is also a demonstration of anti-Western sentiment, targeted particularly at the United States for their support of the PYD. This is intended to show that Turkey is ready to find alternatives in terms of cooperation on the Syrian question.

From the perspective of Russia, cooperation with Turkey has both short- and long-term goals. The short-term aim is to provide a diplomatic and propagandistic cover for the operations carried out by the Assad regime's forces in Aleppo. The declaration about the search for ways to provide humanitarian aid to the besieged city, and the Turkish-Russian support for the initiative by Stefan de Mistura, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Syria, to get opposition forces out of Aleppo, is intended to bring about the *de facto* takeover of the city. In the long term, Russia is seeking to legitimise its activities in the eyes of the Sunni parts of the Arab world. Its cooperation with Turkey is therefore an attempt to remove from Russia the odium of being an ally of the Shia. In addition, in a situation of acute tension with the West (mainly the United States and France), this *ad hoc* cooperation with Ankara aims to show that Russia is not isolated, and can realise its objectives in Syria not only without the approval, but even in the face of opposition from the Western states.

Pragmatic partnership

Vladimir Putin's talks with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Istanbul and their results show that Moscow and Ankara are building a relationship that could be called a 'pragmatic partnership'. It is based on two principles. First, political differences should not affect economic cooperation, which both parties see as beneficial. In this area both Russia and Turkey are aiming to restore the relationship to the level achieved prior to Moscow's imposition of economic sanctions after Turkey shot down a Russian bomber in November

2015 (together with the gas agreement, a number of declarations were also adopted promising cooperation in the fields of trade and tourism, as well as the real start to the construction – hitherto continually delayed – by the Russian-Turkish joint venture of a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu). Secondly, open conflict does not serve the interest of either party; in connection with this, they are resolving disputes by means of discreet bargaining, contenting themselves with temporary compromises, and camouflaging their fundamental differences (for example, on Syria).

On the political level, this partnership is primarily instrumental in nature. Demonstrations of good relations and declarations of a partnership serve Ankara and Moscow in strengthening their bargaining positions vis-à-vis the West, indicating that both states have geopolitical room for manoeuvre.