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The Evolution of Russian-Turkish Relations: Ideational Convergence and Pragmatic Cooperation¹

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Abstract

Moscow-Ankara relations have been experiencing an unprecedented level of partnership simultaneously with a plethora of disputes between the actors. They have managed to continue cooperation without letting the emerging disagreements cause crises similar to the Su-24 Jet incident of 2015. This study examines Russian-Turkish relations since 2016 to expose how this alignment emerged and how the two actors operate in this partnership. After reviewing the literature that highlights the limitations and fragility of the cooperation, the authors shed light on the ideational convergence that allowed the alignment, arguing that it served as the basis of the current pragmatist and personalistic relations. Moreover, four main characteristics of this alignment are explained: 1) risk-aversion as the priority; 2) reliance on personalistic relations between the leaders; 3) focus on resolving issues among themselves instead of including non-regional actors; 4) economic pragmatism. Then, the risks that can potentially cause a collapse of this partnership are discussed, emphasizing the danger caused by the accumulation of unresolved disputes and political uncertainties in bilateral relations. Authors argue that under the current conditions, the partnership is fragile and will be tested by the upcoming challenges.

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Introduction

The relations between Russia and Turkey experienced a severe shakedown in November 2015 when the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian Su-24 aircraft. Russia imposed severe sanctions on Turkey, contributing to the already troubling financial situation. Going through many domestic and regional quarrels, Ankara soon took an alternative path in diplomacy, which required closer cooperation with Moscow. The relations improved following the direct talks between the presidents in 2016. Since then, the two actors found common ground in many disagreements and established a partnership in strategic sectors. However, disputes between Ankara and Moscow continue, and the actors often find each other on opposing sides of the regional conflicts. The two countries' policies contradict each other not only in Syria but also in Libya, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea region. However, these differences do not seem to hinder their recent close cooperation. On the contrary, Ankara and Moscow are getting closer despite their diverging national interests.

In this context, this article seeks to answer how the alignment between Russia and Turkey emerged and the main characteristics of the current *modus operandi*. We argue that the increasing anti-Western sentiments in both Russia and Turkey, coupled with their aspirations to assume a central role in a multipolar global framework, serve as catalysts for enhancing cooperation between the two countries. Despite their conflicting interests in various domains, this ideational convergence played an essential role in these countries establishing pragmatic relations that highly rely on personal communication between the leaders. This has allowed them to take immediate action on emerging crises and/or opportunities.

This study aims to contribute to the discussions by focusing on the characteristics of the partnership between Moscow and Ankara in order to explain *how* they operate. After reviewing the existing literature, the trajectory of cooperation since the 2000s is explained through a constructivist lens to expose the ideational factors that push Russia and Turkey together. Subsequently, opportunities for cooperation that pull the two countries to work together are explained. Then the main characteristics of this cooperation in order to examine the overall pattern

in Russian-Turkish relations since 2016 are discussed. Finally, we conclude with the risks that would curb the partnership in the short term, highlighting the major fragilities in bilateral relations.

Setting the stage: Literature review and theoretical framework

Relations between Turkey and Russia since 1991 have always been a complex interaction that included high-level cooperation (such as the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline) simultaneously with regional competition. Following a period of competition after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the two actors changed their approaches to establish a new strategic partnership and concentrated on the positive aspects of their relations [Rüma, Çelikpala, 2019]. This positive trend was supported by the impressive economic growth of both Turkey and Russia in the 2000s, which enhanced bilateral trade and investment. Commenting on the advancement of the partnership before it was hit by the jet crisis, Öniş and Yılmaz [2015, p. 4] argued that an "asymmetric interdependence" was appearing as a result of the significant partnership of Moscow and Ankara "driven by common economic interests" in which Russia had the advantageous position because of Turkey's energy dependence on Moscow. Aktürk [2007], on the other hand, argued that the relatively decreasing power of Moscow over Ankara was the main driving force for deepening cooperation between the actors.

Whether it was Ankara or Moscow who had an advantageous position in the relationship, both countries enjoyed the positive impact of this trend and managed to prevent disputes such as the conflicts in Georgia in 2008 or Ukraine in 2014 from hindering their cooperation. However, in November 2015, the crisis escalated quickly when the Turkish Air Force shot down the Russian aircraft. The incident showed how fragile the cooperation was since it caused a sudden collapse of the economic ties [Çelikpala, 2015]. Within a year, the two countries were able to mend their strained relationship. Strategic cooperation in many areas, such as the TurkStream natural gas pipeline, restarted quickly [Erşen, Çelikpala, 2019, p. 588]. Since then, the actors have been coordinating their security policies to avoid similar crises [Mamedov, Lukyanov, 2018]. Within the six years since the Su-24 turmoil of 2015, Russia and Turkey have achieved to expand their partnership in the military (purchase of S-400 Air Defense systems), energy (TurkStream and Akkuyu projects), and diplomatic (Astana Peace Process, the Grain Deal) domains. However, the two actors found themselves on the brink of another crisis on many occasions. This contrast between high-level cooperation and geopolitical disputes is the central predicament in the current literature on Russian-Turkish relations.

