

The Developmental Logic and Trends in Russia-Turkey Relations

Zheng Xu

Guangdong Institute of International Strategies, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies,
Guangzhou Guangdong, 510420, China

Abstract

The relationship between Russia and Turkey has very significant influence on making geopolitical strategy in Black Sea region. Although there are quite a lot academic achievements demonstrated the importance of Russia-Turkey relations and they have concluded possible developmental directions of Russian-Turkey relations, it still has research value because international situation is erratic and it will have great impact on Russia-Turkey relation. To start with, the paper is based on literature review to know the latest information of Russia-Turkey relations, and then discusses Russia-Turkey's historical relation, which can be dated back long time ago. The paper focuses on the bilateral relation in the period of 15th to 18th century, 20th century and how they interact with each other in Cold War as well as their relation after the collapse of Soviet Union. Russia and Turkey have collaborated with each other in many aspect, especially in economic cooperation, which is correspondent to their national interests. In diplomatic interaction, leader's characteristics, governmental interaction and international interaction are three main indispensable factors to promote the relations. Hence, the political implications can be concluded that the West should not set up obstacles between Russia and Turkey because cooperation is the only way that two countries can stick together, ensuring the security of Black Sea region, even though they have different perspectives in many aspects like religion. The West should focus on Turkey's following political actions since it is predictable that Turkey probably will quit NATO, and form an alliance with Russia.

Keywords

Russia-Turkey Relation; Historical Relation; Economic Cooperation; Diplomatic Interaction.

1. Introduction

The relationship between the Russian Federation and Republic of Turkey always remains complex since several decades ago, which were considered one of the most important dimension in the Black Sea region. According to the historical development of the relations, Russia-Turkey relations have experienced ups and downs: confrontation, friction and pragmatic cooperation. Whether the two countries will choose to cooperate or not depends on the current international situation. No matter what kind of direction they will consider, one thing for sure is that the link between Moscow and Ankara will definitely have great impact on the region ranging from Atlantic Ocean to Central Asia, as well as from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. Cooperation and confrontation are two major status facing the two countries today. Since the two countries gradually realize that conflicts can be replaced by cooperation, both parties initiate energy cooperative protocol, the relation is much closer than ever before. Turkey's location has very important geopolitical meaning, it is predictable that Russia will improve the relationship with Turkey by making some compromises. Many scholars have already adopted different research perspectives to analyze the relationship between two countries in order to emphasize its important political implications.

Although there are quite a lot academic achievements related to the relations of two countries, current situation in Black Sea region is always changing and much more sophisticated than we expect. The relations of Russia-Turkey cannot be ignored when we discuss Black Sea situation. Therefore, this topic still has strong research value. There are four main keywords in the paper: Russia-Turkey relations, historical development, cooperation and future relation, which builds up basic framework of the paper and try to draw some conclusion about Russia-Turkey future developmental direction, which will be beneficial to European union's policy-making.

2. The Historical Development of Russia-Turkey

2.1. Bilateral Relation in the Period of 15th_ 18th

Russian and Turkey can be regarded two major power in Eurasian continent, especially in the Black Sea region, because two countries are responsible for the security and balance of the Black Sea region. The relationship of two countries have experience ups and downs, which is very complex and volatile. Alexander Titov considers that the relationship is "turbulent". In the early period of their relationship, they became independent powers almost simultaneously in the 16th century, Ottoman empire became superpower while Russia emerged as superpower in the late 16th century. During the period, Ottoman Empire was the most powerful Empire in the region. Several centuries later, Russia gradually grew and started to expand its territory, Russia wanted to have the right to access Black Sea and controlled the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. Therefore, Russia and Turkey always wanted to compete with each other in order to gain dominance of the region, competition, distrust, and conflict were the distinctive feature of their relations. Although two countries always remained hostile to each other, sometimes they would cooperate together against common enemy. For example, they fought against Napoleon in the early 19th century while Russia sent an army to help Ottoman Empire to battle with Egyptian in 1831. Therefore, the struggle between two countries was to acquire discourse in Black Sea, Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, both of them did believe in expansionism and each of them had their way to implement it. Beside, since Russia believed in Eastern Orthodoxy and Turkey believes in Islam, religious enmity would increase the distrust and diminish the will of collaboration.

