

Making Sense of the Current Phase of Turkish-Russian Relations



By Igor Torbakov

October 2007

October 2007

Making Sense of the Current Phase of Turkish-Russian Relations

Igor Torbakov



Occasional Paper

The Jamestown Foundation's Mission

The mission of The Jamestown Foundation is to inform and educate policymakers and the broader policy community about events and trends in those societies that are strategically or tactically important to the United States and that frequently restrict access to such information. Utilizing indigenous and primary sources, Jamestown's material is delivered without political bias, filter or agenda. It is often the only source of information that should be, but is not always, available through official or intelligence channels, especially in regard to Eurasia and terrorism.

Occasional Papers are essays and reports that The Jamestown Foundation believes to be valuable to the policy community. These papers may be created by analysts and scholars associated with The Jamestown Foundation or as the result of a conference or event sponsored or associated with The Jamestown Foundation. Occasional Papers reflect the views of their authors, not those of The Jamestown Foundation.



1111 16th St. NW, Suite 320
Washington, DC 20036
tel: (202) 483-8888 • fax: (202) 483-8337
• www.jamestown.org •

Executive Summary

Over the last decade, some very significant shifts have taken place in Eurasia's geopolitical landscape, with Turkey and Russia moving away from the Cold War era animosity and toward what seems to be ever closer cooperation. Analysts and politicians in the two countries have advanced the set of similarities that account for the ongoing rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow. Both states, it is said, are "Eurasian" as they straddle Europe and Asia, and have emerged from under the rubble of the huge land-based multiethnic empires. In both countries, the elites believe their primary task is to safeguard national unity and sovereignty; thus, nationalism is a wide-spread public sentiment but also a tool readily used by the authorities for mass mobilization. More importantly, both countries' relations with Europe have always been quite problematic. The Turks and the Russians were perceived as "significant Others" in the process of the construction of European identity and to this day have remained largely uncertain as to how they relate to Europe. Furthermore, both Turkey and Russia appear to lack natural allies and have not been terribly good at making friends in their immediate neighborhood.

This paper intends to critically explore the main drivers behind the current Turkish-Russian rapprochement as well as the factors which impose certain constraints on the further development of the relationship. The central argument is that, despite all appearances, the Russo-Turkish "partnership" remains a pretty precarious affair. Turkey and Russia will continue to cooperate under one set of circumstances and compete under the other set of circumstances. Furthermore, the ideological basis for the genuine alliance-type relationship remains too shallow. The frustration with Washington and Brussels that has seemingly brought Ankara and Moscow closer together cannot serve as a serious philosophical platform – the more so that the reasons of Turkey's and Russia's frustration with the West differ. Nor can "neo-Eurasianism" become a common ideology that would unite the two "great Eurasian powers." Even Putin's Kremlin is not pursuing the strategy that can be described in any meaningful way as Eurasianist. As for Turkey, its ascendant Islamic-leaning elites appear keen to pursue the policies which probably can best be labeled as "neo-Ottomanist." Unlike the cautious approach prescribed by the traditional Kemalist foreign policy blueprint, the "neo-Ottomanism" strives for the strategic outreach within the former Ottoman geopolitical sphere. The latter, however, overlaps in a number of strategically crucial regions with what Russian security elites believe is Russia's traditional zone of influence, thus creating a potential for frictions between Ankara and Moscow

The post-Cold War and post-9/11 world we are living in appears to be infinitely more complex than the "good old" epoch of the global confrontation with its seemingly clear-cut fault lines and stable geopolitical alliances. In this sense, it is not difficult to understand those pundits and policymakers who confess they sometimes miss that bygone era – if only because back then one would not have much of a problem telling a friend from a foe. Nowadays, it is not that simple. The case in point is the tangled nature of the relationship between the two erstwhile rivals – Turkey and Russia.

Just consider this: As the West's criticism of Moscow's foreign and domestic policies is on the rise, the Russian president comes to the Munich security conference and delivers a defiant speech in which he harshly castigates the "aggressive" NATO enlargement strategy and the "unbridled" U.S. unilateralism. The next day, the Putin anti-Western diatribe is posted on the official website of the General Staff of Turkey – a long standing NATO member and Washington's supposed "strategic ally" – seemingly as a sign of endorsement of the Putin critique. What's more, there are recurrent pronouncements coming from certain quarters within Turkey's top military brass forcefully arguing that Ankara should change its geopolitical orientation – namely, to move away from the U.S. and the EU and ally itself with Russia and, possibly, Iran [1].

As the above incidents eloquently demonstrate, the relations within the triangle of the West-Turkey-Russia lack the fine clarity they certainly had in the pre-1991 world when international actors, big and small alike, knew on which side of the barricade they stood – and strictly abided by the rules shaped by the bi-polar system. Obviously, some very significant shifts have taken place over the last decade in Eurasia's geopolitical landscape with Turkey and Russia indeed moving away from the Cold War era animosity and toward what seems to be ever closer cooperation. Analysts and politicians in the two countries have been quick to advance the set of similarities that account for the ongoing rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow. Both states, it is said, are "Eurasian" in nature as they straddle Europe and Asia, and have emerged from under the rubble of the huge land-based multiethnic empires. In both countries, the elites believe their primary task is to safeguard national unity and sovereignty; thus, nationalism is a wide-spread public sentiment but also a tool readily used by the authorities for mass mobilization. More importantly, it is being argued, throughout the centuries, both countries' relations with Europe have been quite problematic. The Turks and the Russians were perceived as "significant Others" in the process of the construction of European identity and to this day have remained largely uncertain as to how they relate to Europe. Furthermore, both Turkey and Russia appear to lack natural allies and, likely due to their imperial past, have not been terribly good at making friends in their immediate neighborhood.