There seems to be a consensus among the experts about the transient feature of the current partnership. Experts doubt this trend will become a more robust and long-term partnership despite the high-level cooperation on many issues. Didic and Kösebalaban [2019] describe the shift in Turkey's policy towards Russia as "strategic bandwagoning". Following the neorealist framework, the authors explain Ankara's changing strategy by structural factors, and they argue that the current position is not sustainable for Turkey because of its historical formation and its legacy, which diverges the interests of Ankara and Moscow. According to Rüma and Çelikpala [2019, p. 84], the current relationship is process-oriented, meaning that the actors comprehend the limitations, and instead of focusing on the ultimate result, they try to reach their objectives by "showing their salience." Another concept proposed to describe the current state of affairs between Ankara and Moscow is "strategic alignment" [Köstem, 2021]. In this context, the high-level coordination on security issues and the desire to find a solution to the Syrian Civil War are integral parts of this alignment which is unlikely to evolve into a more robust strategic partnership. According to Avatkov [2017], the current ambiguity is a consequence of Turkey's risky diplomacy of maneuvering between great powers without determining its foreign policy priorities. Focusing on the bright side, Mamedov and Lukyanov [2018] argue that Russia and Turkey established a deideologized "pragmatic partnership" that continues independently from international developments.

This study follows the constructivist school of International Relations as its theoretical framework to examine the improving relations between Russia and Turkey despite their differences in many areas. As one of the main tenets of constructivism, ideational and material factors would play a constitutive function in transforming the identities of the actors and their perception of each other, which would provide the basis of a closer and stronger partnership, which seems to be unlikely in the contemporary structure as argued by above-mentioned studies. Constructivism considers the cooperation between the states by highlighting how ideas and interests play a transformative function and how the states can change their interests following the common social norms [Wendt, 1992, p. 417]. Hence, the social structure should be the initial point when analyzing the relations [Finnemore, 1996, p. 333]. Despite all the structural limitations, material necessities, or seemingly uncompromising interests, the actors can create "collective identities and interests" through intersubjective interaction in the social world [Wendt, 1994, p. 384]. It would be an incomplete analysis to consider the states as merely "rational egoists" that only try to maximize power in material terms. In contrast, the non-material factors also shape states' identities which constantly change due to their interaction with the social world and other actors [Fierke, 2013].

The international identities of states are the individual difference symbols that actors acquire through the relations they have with each other and with the system [Katzenstein, 1996]. Since identities are dynamic concepts, domestic or systemic changes constantly transform them [Hopf, 2002]. The identity factor softens the effect of anarchy on the individual states because it decreases ambiguity by letting the actors know each other [Adler, 1997, p. 265]. As "social actors with identities" [Wendt, 1994], states define their interests by their perception of the place they hold in the social world and evaluate other actors accordingly. In the next section, we argue that changing international identities of Russia and Turkey provided the basis that served as the first stage of the alignment between them.

Changing International Identities of the Actors

Self-identification as a center of power in a multipolar world order is the factor that planted the seeds of the idea of seeking partnership outside Western-centered mechanisms. As Hill and Taşpınar [2006, p. 90] state, the Turkish–Russian relationship is based not on mutual interest but on a shared sense of exclusion by the United States, forming an “axis of the excluded”. Similarly, Mezhyuev [2019] argues that both Moscow and Ankara are the “outcasts” since they hold similar peripheral roles by the Western powers, and this perception is the reason behind how they can come up with cooperation among the plethora of conflicting visions on geopolitical issues. He argues that the most significant turning point that paved this way was the USA's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Rüma and Çelikpala [2019, p. 68] also take the invasion of Iraq as the starting point of Turkey's worsening relations with the United States. According to them, it is possible to find the roots of current disputes in Turkish-American relations in the Turkish parliament's decision to reject the US Army to use Turkish soil for the invasion. Anti-Western sentiments functioned as a push factor, bringing Ankara into a similar ideological position as Moscow. As Kutlay and Öniş [2021, p. 1088] argue, “like-minded non-Western powers” seek “strategic autonomy” in international relations to balance USA's unipolar hegemony. Domestic political factors also affect the states' identities and perceptions of other actors. For instance, in the case of Turkey, seeking strategic autonomy has a domestic function of legitimizing authoritarian tendencies through populist discourse in foreign policy.

Russia

Russian and Turkish international identities have changed due to states' re-evaluations of the international system and their respective places in it. In his seminal article, Alexey Bogaturov [2007] summarizes the evolution of Russian foreign policy from 1991 to 2007 in three generations.