2.2. Bilateral Relation in the Period of 20th Century

In the early period of 20th century, Russian Empire and Ottoman Empire was collapsed and replaced by brand new regions. Russia was controlled by a communist region and Turkey was controlled by a nationalist one in Ankara. In this period, two regimes got along well with each other, Communist regime in Russia was called Bolsheviks, Bolsheviks provided critical assistance in Turkish War of Independence. Not only did they collaborate with each other in military cooperation, but also international recognition, territorial integrity as well as making sure economic and political dimension developed in steady way. In order to strengthen the cooperation of two countries, they signed treaties to express that they had common interests, including the Treaty of Moscow, Treaty of Kars and Friendship and Neutrality Treaty. These treaties would be able to provide legitimacy of their cooperation, ensuring that they could stay at peace. The cooperation between Turkey and Russia attracted some western country's attention, such as France and United Kingdom, they wanted to make sure that Russia-Turkey's cooperation would not pose a potential threat to any countries. Therefore, cooperation is the major status during the period, because it is correspond to their future interest. However, their "friendship" did not last for a long time, Turkey became the member of NATO in 1952, Turkey and Russia turn against each other again. Turkish-US relation was strengthened because they had financial interaction.

2.3. Bilateral Relation during the Cold War Period

During the Cold War period, Soviet Union tried to find multiple ways to restraint development of United States. Turkey was one of the most powerful countries in central Asia, so it was necessary to improve the relationship with Turkey. In 1960s, when it come to Cyprus issue, Turkey and America had different viewpoint about how to deal with the issue. Soviet Union seized the opportunity to build up pragmatic relationship with Turkey. Because of Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974, America started to impose sanction on Turkey and attempted to destroy its cooperation with Moscow, Turkey was inclined to Soviet Union in order to look for protection. In 1980, the relation once again was getting worse because of religion. Russian's regime believed in Marxism, so anti-religious principle was one of primary missions for Bolsheviks, it was contradicted to Turkey's religious Islamism and pan-Turkic nationalism. It is interesting to note that the cooperation between Russia and Turkey based on potential world powers instead of economic relations because cooperation in crucial moment was correspondent to their national interests.

2.4. Bilateral Relation after Collapse of the Soviet Union

Soviet Union once was a dominant power in the Caucasus and Central Asia, but after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an apparent great power vacuum left there. Turkey desperately wanted to take back the discourse in the area of Caucasus and Central Asia, the independent of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan made it possible because these countries were Turkic-speaking nations and had a vision of pan-Turkism. Therefore, Turkey could form new discourse and view Russia as a threat. By 1995, the situation changed again, Russia took back the dominant place in the region. Over the centuries, the region is closely linked to Russia in terms of culture and history. Interestingly, Turkey realized that it was unwise to compete with Russia, Turkey started to behave in more cooperative attitude and try to establish bilateral trade, expanded economic relations and energy cooperation, especially in natural gas. For now, even though there are lots of divergences between Russia and Turkey, we can predict that cooperation is the keywords in their relations and the government of Russia want to remain current situation with Turkey because Russia has to deal with U.S. government, how to use natural energy as a geopolitical weapon and eliminate the threats from western countries, furthermore, Russia is China's "big brother" and get along well with China, but how long the situation will last? Facing with these international issues, Russia has no other choices but stick to collaboration.