A string of publications have recently appeared that discuss what some observers call a true "honeymoon" in the relations between Ankara and Moscow [2]. There are commentators who argue that the enhanced cooperation between Turkey and Russia represents a "central feature of Central Eurasia's post-Cold War restructuring" [3]. Other analysts even explore the possibility of forging a closer Russo-Turkish alliance based on the two countries' "spiritual affinity" that is allegedly rooted in their "Eurasian" identity and reflected in the shared "neo-Eurasianist" political philosophy [4].

This paper intends to critically explore the main drivers behind the current Turkish-Russian rapprochement as well as the factors which impose certain limitations on the further deepening of the relationship and which will likely prevent it from evolving into the full-blown "strategic partnership." My central argument is that, despite all appearances, the Russo-Turkish "honeymoon"

remains a pretty precarious affair. To be more precise, the complex and contradictory nature of the relationship doesn't lend itself well to be neatly encapsulated in one all-encompassing formula – be it an “advanced cooperation,” “multidimensional partnership” or the like. Turkey and Russia will continue to cooperate under one set of circumstances and compete under the other set of circumstances. Furthermore, the ideological basis for the genuine alliance-type relationship remains too shallow. The present-day upsurge of anti-Occidentalism – the frustration with Washington and Brussels that has seemingly brought Ankara and Moscow closer together – cannot serve as a serious philosophical platform – the more so that the reasons of Turkey's and Russia's frustration with the West differ. Nor can “neo-Eurasianism” become a common ideology that would unite the two “great Eurasian powers.” Even Putin's Kremlin is not pursuing a strategy that can be described in any meaningful way as Eurasianist. As for Turkey, its ascendant Islamic-leaning elites that have just recently re-confirmed their grip on power following their electoral landslide appear keen to pursue the policies which probably can best be labeled as “neo-Ottomanist.” Unlike the conservative, cautious and largely reactive approach prescribed by the traditional Kemalist foreign policy blueprint, the “neo-Ottomanism” is resolutely proactive and strives for the strategic outreach within what its proponents describe as the Ottoman geopolitical sphere. The latter, however, overlaps in a number of strategically crucial regions with what Moscow security elites believe is Russia's traditional zone of influence, thus creating a potential for frictions between the proud descendants of the Ottomans and the nationalist-minded heirs of the Romanovs.

Changing Threat Perceptions as a Key Factor Behind the Thaw in Turkish-Russian Relations

There appears to be a consensus among international analysts that right now Turkey and Russia are enjoying closer ties than at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet the commentators tend to disagree as to which factors played the crucial role in bringing about the current rapprochement between the two former antagonists. There is an influential school of thought arguing that it is the economic cooperation – above all, the massive trade ties, lucrative energy relations – that is the primary vehicle that has been bringing Moscow and Ankara closer together since the end of the 1990s [5]. This author, however, tends to agree with the political analysts who suggest that the “realist” approach is the best methodological tool to explain the changing dynamics of Turkish-Russian relations [6]. Indeed, it is the change of threat perceptions on both sides that preceded any significant increase in the bilateral trade ties and in fact opened up the ways for future economic cooperation. To be sure, it was the precipitous decline in Russian economic and military capabilities following the 1991 implosion of the USSR that removed the specter of the “Soviet threat” that was haunting the Turkish security elites ever since Stalin's 1945 territorial claims. If one compares the Russian and Turkish figures in such categories as GDP, population, GDP per capita, and military manpower throughout the 1980s and particularly the 1990s, it is clear that the balance was steadily shifting into Turkey's favor [7].

It is important to note that, as the Turkish top brass and policymakers in the first half of the 1990s were getting used to the comfortable thought that the Russian Army divisions would probably not be rolling across the Caucasus border into Anatolia after all, their opposite numbers in Moscow were equally relieved to witness the failure of Ankara's brief "pan-Turkic moment" [8]. Having rejected Turkey's overtures together with the much-touted "Turkish model," the "brotherly Turkic nations" of the South Caucasus and Central Asia have also exposed the limitations of Ankara's strategic capabilities. As a result, Turkey and Russia ceased to see one another as a threat. Without this initial basic condition, the future cooperation and proliferation of common geopolitical interests would hardly become possible.

But if the "realists" are right (as I believe they are) then one has to realize that the success or failure of the Turkish-Russian "partnership" hinges – in the final analysis – on whether or not the sides perceive one another as a direct threat. Unlike in the 1990s, when the Russian military might dramatically decreased – which was a causal factor for the beginning of the Turkish-Russian thaw – and the weakened and humiliated former imperial metropole was generally perceived as the "sick man of Europe," the main message of the Putin Russia is that "it is back" as a great power [9]. Putin's ambitious intent to carry out a massive overhaul of the Russian military machine (including the lavish funding) coupled with more muscular policies in Russia's and Turkey's overlapping neighborhoods probably make the Turkish generals feel uneasy again. If the wariness on the Turkish side increases, it is highly likely that the currently flourishing partnership will find itself under serious strain, all the common interests notwithstanding. After all, the Turkish-Russian relationship has already experienced one such sharp turn when, following the Bolshevik-Kemalist honeymoon of the 1920s-1930s, the growing aggressiveness of the Stalin Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War -- particularly Moscow's insistent demands to cede some Turkish territories – pushed Turkey "westward."