The short pro-Western era, when the ruling elites considered Russian interests the same as Europe's, ended with the geopolitical developments of the mid-1990s. This period was followed by the desire to balance the unipolar structure by establishing partnerships with emerging powers during the foreign ministry of Evgeniy Primakov; however, domestic political turmoil and financial difficulties did not allow Moscow to achieve this target to the fullest. Since NATO's strike on Serbia, Russia has regularly expressed opposition to unilateral actions and a unipolar global system. The 2000 Foreign Policy Concept criticizes such a system, and the 2008 concept suggested that unilateral action causes instability and disruption in the world. Russia has consistently expressed its support for a multipolar world and multilateral partnerships as a more effective solution to global issues [Light, 2105, p. 16]. Russia's transformation from a "weak state" that focuses on domestic security issues to a strong state that considers the West as "the main security Other", as argued by Snetkov [2012], helped Moscow to pursue this policy.

In his famous Munich speech in 2007, Vladimir Putin expressed his strong objection to a unipolar world, stating that he perceived the idea to be both unsuitable and improbable in the present global context [Kremlin, 2007]. Following the conflict in Georgia in 2008, Dmitry Medvedev echoed Putin's sentiments by strongly opposing a global order governed by a single power. He called for a multipolar world in a speech, which came to be known as the Medvedev doctrine [Kremlin, 2008]. In 2014, in a speech in which he declared the integration of Crimea into Russia, Vladimir Putin once again touched upon this issue. He argued that the instability in the world is a direct result of the end of the bipolar world order. Moreover, he criticized Western countries for their alleged disregard for international law, accusing them of "acting as they please" [Kremlin, 2014].

The natural result of this trend in Russian foreign policy was rising anti-Western and more specifically anti-US sentiments. Constructivist studies highlight how "Russian foreign policy is shaped through interactions with other nations and affected by the Western states' treatment of Russia and by their references to Russia" [Omelicheva, 2013]. According to Tsygankov & Tsygankov [2021, p. 2], "in political affairs, Russia has embraced anti-Americanism and sought to protect itself against Western democratization pressures". The Ukraine Crisis in 2014 was the most significant turning point that shaped today's Russian worldview that perceives the international system with many power centers in which cooperation with the Western powers is implausible. After 2014, Russia's exclusion from the Western world became more salient. Related to this, Savchenko and Zuenko [2020] show how it is the geopolitical considerations but not the economic motives that are the actual "driving force" behind Moscow's "turn to the East."

This sense of exclusion became an integral part of Moscow's understanding of multipolarity. Since the millennium, political events such as the invasion of the US of Iraq or the 2007-8 global economic crisis strengthened the idea of an emerging multipolar world and Russia's self-identification as one of the centers of powers in this new order. Russia is actively pursuing new partnerships in Eurasia and is also quite vocal about rejecting Western hegemony and instrumentalized concepts such as "Responsibility to Protect" by firmly defending international principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. For Moscow, international law for seeking its interests in world politics is an integral tool; therefore, the erosion of the established international legal system can lead to the loss of competitive advantages for Moscow [Baykov, Istomin, 2013, p. 118]. Sakwa [2019a] conceptualizes Russia's approach as "neo-revisionism" and argues that Moscow advocates for the "universal and consistent application of existing norms" instead of pursuing an alternative model and creating new rules. Similarly, Makarychev and Morozov [2011, p. 370] argued that Moscow's emphasis on global democracy is also an instrument to counterbalance the West. In this context, Mamedov and Lukyanov [2018] emphasize how the experts in Moscow concluded that American unipolarity is ending and multipolarity has become the focal point of their research. They consider mechanisms such as the Astana process as a sign of the realization of this idea since it was the regional actors but not the Western powers, who could take a concrete step toward the solution to the Syrian stalemate.

Turkey

Turkey, on the other hand, has gone through its own process of reevaluation of diplomacy. Current governments' policies are based on the view that Turkey is not part of Europe but is the leader of its own "civilizational basin" [Bilgin, Bilgiç, 2011]. Through this ideational change, Turkey sought to advance its relations with non-Western powers, especially in Eurasia. According to Davutoğlu, whose ideas dominated Turkish diplomacy from 2002 to 2015, Ankara had adopted a peripheral role in its relation to the West during the Cold War, which was an obstacle for Turkey to reach its full potential [Davutoğlu, 2001]. Instead, Turkey had to reach out to the Balkans, Middle East, Central Asia, Caucasus, and Africa as an independent actor to create a "strategic depth." In his criticism of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, Davutoğlu [1997] mentions the Islamic world as one of the civilizations in the process of "self-realization" (*ben idraki*). According to him, the Ottoman legacy provides a "flexible and strong" self-realization for this civilization. This framework was the conceptual basis for the Turkish foreign policy supported by the concepts of "proactive diplomacy," "strategic depth," and "zero problems with the neighbors." However, Ankara's strategy towards the Arab Spring backfired and caused regional isolation (and cost Davutoglu his post as the Prime Minister).