3. The Contemporary Cooperation between Russia-Turkey

3.1. Economic Cooperation

3.1.1. Turkey and Russia's Current Economic Situation

Economic collaboration has been probably one of the steadiest elements of the Russian-Turkish relationship. Therefore, before we take a deeper research on the Russia-Turkey trade and Russia-Turkey energy relation, it is necessary to know the basic situation of two countries' economy. In 2019, Russia and Turkey's GDP ranks the top 20 of world economic, and their economic growth trajectories are almost similar from 1990 to 2011, then there is a slight growth from 2011 to 2013. Turkey and Russia's economic trajectory is different ranging from 2013 to 2017, as we can see figure 1, Russia's economy declines in 2014 and keeps downward in 2016, which is the lowest point in the last ten years. From 2016, Russia's economy keeps stable growth in the next four years, although it declines a little bit from 2019 to 2020 because of COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic spread all over the world and it has irreversible effect on the world's economy, Turkey and Russia are in no exception. When we take a glimpse of figure 2, we can see that Turkey's economic trajectory is steady, even though it keeps declining from

2013 to 2020. In conclusion, we can summary that two countries’ economic have experienced steadily growth, sometime they will experience downward, which can be demonstrate that their economic fundamental are sound in the long-term and they keep managing to make economic progress while ensuring stability.

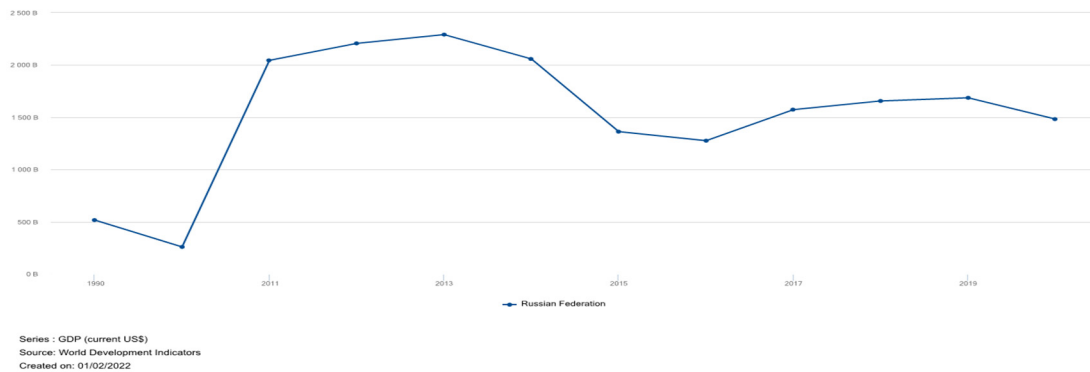


Figure 1. Russia’s economic trajectory

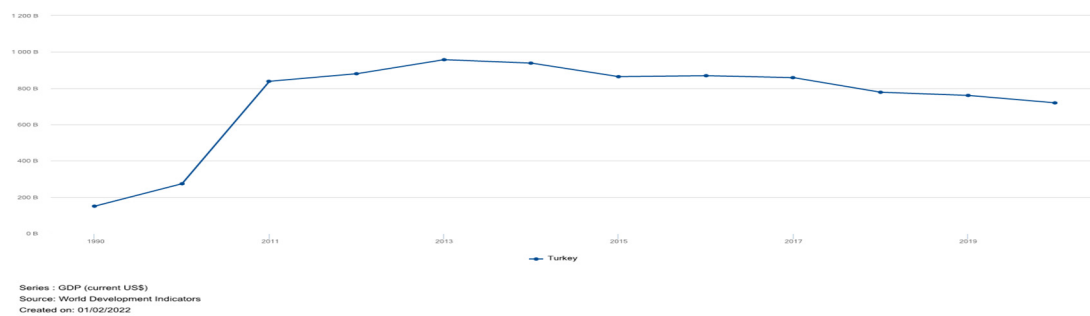


Figure 2. Turkey’s economic trajectory

3.1.2. Turkey-Russia Trade and Energy Relations

Turkey-Russia trade is indispensable ways to maintain the relationship between Russia and Turkey. Russia plays very important role in Turkish trade because Turkey’s largest imports from Russia are mineral fuels, oil, and distillation products as well as iron and steel, aluminum, organic and inorganic chemicals, precious metal compounds and isotope and other commodities, which cause enormous economic effects. Turkey also plays very important role in Russian trade because Turkey contributed about 5% of total Russian trade value in 2018, these things includes fruits and nuts, machinery and boilers as well as vehicles and it will promote economic development. Therefore, Russia and Turkey’s trade are effective, and this mutual cooperation will always provide development opportunities for both countries.