Yet throughout the 1990s, the dramatic decrease in threat perception on both sides was indeed conducive for the warming of Turkish-Russian relations and for the emergence of a plethora of common interests ranging from trade to the certain affinities in the two countries' strategic outlooks. My point, however, is that in each significant sphere of the Turkish-Russian interaction there is a potential for both cooperation and competition with both modes coexisting or alternating, thus making the general picture of the relationship seemingly unstable and in a state of flux.

This paper will turn now to the analysis of the three key areas that are said to be forming the backbone of the emerging Turkish-Russian "partnership." These are energy ties, the two countries' positioning vis-à-vis the "West," and, finally, the allegedly converging philosophical underpinnings of Turkey's and Russia's (non-Western) international identity.

Energy: Never Ending Story of Competing Pipelines

Over the last couple of years, there has been a veritable avalanche of publications seeking to reveal the “true objectives” of Russian energy policies. However, the Kremlin has never been particularly secretive about the role that the energy clout should play in its grand plan aimed at restoring Russia’s geopolitical influence, which was greatly diminished by the Soviet Union’s break-up. According to Russia’s Energy Strategy adopted in August 2003, the country’s “energy complex” constitutes the “foundation for its economic development and is an instrument for implementing domestic and foreign policy.” The strategic document further states, quite matter-of-factly, that “the role of the country in world energy markets determines its geopolitical influence” [10].

Turkey, given its energy demands and geo-strategic location, naturally, occupies a prominent place in Russia’s geopolitical calculus. For starters, Russia is Turkey’s major supplier of fuel as almost two thirds of Ankara’s natural gas imports come from Russia [11]. These massive trade ties alone constitute, one would assume, a solid basis for the mutually beneficial economic cooperation. To be sure, a significant amount of cooperation does take place, given the sheer amount of energy trade turnover coupled with the corporate and personal interests involved. But despite the unprecedented intensification of the Russian-Turkish energy cooperation over the last decade, there are also clear limits constraining further development of this seemingly positive trend. Furthermore, the Russian-Turkish energy relationship is also rife with competition which is promising to become truly fierce if not cutthroat altogether.

The reason for this, quite simply, is that Turkey’s and Russia’s ultimate strategic objectives in the energy sphere are diverging rather than converging. Russia’s game, in a nutshell, is to make everything possible to “monopolize the European market and monopolize Caspian exports” [12]. Thus Moscow is not terribly keen to see Ankara’s regional role enhanced – through Turkey’s growing stake in the energy transportation sector – to the point when Turkey might feel emboldened enough to start playing a role of an independent actor and raise the issue of the possible revision of the Gazprom contracts. If Turkey emerges as an energy transit hub, some Russian analysts warn, Ankara could eliminate its dependence on costly Russian gas [13].

For its part, Turkey appears to be pursuing a two-pronged energy strategy. First, it seeks to diversify its own sources of imported fuel. Second, the Turkish strategists see the turning of their country into an east-west energy corridor as part of a broader plan aimed at increasing Ankara’s geopolitical role in the region [14]. According to some analysts, Ankara – being perfectly aware that the European Union’s frantic efforts at diversifying energy supplies and its own possible role as a transit hub give Turkey a certain leverage in its uneasy relationship with Brussels – will probably be increasingly wary of participating in the projects in which the transportation of Russian gas is involved [15]. (The EU has already unveiled plans to lower imports of Russian gas from the

current 150 billion cubic meters annually to about 50 billion by 2010. If the Europeans succeed in their determination to lessen their dependence on Russian fuel (which of course is not guaranteed), Turkey, some analysts note, “might find its gas-transit plans to be overextended and unrealistic” – at least “in the short term” [16]). The bottom line is that, as far as energy issues are concerned, Turkey’s and Russia’s strategic goals don’t sit well together, and the most recent “pipeline battles” are a good proof of this.

According to Sinan Ogan, President of the Turkish Center of International Relations and Strategic Analysis (TURKSAM), “developments in recent months suggest that Turkey and Russia once again have conflicting energy interests” [17]. Ogan and other Turkish commentators are concerned that in the two latest cases involving the east-west energy transport network Russia has taken decisions that run contrary to Turkey’s strategic interests as they clearly undermine its goal of tuning itself into a major transit hub. In the first case, Moscow, seeking the Bosphorus-bypass options for the transport of oil, appeared to have favored the Burgas-Alexandroupolis link connecting the Bulgarian Black Sea coast with the Greek Aegean over the Turkish government-backed Samsun-Ceyhan oil pipeline that would run across Anatolia from Turkey’s Black Sea coast to the Mediterranean. Ankara was utterly displeased with the Kremlin’s snub. “Moscow’s recent decision to go ahead with the Burgas-Alexandroupolis bypass oil line ... clearly illustrates the realistic limits to Turkish-Russian relations, even in the field of energy,” one Turkish commentary says [18]. According to Turkish sources, during their meeting in Istanbul last June, “Putin remained silent when [Turkish Prime-Minister Recep Tayyip] Erdogan voiced his views on the [Samsun-Ceyhan] energy corridor” [19]. As the Russians withdrew their support which is absolutely critical for the costly project to be ever realized and as the security situation in northern Iraq remains highly volatile, there is “no guarantee,” one Western observer notes, “that Ceyhan will become a second Rotterdam in the foreseeable future” [20].