Until 2016, the idea of strategic autonomy did not prevent Ankara from seeking deeper integration with the West. Erdogan drastically changed his foreign policy course by mid-2016 following Davutoğlu losing his post and the thaw in relations with Russia. More importantly, the coup attempt on 15 July exacerbated the anti-Western sentiments among the public, as many believed that the US was behind the plot². With the United States, the coup attempt of 2016 is the primary source of the worsening relations since both the Turkish public³, media⁴, and politicians and government officials⁵ saw the USA and other Western countries as the plotter of the failed coup attempt [Cook, 2016]. The anti-Western sentiment in Russia was not unprecedented, but it also rose in Turkish politics. According to a public opinion poll among Turkish participants in 2022, for the first time in history, the percentage of Turks who think Ankara should focus more on relations with Russia and China has surpassed the number of people who think relations with the West should be prioritized⁶. On the regional level, the differing approaches to Syria were the primary source of trouble. Washington has been supporting the PYD group heavily with arms and resources even though Turkey considers it a branch of PKK, which is on the list of terrorist organizations of both Turkey and the USA [Ricciardone, Stein, 2016].

Moreover, the detention of American pastor Andrew Brunson in 2016 following the failed coup attempt and the US sanctions on Turkish officials in 2018 heated the disputes between them. In 2019, the US suspended Turkey's participation in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter project when Ankara received the S-400 Air Defence systems from Russia. Already invested more than a billion USD on the project, Ankara strongly condemned the decision and emphasized its determination on the decision to purchase S-400 systems and has not taken a step back on the issue. Erdogan

² Arango T. & Yeginsu C. (2016) Turks Can Agree on One Thing: U.S. Was Behind Failed Coup. *The New York Times*, [online] 2 August. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/world/europe/turkey-coup-erdogan-fethullah-gulen-united-states.html>> [Accessed 12.07.2023].

³ Uluş A. (2016) Darbenin arkasında ABD var: %79... [The US is behind the Coup: 79%...]. *HABERTURK*, [online] 29 November. Available at: <<https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1329969-darbenin-arkasinda-abd-var--79-ohal-hayatimi-degistirmede--75>> [Accessed 12.07.2023].

⁴ Çelik E. (2016) CIA's clandestine meeting in Istanbul on coup night. *Yeni Şafak*, [online] 16 July. Available at: <<https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/cias-clandestine-meeting-in-istanbul-on-coup-night-2499850>> [Accessed 12.07.2023]; Çelik M. (2022) Does Bolton imply US behind Turkey's July 15 coup bid too?. *Daily Sabah*, [online] 15 July. Available at: <<https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/does-bolton-imply-us-behind-turkeys-july-15-coup-bid-too>> [Accessed 12.07.2023].

⁵ Hurriyet Daily News () 2016 US general is on side of coup plotters: Erdoğan. *Hurriyet Daily News*, [online] 30 July. Available at: <<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-general-is-on-side-of-coup-plotters-erdogan---102242>> [Accessed 12.07.2023]; Reuters (2021) Turkish minister says U.S. behind 2016 failed coup. *Reuters*, [online] 4 February. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-security-usa-int-idUSKBN2A41NF>> [Accessed 30.03.2023].

⁶ Sputnik Türkiye (2022) Metropol anketi: Türkiye dış ilişkilerinde Rusya ve Çin'e öncelik vermelidir diyenler yüzde 39.4 [Metropol survey: 39.4 percent say that Turkey should give priority to Russia and China in its foreign relations]. *Sputnik Türkiye* [online] 22 January. Available at: <<https://sputniknews.com.tr/20220122/metropol-anketi-turkiye-dis-iliskilerinde-rusya-ve-cine-oncelik-vermelidir-diyenler-yuzde-394-1053017774.html>> [Accessed 12.07.2023]

stated that Turkey would not ask America for permission⁷. The saga continues with the USA removing Turkey from the F-35 project in 2021, citing the operationalization of S-400 air defense systems as a threat to NATO defenses. Ankara's bid for the F-16 purchase and repayment of its investments in the JSF project continues.

Despite decades of close relations with the EU, including the status of candidacy for membership to the union, Turkish-European relations evolved into a pragmatist *quid pro quo* interaction built around distrust. Even in March 2016, the notorious “migration deal” with the EU had clauses for revitalisation of Turkey’s EU accession process and visa-free regime for Turkish citizens in the Schengen area [European Council, 2016]. However, in May, President Erdogan harshly criticized the deal by declaring it as the EU’s attempt to intervene in Turkey’s domestic politics and put Prime Minister Davutoglu in a harsh position [Gürsel, 2016]. The disputes in the Mediterranean region with Greece only added to this quagmire. Turkish decision-makers started to see Brussels merely as the protector of Athens instead of its traditional mediator role. Therefore, the desire for closer cooperation with Moscow results from the perceptions about the fundamental changes in international power politics, and it is a response to the deteriorating relations with the traditional allies, which needs to be balanced [Erşen, Köstem, 2020].

Convergence of ideas and increasing cooperation between Russia and Turkey

The multipolar world, as perceived by Moscow, considers Turkey as one of the regional powers in the emerging structure [Shakleina, 2022, 36]. Sergei Lavrov's response to the Turkish President's criticism of the United Nations structure by stating that "the UN Security Council badly needs reforms to reflect the multipolar global realities better" clearly depicts this position⁸. Therefore, analyzing the cooperation between Moscow and Ankara by merely focusing on the short-term impacts and consequences of the activities would miss the point: the mechanisms, the discourse, and the modes of interactions are, in fact, contributing to the idea of the emergence of the multipolar order without the hegemony of Western actors, mainly the US. No matter how effective the bilateral talks about Syria, or the Astana triangle with Tehran, the actors are creating a new model of diplomacy in which regional powers are deciding on the fate of the regions within the regions. Therefore, the "alignment" between Moscow and Ankara also resonates with the

⁷ Al Jazeera (2020) Erdogan defends testing Russian S-400, shrugs off US criticism. *Al Jazeera*, [online] 23 October. Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/23/erdogan-says-turkey-tested-russian-s-400s-shrugs-off-us-reaction>> [Accessed 12.07.2023]

⁸ Teslova E. (2018) UN Security Council unrepresentative: Russia's Lavrov. *Anadolu Agency*, [online] 3 May. Available at: <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/un-security-council-unrepresentative-russias-lavrov/1134395>> [Accessed 30.03.2023].

fading of the USA's hegemony [Köstem, 2021, p. 18]. However, this new disposition does not necessarily mean the emergence of a strategic partnership. On the contrary, until 2016, the two countries found themselves harshly competing, crystallized by their positions in the Syrian Civil War and the downing of a Russian jet by the Turkish Air Force. The gradual convergence on the ideational level served as the basis for the future advancement of bilateral relations.

The alignment between Russia and Turkey was born based on the abovementioned convergence of ideas shaped by the perception of exclusion from the West. However, they first experienced the 2015 jet crisis, which caused a significant interruption in bilateral relations with sanctions, negative discourse, and a sudden cut of diplomatic relations. The thaw in 2016 must be interpreted within the context of the plethora of international and domestic crises in Turkish politics that ended up with the current diplomacy of Ankara. At this critical juncture, instead of prolonging the conflict with Russia and aligning with the West, Ankara chose to ameliorate relations with Moscow and advance on the path of autonomous foreign policy. In addition to the economic strain caused by the jet crisis, there were numerous geopolitical problems with Russia, particularly in Syria. Although the Russian policy was also at odds with Turkey, the direct support of the US to the PYD made cooperation with Russia a more plausible path (Kudryashova, 2021).

To sum up, the reevaluations of the foreign policies of Russia and Turkey were based on the increasing anti-Western sentiments and the necessity to overcome the protracted issues that required immediate solutions, especially the ones regarding the Syrian conundrum. Deteriorating relations with the West pushed Moscow and Ankara to each other. On the other hand, opportunities for cooperation in different areas pulled them together to advance relations in the milieu of dozens of contrasting geopolitical issues.

From Ideational Convergence to Pragmatic Partnership

After the jet crisis in 2015, the two countries increased their efforts on cooperation not only by the continuation of existing projects such as Akkuyu NPP and TurkStream but through collaboration in new sectors (such as the S-400 deal) and new areas (in Syria, Caucasus, Ukraine). In this section, we examine *how* Moscow and Ankara instrumentalized the above-mentioned ideational convergence in this process and what are the main characteristics of the current *modus operandi* that they have been conducting since 2016. This alignment was primarily motivated by an increasing resentment towards the West and a belief in their own status as a regional power in a multipolar world. However, the imminent issues that required bilateral effort and the economic opportunities, profitable for both countries, acted as the pull factors that enhanced the process that

resulted in the current partnership. We argue that this partnership has a pattern composed of the following characteristics: 1) prioritizing risk-aversion; 2) overreliance on personalistic relations between the leaders instead of institutionalization; 3) keeping external powers out of the region; 4) economic pragmatism.

Since the starting point of the current cooperation is the process of revitalizing bilateral relations after the Su-24 crisis, it does no surprise that the primary characteristic is the insistence on averting risks. Russia and Turkey focus on de-escalating measures of emerging crises and seeking acceptable short-term formulas. By this, they try to delay the consequences of the conflict of interest if an immediate solution is not viable. So far, the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara in December 2016, the initiation of Turkish-Russian joint military patrols in northern Syria in December 2019, and the quagmire after the shelling of Turkish soldiers in the Idlib region of Syria in February 2020 are the most prominent examples of this novel way of interaction that prevented further escalation, though not providing an overall solution that satisfies both parties.