The second case involves Moscow’s decision to shelve the so-called Blue Stream-2 gas transportation project that envisaged the extension of the already functioning Russian-Turkish Blue Stream system to connect Russia and Hungary from where gas could be delivered further south – to Slovenia, Croatia and Italy. Having failed, after much lobbying, to persuade Ankara to endorse a plan to lay a second thread under the Black Sea to raise the annual capacity of the original Blue Stream pipeline from 16 to 30 bcm, last summer Moscow has unveiled the alternative “South Stream” gas pipeline project. The new network, linking Russia and Bulgaria via the Black Sea and then branching into Hungary, Austria and Slovenia in one direction and into Greece and Italy in another, is jointly supported by Russia’s Gazprom and Italy’s Eni. Being perfectly aware that last May Russia cut a landmark energy deal with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to transport the Turkmen gas to Russia via Kazakhstan, the Turks are now worrying that their hope to become a major natural gas supplier to Europe may be dashed [21].

Turkish failure to approve the Blue Stream-2 project (the decision Ankara now appears

to regret) is particularly significant as it demonstrates that in its desire to become a transport hub Ankara is engaged in a very delicate balancing act. Russia's offer to expand the Blue Stream to enhance gas exports to Europe undoubtedly sounded tempting but, on the other hand, Turkey seeks to promote its value as an energy corridor that would help Europe to diversify its supplies – which basically means to lessen its heavy dependence on Russian gas. So, having found itself under Russian pressure, Ankara felt torn both ways and procrastinated until Moscow found a new partner – ironically, from among the EU member states.

After being snubbed by Russia, Turkey, however, made its counter-move having concluded in July an energy deal with Tehran. Remarkably, Iran is the largest potential source of non-Russian gas for Europe. Under the terms of the preliminary agreement, Turkey will be developing three projects in Iran's South Pars gas field. In addition, two pipelines will be built to ship approximately 30 bcm of Turkmen and Iranian gas to Europe via Turkey. True, many Turkish analysts are aware that the Turkish-Iranian project faces quite a lot of hurdles – not least, the vehement opposition on the part of the U.S. What is significant, though, is that most Turkish commentators immediately assessed the Iran deal – and with an apparent satisfaction at that -- as a “blow to Russia's [energy] aspirations” [22].

While each country has a huge stake in sustaining lucrative Turkish-Russian energy ties, competition appears to be as strong a trend as cooperation in their complex relationship. “Although trade and diplomatic and political relations between the two [countries] have improved greatly since the end of the Cold War,” one recent analysis concludes, “the rivalry continues, particularly in relation to energy, as the two countries struggle over pipeline routes and influence in the neighboring regions, including the Caspian basin” [23].

Turkey and Russia in a Broader World

There has been much talk – particularly following the U.S. invasion of Iraq – of a “strategic realignment” bringing Turkey and Russia together in a kind of “axis” that would increasingly confront Washington's destabilizing intrusion into Moscow's and Ankara's geopolitical backyard. The souring relations between the two peripheral “Eurasian” nations and the European Union, it has been argued, only added to Russia's and Turkey's sense of geopolitical isolation and further influenced the shift in both countries' strategic outlook – naturally, away from the West [24].

Indeed, recent geopolitical developments appear to have prompted Ankara and Moscow to suddenly start seeing eye-to-eye on many regional issues. As Sami Kohen, the *Milliyet* newspaper's influential political commentator, contended, “In the final analysis, Turkey's views are different from the West and closer to Russia.” In a number of cases, the level of the Turkish-Russian mutual understanding is truly unprecedented. Both countries vehemently opposed the war

in Iraq and now staunchly support the preservation of the ravaged nation's territorial integrity. In contrast to Washington's push to isolate Iran and Syria, Russia and Turkey favor engagement. Both Ankara and Moscow also appear to perceive U.S. policies in the South Caucasus as being destabilizing. The two countries have been keen to preserve the status quo in the region, while the U.S. enthusiastically backed the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia. In general, when it comes to democratization, Turkey and Russia favor an incremental approach that does nothing to upset a delicate geopolitical equilibrium. Turkey's newly elected President Abdullah Gul's formula – "Democratization is a process, and it should be expected to proceed at a different pace in different countries" – can easily be taken for one of the Russian Foreign Ministry statements [25].

Overall, Turkish policy elites appear to see Moscow's stance on some vital regional issues as a useful counterbalance to what the Turks perceive as potentially harmful U.S. policies. This does not mean, however, that some kind of Turkish-Russian "strategic partnership" is emerging. Rather, we are witnessing a tactical rapprochement based on the Russian and Turkish policymakers' shared displeasure with what they view as America's arrogant and brazenly unilateralist behavior. "The most crucial factor creating a common ground between Ankara and Moscow," one Turkish commentary contends, "[is] frustration with Washington" [26].

What is important to understand, though, is that the sources of Turkey's and Russia's anti-Americanism differ profoundly. Ankara's troubles with Washington are primarily regional and centered on America's Iraq misadventure. Turkey's most urgent strategic concern is undoubtedly the Kurdish question in Iraq. The emergence of independent Kurdistan – Ankara's nightmare scenario with dire potential consequences for Turkey's own territorial integrity – will likely be seen by the majority of the Turks as a direct result of U.S. bungled policies in the region. "If Iraq disintegrates and a Kurdish state is created in the north, the Turkish people will take this as something of U.S. making," the former Turkish president Suleiman Demirel has recently warned [27].

There is also a domestic policy dimension to Turkey's souring relations with the U.S. – namely, Washington's attempts to promote Turkey as a model of a "moderate Islamic state" throughout the troubled Greater Middle East. America's perceived support for Turkey's self-styled "Muslim Democrats" – the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) which has roots in the Turkish Islamist movement – alienates Turkey's Kemalist elites as the latter, particularly the military, see themselves as the guardians of Turkey's secular order.