The experience of these incidents led Moscow and Ankara to expand cooperation in other regional problems as well. After the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, a Russian-Turkish military observation post was established in Aghdam, Azerbaijan. Moreover, with Ankara's initiative, the Russian delegation met with their Ukrainian counterparts in Turkey to resolve the military conflict that started in February 2022. Although the talks were fruitless, Ankara insisted on providing a platform for coordination, which resulted in a deal that averted a global grain shortage. This communication channel also facilitated several hostage exchanges between Ukraine and Russia.

When we delve into the logic of this interaction, the pattern becomes more apparent. Firstly, none of the examples has provided a definitive solution: the Idlib quagmire is still there, Turkey's discontent towards PYD existence in northern Syria has not gone anywhere, Azerbaijan and Armenia are still on the brink of war, and Turkey is not going to change its stance regarding Crimea and the territorial integrity of Ukraine. However, what we defined as the first characteristic of Russian-Turkish cooperation allowed them to find interim remedies that ameliorated a tragic outcome by maintaining coordination.

The second characteristic of post-2016 cooperation is the overreliance on personalistic relations between presidents instead of institutions. Direct talks between presidents Putin and Erdogan appear as the main mechanism that drives the cooperation between Moscow and Ankara.

The communication between the leaders has had more impact than any other institutional channel [Erşen, Köstem, 2020, p. 240]. As an obvious example of this phenomenon, despite several mechanisms established for conflict management in Syria, the actors could only de-escalate the Idlib conundrum with Erdogan's visit to Sochi⁹.

Kudryashova [2021] defines the partnership between Moscow and Ankara as a pragmatic relationship without functioning institutions. The High-Level Cooperation Council is the most prominent existing structure that Russia and Turkey already have. However, the Council has not made any significant contribution to the partnership since its establishment in 2010, and its functionality gets eclipsed when disputes appear between Russia and Turkey [Aslanlı, Akgün, 2020, p. 801]. In addition, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation appears as the sole regional organization where both Russia and Turkey hold membership. It has remained a loose integration scheme and has not been at the "center of the process of strengthening bilateral ties" [Öniş, Yılmaz, 2015, p. 11].

In addition to the lack of a history of common robust institutions, the main reasons for following this non-institutional path are the constraints drawn by existing structures (e.g., NATO for Turkey), the imminent nature of the emerging problems that require a quick response, and the leadership styles of the presidents of both countries that prefer a more hands-on approach instead of delegating. For example, during the ceremony of the first loading of nuclear fuel into the Akkuyu NPP, Vladimir Putin applauded President Erdogan for his personal touch in the project that solved the administrative complexities [Kremlin, 2023]. Related to this, these leaders are not the biggest supporters of the transfer of sovereignty to international organizations, and their view on the international order coincides with the concept that Sakwa [2019b, pp. 20-21] describes as *sovereign internationalism*. In contrast to liberal, revolutionary, or mercantilist types, sovereign internationalism "emphasizes sovereign decision-making by nation-states" and avoids ceding power to institutions.

No matter how effective the communication between the presidents is, the dependence on their personal initiatives reflects the fragility of the partnership. This was crystallized when the presidential candidate from the opposition, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, accused Russians of intervening

⁹ Al Jazeera (2021) Syria high on agenda as Putin and Erdogan meet in Sochi. *Al Jazeera*, [online] 29 September. Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/29/syria-high-agenda-putin-erdogan-meet-sochi>> [Accessed 30.03.2023].

in Turkish elections through his social media page¹⁰. Although the results of the election provided another term for the Erdogan administration, Kılıçdaroglu's tweet and its echoes in the media showed the fragility caused by the dependence on direct talks between the presidents in case of any power change in Russia or Turkey.

The third characteristic of the post-2016 cooperation is, concerning risk aversion, the two countries' efforts to resolve regional problems without the involvement of external powers. Both parties are dedicated to solving regional matters without the involvement of outside powers. This was always a concern for Turkey, as crystallized by its insistence on not letting Russia-Georgia conflict in 2008 turn the Black Sea region into a frontline for the NATO-Russia confrontation [Konovalov, 2020, p. 162]. A more recent example is the Astana peace process, established by Russia, Turkey, and Iran to resolve Syria-related issues. They consider the Astana process as a sign of this realization of this idea since it was the regional actors but not the Western powers, who could take a concrete step toward the solution to the Syrian stalemate. One other crucial instance was the outcome of the 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. The war ended when Russia brokered a ceasefire agreement, sidelining the OSCE. Although Russia was the primary mediator for the ceasefire agreement, Turkey also took a role in the truce monitoring operations.

The Astana model appeared as an embryonic phase of regional institutionalism that would provide the basis for Ankara and Moscow to strengthen their geopolitical alignment. In contrast to the Geneva talks, the Astana process only hosted the prominent regional actors and kept the Western actors out [Kortunov, 2019]. Markedonov [2018, p. 43] offered Moscow-Ankara-Tehran to reach out for a solution to the conflicts in the South Caucasus since the format is already tested in Syria with positive results. A similar proposal to establish a forum for the Caucasus with six regional countries has been proposed by Turkey for many years¹¹. However, the 2020 Azerbaijani-Armenian War mostly ended with Russian initiatives, and in the aftermath of the war, Tehran could not play any significant role, while Moscow legitimized Turkey's role with the establishment of the common observation point [Trenin, 2020]. Even for the disputes in Syria, Ankara tended to solve disagreements through direct talks with Moscow instead of using the trilateral mechanism.

¹⁰ Reuters (2023) Erdogan rival accuses Russia of 'deep fake' campaign ahead of presidential vote. *Reuters*, [online] 12 May. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-rival-accuses-russia-deep-fake-campaign-ahead-presidential-vote-2023-05-12/>> [Accessed 12.07.2023]

¹¹ Hurriyet Daily News (2020) Turkey proposes a 6-way Caucasus platform for peace and stability. *Hurriyet Daily News*, [online] 11 December. Available at: <<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-be-patient-and-see-what-trend-emerges-after-biden-takes-office-erdogan-160776>> [Accessed 30.03.2023].

Therefore, the hopes for a robust regional institution based on the principles of the Astana process did not materialize.

The fourth and final characteristic of the Moscow-Ankara partnership is economic pragmatism, based on the complementarity of the two countries' economies and the difficulties they have confronted. While Russian know-how in the nuclear sector allowed the Akkuyu NPP project, its need to find new markets for natural gas made TurkStream a charming initiative. Such projects, while encouraging further cooperation, also make future conflicts costlier. For example, although Ankara condemns the annexation of Crimea, it agrees to a project that would have detrimental consequences for Ukraine. As Köstem [2018, p. 23] argues, the TurkStream project should be understood in relation to Russia's geopolitical target of ending Ukraine's transit country status. Moreover, President Putin suggested that Turkey could serve as a gas hub for Russian gas to Europe, following Europe's search for alternative gas supplies due to the conflict in Ukraine [Oğuzlu, 2022]. Such links within this framework are Turkish construction investments in Russia, tourism flow to Turkey (particularly following the flight restrictions imposed by the Western sanctions), and trade of agricultural products (the saga of sanctioned Turkish *potatoes* in the 2016 crisis).

Nevertheless, the two countries operate pragmatically within the boundaries of existing economic structures. As a member of the EU's Customs Union, Ankara is unwilling to risk falling under the sanctions regime. The Turkish banks decided to cease the Russian MIR payment system soon after the warnings from the USA¹². Moreover, the Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that Turkey is not letting the Turkish institutions circumvent sanctions [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2022]. It is understandable why Ankara is worried about a crisis with Western financial organizations, considering the Halkbank trial linked to evading US sanctions on Iran that have continued for many years¹³. The ability of both actors to maintain their cooperation despite significant disagreements and structural restraints is evident in their actions regarding the Ukraine conflict. The *grain deal* is a clear example of this, where Ankara can now use its influence to extend the deal despite the announcements of Moscow not to renew it [Prokopenko, 2023].

¹² Kandemir A. Turkey's Isbank Suspends Use of Russian Mir Cards After US Warning. *Bloomberg*, [online] 19 September. Available at: <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-19/turkey-s-isbank-stops-using-russian-mir-cards-after-us-warning>> [Accessed 12.07.2023]

¹³ Stempel J. (2020) Turkey's Halkbank urges dismissal of Iran sanctions criminal case in U.S. *Reuters*, [online] 18 September. Available at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-turkey-halkbank-idUSKBN2692FF>> [Accessed 12.07.2023]

While the UN was criticized for taking sides in the conflict, Ankara's initiative paved the way for the deal. It delayed a global grain shortage if not wholly prevented [Sakwa, 2023, p.85].

In Lieu of Conclusion: Risks and Uncertainties

Since 2016, Russia and Turkey have found a way to maintain a delicate balance in their relationship, although the two countries' policies contradict each other in several areas. In this study, we sought to answer how the alignment between Russia and Turkey emerged and analyzed the main characteristics of the current *modus operandi* that points out the logic on which Moscow and Ankara operate regarding bilateral and regional issues. We argued that the current Russian-Turkish alignment is a result of a long-term push from the ideational convergence based on the increasing anti-Western sentiments in both Russia and Turkey together with their aspirations to assume a central role in a multipolar world order. Furthermore, this ideational push has been crucial in developing pragmatic relationships that depend heavily on direct communication between the leaders. This has enabled them to swiftly respond to new challenges or opportunities for cooperation. The resulting *modus operandi* is an alignment that focuses on averting potential crises through a personalistic approach with the multipolarity narrative and economic pragmatism.