Unlike Turkey's frictions with the U.S. which are mostly "regional," Moscow appears to view its current rivalry with Washington (and, broader, with the "traditional West") as a "global" affair. Significantly, some influential Russian pundits seek to re-conceptualize the troubled Russia-West relationship as a "new epoch of confrontation" [28]. Two global processes shape the essence of this new era, they contend. The first is the competition between the two types of capitalism – the liberal-democratic capitalism of the "old West" and the authoritarian capitalism that has emerged

in South-East Asia and is now developing also in China and Russia [29]. The second global trend is the shifting of control over energy resources away from the industrialized consumers and toward the less developed producers of hydrocarbons. This tectonic shift makes the competition between the energy producers and energy consumers ever more acute. According to Moscow political thinkers, Russia is a pivotal country destined to define the outcome of both global rivalries.

Within this paradigm, the confrontation between Russia and the West is unavoidable. The countries of the “old West” are in strategic retreat due to the U.S. Iraq imbroglio and the EU’s loss of direction. By contrast, Russia is rising. Seeking to prevent the further weakening of its positions and hoping to possibly recoup the geopolitical losses, the West has launched an all-out counter-attack against Russia [30].

So, there is an obvious disconnect between Turkey’s and Russia’s “anti-Occidentalism.” Turkey is concerned with the U.S. government’s bumbling in the already highly volatile region and frustrated by what it perceives as the discriminatory attitude on the part of the EU [31]. But Ankara does not view itself as being involved in any kind of “global confrontation” with the West. Russia, however, appears to be readying itself for the new round of the “existential” struggle with its perennial significant “Other.”

Some Turkish generals, deeply disturbed by U.S. policies in the Middle East, might indeed applaud Putin’s invectives against Washington [32]. Turkey’s top brass, however, uses such demarches mostly to demonstrate their displeasure with U.S. behavior. The primary aim of such moves is to urge the Bush administration to change tack and they should not be misconstrued as signs of “Turkey’s sliding toward Russia.” On the contrary, most Turkish analysts note that Moscow and Ankara lack common strategic vision concerning the issues that the Turks consider vital for their national security. The most burning problem is the intensification of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) terrorist activity in Turkey. But, much to the chagrin of Ankara’s policy elites, “Moscow still refuses to include the PKK on its list of terrorist organizations” [33]. Furthermore, “Moscow has done absolutely nothing to help Turkey vis-à-vis Cyprus, Armenia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict” [34]. For the bulk of Turkey’s policymakers and analysts, Russia’s inaction on the issues that Ankara puts on top of its security agenda is indicative of the limits to the further development of the Turkish-Russian relations.

Coming to Terms with Peripheral Status: Neo-Eurasianism and Neo-Ottomanism

Sitting at the margins of Europe, the Russians and the Turks have long been concerned with adding a non-Eurocentric international identity to the one that was tightly bound up in the two countries with the processes of Europeanization and modernization. The purpose of such dual identity is meant to be twofold: to balance the fluctuations of Europe-oriented policies and establish

a definable role in the non-European regions which Turkey and Russia view as their geopolitical backyard – in particular, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East.

Neo-Eurasianism, it is being suggested, fits this bill and, in addition, provides an ideological basis for the more cooperative relations between Moscow and Ankara. “Turkish and Russian officials increasingly refer to their respective countries as two great Eurasian powers, indicating that the Turkish and Russian versions of Eurasianism need not be competitive,” one commentary notes, “Rather, they can be complementary” [35].

Indeed, in both countries the notion of Eurasia/*Avrasya* is being increasingly used, including by the anti-Western politico-ideological movements associated with the names of the Russian “geopolitician” Alexander Dugin [36] and the Turkish romantic poet Attila İlhan (1925-2005) [37]. The Russian and Turkish neo-Eurasianists seek to root their political philosophy in their countries’ supposedly unique civilization and in geopolitics based on the deep antipathy toward the West. It could be argued, however, that neo-Eurasianism cannot serve as a viable ideological foundation for the Turkish-Russian strategic rapprochement. First, the Russian and Turkish neo-Eurasianists’ ability to influence the decision-making process in their respective countries is, mildly speaking, very modest. Second, the very significance of “Eurasianism” in today’s foreign policy of Russia and Turkey appears to be grossly exaggerated.

When the Kremlin strategists turn to the “Eurasianist” rhetoric, they do so in an extremely instrumental manner. (Needless to say, the “neo-Eurasianist” exercises of the present-day Russian pundits rarely have anything to do intellectually with the complex cultural, philosophical and historiographic discourses of the classical Eurasianism in the 1920s -1930s.) The official Russian usage of “Eurasianism” appears to pursue four interconnected goals:

- 1) to underscore Russia’s “physical” identity as the country that has the borders and interests in both Europe and Asia;
- 2) to justify the necessity of conducting a balanced foreign policy that does not privilege the relationship with the West at the expense of the Eastern dimension;
- 3) to interpret the multicultural and multiethnic nature of Russia’s “Eurasian” identity to justify the county’s membership in various international organizations (such as the Organization of Islamic Conference);
- 4) and, most important, to rationalize Russia’s right to be a Great Power (*velikaya derzhava*) with the corresponding geopolitical role in global and regional affairs [38].

It is worth noting that, while instrumentalizing – and distorting beyond recognition – disparate Eurasianist ideas, the Kremlin has never questioned the importance of the Western dimension of the country’s foreign policy nor has it ever sought to downplay Russia’s cultural ties and civilizational affinity with Europe. In a word, the Russian foreign policy, with all its twists and turns over the last decade and half, doesn’t have anything specifically “Eurasianist” about it.

The Turks, as stated above, have also been resorting to the “Eurasianist” idiom (the notion of *Avrasya*) to underscore Turkey’s dual identity. Such an identity is meant to help offset the frequent glitches in the country’s bumpy EU accession process and to facilitate Ankara’s dealings with the ethnic and religious brethren to the east of Turkey’s borders. However, unlike Russia’s, Turkey’s Eurasianism lacks deep historic-cultural roots and serious philosophical underpinnings. This theoretical deficiency accounts for the very loose interpretation of “Eurasianism” by the Turkish political thinkers. As far as the country’s geopolitical orientation is concerned, “in Turkey Eurasia can mean either anti-Western or Western-friendly” [39].

Yet it is far more important that Turkey’s current foreign policy is inspired not so much by the ideas associated with “Eurasianism” as by the intellectual movement deeply rooted in the indigenous history and culture. Neo-Ottomanism appears to be all the rage in today’s Turkey. The artifacts dating from the Ottoman era have become extremely popular with the Istanbul and Ankara elites. The antique stores in the country’s two capitals as well as across the rest of Turkey are doing good business selling all sorts of Ottoman memorabilia ranging from calligraphic scripts to late imperial postcards. Portraits of the Sultan Mehmet II are almost as ubiquitous these days as those of Atatürk. Even the country’s Armed Forces – the epitome of Turkish republicanism – have readopted the Ottoman coat-of-arms – for decades the despicable symbol of the retrograde empire. “Ottomania is in full swing with the Turkish elite, reflecting the determined revival of a culture long denied and discredited by the Turkish Republic,” one Ankara-based observer comments [40].

Neo-Ottomanism as an intellectual movement, an attempt at reformulating Turkish identity, and a foreign policy strategy is not exactly a brand-new phenomenon [41]. Its roots go back to the Turgut Ozal era of the early 1990s [42]. However, the true flourishing of the neo-Ottoman philosophy coincides with the moderately Islamic AKP’s rise to power in 2002. The elaboration of the neo-Ottoman geo-strategy is usually associated with the Prime-Minister Erdogan’s chief foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoglu. In his writings, particularly in the influential book *Strategic Depth*, Davutoglu proposes the principles of Turkey’s neo-Ottoman foreign policy based on the concept of geographic and historical depth [43]. The neo-Ottomanists’ reading of the country’s history differs markedly from the republican narrative that sought to sever all ties with the pre-Kemalist past and reject all things Ottoman. By contrast, Davutoglu and his disciples have no problem with embracing both Turkey’s Ottoman past and the Ottoman geopolitical space. In fact, they champion a deliberate revival of the Ottoman past, “both as a matter of cultural enrichment, but also as a source of an enriched Turkish identity as a political actor” [44]. In this sense, the proposed new strategic outlook is not merely national but regional, and it shifts Turkey’s self-perception as being on the periphery to the understanding that the country is in the very center of important historical developments [45].

“Turkey is a country with a historical and geographical depth,” contends Davutoglu. This involves the country’s responsibilities and, he specifically emphasizes, “certain rights.” Davutoglu forcefully argues that Turkey is not an “ordinary nation-state” that emerged at a certain point due to the play of circumstances or the designs of the outside powers – like, for example, many new states in Central Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. By contrast, Turkey is a regional power in its own right, having strong traditions of statehood and broad strategic outreach. Thus, Davutoglu concludes, “it has no chance to be peripheral, it is not a sideline country of the EU, NATO or Asia.” Rather than being peripheral, Davutoglu and other neo-Ottomanists contend that Turkey is a centrally positioned international player. For them, “Turkey is a country with a close land basin, the *epicenter* of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus, the *center* of Eurasia in general and is *in the middle* of the Rimland belt cutting across the Mediterranean to the Pacific” [46].

Such geo-strategic vision reflects the newly-acquired self-confidence on the part of the neo-Ottomanists who are supportive of a more proactive foreign policy – particularly in what they call the Ottoman geopolitical space – and highly critical of the traditional Kemalist strategy for its myopic reluctance to embrace the country’s obvious advantages – namely, its rich history and geographical location.

Yet from Russia’s strategic perspective, the rise of neo-Ottomanism may well be a cause for concern. To be sure, the neo-Ottomanists go out of their way to reassure Turkey’s neighbors that their strategy “does not, in any shape or form, involve a restoration of Empire” and are keen to draw an “extremely vital distinction between imperial vision and imperialism” [47]. But the Turkish policy elites’ talk of Ankara’s responsibilities and rights within the sprawling former Ottoman realm does not sit well with the Kremlin strategists’ perception of the large parts of the “Ottoman space” as belonging to Moscow’s geopolitical turf. The revival of neo-Ottomanism evokes the 500-year long Russian-Ottoman rivalry in the Balkans, the Black Sea region and the Caucasus. Today’s Russia which views itself as a reemerging Eurasian *derzhava* will likely be eyeing Turkey’s aspirations to become a neo-Ottoman *derzhava* – a polity vastly superior to an “ordinary nation-state” – with increasing suspicion.

Conclusion

The last decade saw a dramatic change in Turkish-Russian relations, with Ankara and Moscow moving away from the Cold War era animosity and toward a more cooperative relationship. However, the idea of the emerging Turkish-Russian “strategic partnership,” to say nothing of an “alliance,” appears to be too far-fetched. Ironically, the rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara has become possible due to the two countries’ relative weakness throughout the 1990s. As Turkey and Russia reemerge as the leading regional powers, the tensions between the two are likely to grow. The Russian and Turkish elites’ frustration with the West, particularly with the policies of the U.S. administration, proves to be an inadequate basis for the truly strategic relationship.

Symptomatically, the findings of the recent Transatlantic Trends 2007 survey of public attitudes sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States reveal that the Turks are antipathetic not only to the U.S. and the EU, but also to Russia and China [48].