Considering the geopolitical tectonic shifts, the partnership has been fruitful so far. However, it is still a fragile partnership from several aspects and will be tested by them. The plethora of imminent uncertainties create a foggy atmosphere that contains many factors that will test the robustness of this mode of operation. The foremost risks are the crisis in Ukraine, continuing geopolitical conflicts of interests of Moscow and Ankara, and finally, a potential turn to the West from Turkey, which is still an option in Ankara's playbook despite the long-run disengagement.

Increasing Russian military presence around Turkey is one of the potential causes that may endanger relations. Although the supply of military weapons and ammunition, including armed drones, to Ukraine by Turkey was a contentious issue that could have been expected to create more significant problems between Moscow and Ankara, the trade volume between the two countries grew. Despite Moscow's disapproval of Ukraine's use of Bayraktar drones in Donbas before the conflict, Turkey continued to supply them to Ukraine even after the war began. On the other hand, Russia's annexation of Crimea has caused a significant shift in the strategic configuration of the Black Sea region, and it continues to pose a growing challenge for Turkey and NATO as Russia enhances its military infrastructure in this vital location and strengthens its Black Sea Fleet [Baev, 2019, p. 54]. Further Russian territorial gains in Ukraine will only reinforce the dominant position

of Moscow in the Black Sea region at the expense of Turkey's position. In addition to the Black Sea, Turkey has observed a rise in Russian military presence in various areas, such as the South Caucasus states to the east since 2008 and Syria to the south. The feeling of being encircled may push Ankara to seek a balancing policy vis-a-vis Russia, and the stance of both countries may intensify in the areas both have a military presence.

Russia and Turkey's geopolitical competition is also another risk in bilateral cooperation. Ankara's efforts to increase its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus through initiatives such as the Middle Corridor and the Turkic World can potentially create problems in bilateral relations. For example, Ankara's plans to connect Eurasia to Europe through the so-called Middle Corridor would help Central Asian countries and China to diversify their trade routes by bypassing the Northern Corridor dominated by Russia. Although the trade volume flowing through this route is not as big as expected yet, it may diminish the role of Russia in the future [Chang, 2023]. Furthermore, Ankara's endeavors to bring Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus through the Organization of Turkic States have the potential to anger Moscow as the latter sees these countries under its natural sphere of influence. Ankara is being cautious not to provoke Russia in this domain. However, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has diverted its attention and created an opening for Turkey to enhance its relations with the Central Asian republics [Pannier, 2022]. In contrast, the dispute in Syria seems less risky than before, with Damascus in the talks among the Astana trio in Moscow as quadripartite foreign ministerial meetings¹⁴. Nevertheless, a sustainable resolution to this issue will require significant time.

Turkey's ambivalent position towards NATO and the EU is another uncertainty in Russo-Turkish relations. Turkey has provided military and economic assistance to Ukraine, including selling drones and other military equipment. This assistance may incense Russia and result in further friction between the two countries, especially if the conflict in Ukraine intensifies. So far, Turkey has adopted a pragmatic foreign policy vis-a-vis Russia in this context. While condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine and selling weapons to the latter, Turkey has refrained from joining the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West. However, recently Ankara started to show signs of a change in this policy. Firstly, Erdogan frequently states his support for Ukraine's bid for NATO membership. Moreover, Zelensky returned to Kyiv with the Azov hostages residing in Turkey as

¹⁴ Guldogan D. (2023) Quadripartite foreign ministerial meeting on Syria held in Moscow. *Anadolu Agency*, [online] 10 May. Available at: <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/quadripartite-foreign-ministerial-meeting-on-syria-held-in-moscow/2893563>> [Accessed 12.07.2023]

part of the deal made in 2022¹⁵. Soon after, President Erdogan announced he would no longer block Sweden's application for NATO membership and would send it to the Turkish Grand Assembly. As Turkey's purchase of S-400s inflicted considerable damage to its relations with the West, its unwillingness to support Sweden's and Finland's membership to NATO was a sign of the problematic relations between Turkey and the West. However, NATO membership is still an asset for Ankara. In case of an escalation in the conflict in Ukraine between Russia and NATO members, Turkey may have to choose a side, meaning it will be unable to pursue its self-assigned mediating role. This policy may have significant implications for Turkey's relations with Russia, particularly since the accession of new members may challenge Moscow's defense strategy.

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¹⁵ Faggionato G. (2023) Zelenskyy brings home Azov fighters from Turkey, angering Moscow. *Politico*, [online] 9 July. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-accused-turkey-and-ukraine-of-violating-prisoners-deal-war> [Accessed 12.07.2023]

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