The Turks' lingering distrust of Russia – undoubtedly rooted in the centuries-long history of the geopolitical confrontation – can also be partially explained by the lack of mutual knowledge and the dearth of cultural ties. True, millions of Russian tourists and suitcase traders visit Turkey on a regular basis, while thousands of Turkish businessmen thrive in the economically booming Russia. But the contacts at the level of high culture remain few and far between. On average, the Turks may be better versed in Russian literature of the 19th century than the Russians in the Ottoman era classics. However, the vibrant cultural scene in Turkey remains terra incognita for the Russians while the Turks are almost totally ignorant of Russia's modern and contemporary culture. More often than not, Russian-Turkish cultural relations, instead of being direct, would take a detour via the West. Turgut Bey, the character in Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow* who translates Turgenev from the French, is a good example of such "indirect" relationship. Another one is of course Pamuk himself, who was embraced by the Russian readership only after his literary success in the Western world.

While Turkish-Russian economic relations remain robust, there exists a potential for the reemergence of the geopolitical rivalry between Moscow and Ankara. Furthermore, the diverging strategic outlooks, mutual distrust and feeble cultural ties put additional constraints on the Turkish-Russian relationship.

Notes

1. C. Cem Oguz, “Wait, Russia, Many Are Coming to Join You!” *New Anatolian*, February 20, 2007; Ihsan Dagi, “A Pro-Russian Turkish General?” *Turkish Weekly*, May 31, 2007; Burak Bekdil, “An Incursion Which is Not – And Russophiles in Ankara,” *Turkish Daily News*, June 8, 2007.
2. James W. Warhola, William A. Mitchell, “The Warming of Turkish-Russian Relations: Motives and Implications,” *Demokratizatsiya* 14:1 (Winter 2006); Fiona Hill, Omer Taspinar, “Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus: Moving Together to Preserve the Status Quo?” *Russie.Nei.Visions* 8 (January 2006); Fiona Hill, Omer Taspinar, “Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?” *Survival* 48:1 (Spring 2006); Suat Kiniklioglu, “The Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations,” *Sakip Sabanci International Research Paper* (2006); Charles Grant, “Turkey, Russia and Modern Nationalism,” *Center for European Reform Bulletin* 49 (August-September 2006). See also a special issue of the journal *Insight Turkey* “Turkey and Russia: From Competition to Convergence” -- *Insight Turkey* 4:2 (April-June 2002).
3. Sener Akturk, “Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War (1992-2002),” *Turkish Studies* 7:3 (September 2006), 337.
4. Busra Ersanli, Visne Korkmaz, “Russian Eurasianism: Model for Iran and Turkey?” *Turkish Review of Eurasian Studies* 4 (2004); Marlene Laruelle, “Russo-Turkish Rapprochement through the Idea of Idea of Eurasia: Alexander Dugin’s Networks in Turkey,” *Jamestown Foundation Forthcoming Occasional Paper*.
5. Warhola, Mitchell, “The Warming of Turkish-Russian Relations”.
6. The “realist” case is persuasively argued in Akturk, “Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War”.
7. *Ibidem*, 346-349.
8. See Igor Torbakov, “Turkey and Post-Soviet Eurasia: Seeking a Regional Power Status,” *Prospects for Democracy in Central Asia* (Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2005).
9. Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations with the West,” *Washington Quarterly* 30: 2 (Spring 2007); Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Projecting Confidence, Not Fear: Russia’s Post-Imperial Assertiveness,” *Orbis* (Fall 2006).
10. See Igor Torbakov, “Turkey Stands to Benefit from Caspian Basin Energy Competition,” *EurasiaNet*, February 17, 2006.
11. In 2006, Turkey imported approximately 19.65 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas from Russia. Turkey’s total natural gas imports for 2006 amounted to 31 bcm. In 2010, Turkey is committed to import 30 bcm of Russian gas to satisfy a projected total energy demand of 38.5 bcm. The figures are available at the official website of Turkey’s Petroleum Pipeline Corporation (BOTAS), www.botas.ogov.tr/eng/naturalgas/ng_trade.asp.
12. Ali Tekin, Iva Walterova, “Turkey’s Geopolitical Role: The Energy Angle,” *Middle East Policy* 14:1 (Spring 2007), 89.
13. See, for example, Vladimir Milov, Andrei Lipsky, “Poveliteli trub: Pochemu stroiatsia zavedomo ubytochnye eksportnye gazoprovody,” *Novaya Gazeta*, February 2, 2006.

14. See C. Cem Oguz, "Turkey's Rearranged Energy Chessboard," *Turkish Daily News*, July 18, 2007.
15. For a detailed discussion of Turkey's role in Central Eurasia's energy politics, see Gareth Winrow, "Geopolitics and Energy Security in the Wider Black Sea Region," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 7:2 (June 2007); Idem., "Possible Consequences of a New Geopolitical Game in Eurasia on Turkey as an Emerging Energy Transport Hub," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 5:2 (Summer 2006).
16. Roman Kupchinsky, "Ankara Seeks Role as East-West 'Energy Bridge,'" *RFE/RL*, August 27, 2007.
17. Sinan Ogan, "Energy Signals in Turkish-Russian Relations After BSEC Summit," *Today's Zaman*, June 26, 2007.
18. Omer Taspinar, "Turkish-Russian Rapprochement: Reality or Fiction?" *Today's Zaman*, March 26, 2007.
19. Barcin Yinanc, "New Turkish Play On Energy Chessboard," *Turkish Daily News*, June 27, 2007.
20. Winrow, "Possible Consequences of a New Geopolitical Game in Eurasia"
21. See Ogan, "Energy Signals in Turkish-Russian Relations"
22. Oguz, "Turkey's Rearranged Energy Chessboard"
23. Tekin, Walterova, "Turkey's Geopolitical Role," 89.
24. See Hill, Taspinar, "Turkey and Russia;" Warhola, Mitchell, "The Warming of Turkish-Russian Relations;" Sergei Markedonov, "Turtsiia ukhodit k Rossii," *Polit.ru*, October 17, 2006; Idem., "Turtsiia kak potentsial'nyi soiuznik," *Prognosis.ru*, July 7, 2006.
25. Igor Torbakov, "Turkey's Strategic Outlook Making Significant Shift," *EurasiaNet*, March 7, 2006.
26. Taspinar, "Turkish-Russian Rapprochement"
27. Torbakov, "Turkey's Strategic Outlook"
28. See, for example, Sergei Karaganov, "Novaia epokha protivostoianii," *Rossiia v global'noi politike* 4 (July-August 2007). This programmatic policy paper was also serialized in Russia's government newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta*. (See the issues from July 6 and September 12.)
29. Kirill Rogov, "Battle of Two Capitalisms," *Moscow Times*, September 18, 2007.
30. Karaganov, "Novaia epokha".
31. The latest, and quite bizarre, example of the EU's coldshouldering of Turkey involves a new euro coin design that cuts Turkey from the European map. See "Euro Coin Draws Line on Turkey," *International Herald Tribune*, September 26, 2007.
32. Dagi, "A Pro-Russian Turkish General?"
33. C. Cem Oguz, "Being Seduced by Russia, Turkey Divorces from the West?" *Turkish Daily News*, July 4, 2007.
34. Taspinar, "Turkish-Russian Rapprochement".
35. Shireen T. Hunter, *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 370.

36. Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Dugin, Eurasianism, and Central Asia,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40: 2 (2007); Marlene Laruelle, “The Two Faces of Contemporary Eurasianism: An Imperial Version of Russian Nationalism,” *Nationalities Papers* 32:1 (March 2004); Idem., “Alexander Dugin: an ‘Eurasianist’ view on Chechnya and the North Caucasus,” *Jamestown Foundation Chechnya Weekly* 8:6 (February 8, 2007); John Dunlop, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Foundations of Geopolitics,” *Demokratizatsiya* 12:1 (Winter 2004).
37. Sener Akturk, “Counter-Hegemonic Visions and Reconciliation Through the Past: The Case of Turkish Eurasianism,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2004).
38. Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Finding a Civilizational Idea: ‘West,’ ‘Eurasia,’ and ‘Euro-East’ in Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *Geopolitics* 12:3 (2007); Paradorn Rangsimaporn, “Interpretations of Eurasianism: Justifying Russia’s Role in East Asia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 58:3 (May 2006); Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Russia’s Foreign Policy and Eurasianism,” *EurasiaNet*, February 9, 2005; Gordon M. Hahn, “The Rebirth of Eurasianism,” *Russian Journal*, July 12, 2002; Graham Smith, “The Masks of Proteus: Russia, Geopolitical Shift and the New Eurasianism,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24:4 (1999); D. Kerr, “The New Eurasianism: The Rise of Geopolitics in Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 47:6 (September, 1995).
39. Stephen Kotkin, “Mongol Commonwealth? Exchange and Governance across the Post-Mongol Space,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8:3 (Summer 2007), 497.
40. Suat Kiniklioglu, “The Return of Ottomanism,” *Today’s Zaman*, March 27, 2007.
41. For the thoughtful discussion of the emergence of neo-Ottomanism, see M. Hakan Yavuz, “Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism,” *Critique* 12 (Spring 1998).
42. The prominent Turkish analyst Cengiz Candar once called President Ozal a “21st –century Ottoman.” See *Sabah*, April 28, 1992. Remarkably, Candar, who was Ozal’s foreign policy advisor, recalls Ozal as saying that his two favorite state models in history were the Ottoman Empire and the United States.
43. Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2000). See also his important theoretical article “The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World (Dis)Order,” *Perceptions* 2:4 (December 1997-February 1998).
44. Richard Falk, “Reconsidering Turkey,” *Zaman*, October 6, 2004.
45. Alexander Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42:6 (November 2006).
46. “The World of Business Now Spearheads Foreign Policy [An Interview with Ahmet Davutoglu],” *TurkishTime.org*, available at: www.turkishtime.org/27/print/66_2_en_p.asp; “The Power Turkey Does Not Use Is That of ‘Strategic Depth’ [An Interview with Ahmet Davutoglu],” *Turkish Daily News*, June 14, 2001.
47. Ali Fuat Borovali, “Post-modernity, Multiculturalism and Ex-imperial Hinterland: Habsburg and Ottoman Legacies Revisited,” *Perceptions* 2:4 (December 1997-February 1998).
48. Hasan Kanbolat, “Turkey’s Increasing Isolation,” *Today’s Zaman*, September 18, 2007.

About the Author

Igor Torbakov is a researcher who specializes in Russian and Eurasian history and political affairs. He holds an M.A. in History from Moscow State University and a Ph.D. from the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. He was Research Scholar at the Institute of Russian History, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow; a Visiting Scholar at the Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington DC; a Fulbright Scholar at Columbia University, New York; and a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University. From 2001-2006 he was based in Istanbul, Turkey, as an analyst writing for Open Society Institute's EurasiaNet and The Jamestown Foundation's Eurasia Daily Monitor. Currently, he is a Visiting Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Uppsala, Sweden.