Another reason why both countries can remain strategic partnership to each other is that energy-related trade is the most important one among all kinds of cooperation. Turkey cannot develop without oil supply and Russia can provide Turkey best quality of oil. And there are several oil supplier of Turkey like Iran, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Azerbaijan. In Contrast, natural gas requires more complex and sophisticated pipeline infrastructure, one specific feature of natural gas is irregular distribution, which makes it very difficult to exploit. But new, unconventional gas, mostly in United States or Australia, as well as improvement of liquefaction technology change current situation, allowing Turkey to reset its energy relationship with Russia. Turkey planned to buildup several natural gas infrastructure, which make it convenient to access Turkey’s market and turn Turkey into a hub for distribution of natural gas to the European Union. It means that even though some southeast portion of EU

countries cannot access natural gas from Russia, this situation will change since they can acquire natural gas from other countries. Hence, more and more phenomena prove that Turkey is turning into a natural gas hub, or potential natural gas hub, it will weaken Russian dominant position. In a word, although Turkish advantages are emerging, occupying important geographical position, it is predictable that Turkey are still inclined to maintain sound relationship with Russia because Turkey have established cooperative relationship with Russia in many aspects, energy relation is just one-side of these aspects.

3.2. Diplomatic Cooperation

3.2.1. Leader's Characteristics

Leader's characteristics will always effect diplomatic direction, the common characteristics of both Putin and Erdogan are straight-taking and tough, two of them are more like "political twins", but they have different political origins and power bases. Putin once served in presidential administration because Boris Yeltsin brought Putin to Moscow, Putin played very important role in the presidential administration, Foreign Intelligence Service, and National Security Council. Putin was nominated prime minister by Yeltsin in August 1999. Yeltsin also named Putin as an interim president after he handed in his resignation in December 1999, and Putin was elected to be Russian president in March 2000. Compared with Putin, Erdogan has more soft origin, he came into power with the help of people who belong to low social level. Hence, different political origins result in different viewpoint and preferences, once they have reached consensus on some political issues, their political origins largely play a decisive role during the whole process.

3.2.2. Governmental Interaction

Putin and Erdogan have almost the same way to deal with political issues, which largely depends on their personal characteristics. The political regimes that Putin and Erdogan establish are resemble. Both of them have tendency for strengthening their core power, expanding their rule area and when it comes to presidential election, they will show no mercy to their political opponents. In 2008, according to Russian constitution, Putin was elected as a prime minister and Dmitry Medvedev was chosen to be Russian president, but Putin had the right to decide how to solve the most important political issues. Nowadays, Putin was elected as president again in 2018. Erdogan used to be prime minister in 2003, 2007 and 2011, he ran for president in 2014 and he was very ambitious because when he came into power, he planed to expand his own power. In April 2017 referendum, Erdogan expelled new powers and he won the referendum, making sure that he was the core of Turkey. From what we have mentioned above, the situation is correspond with what Bechev have noted, "Both Russia and Turkey share a political culture that priorities national security and sovereignty over liberal values."

National identities are the symbol of powers, presidents will always find some ways to establish their national identities because they can take international floor and gain international discourse. Putin and Erdogan often stress their religious identities and it important meaning for the whole world. Putin will emphasize the great power tradition of Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Beside, Putin also stresses that Russia is the central place of Orthodoxy. Erodogan will repeat the nationalist ideas with Islamic, and he uses Ottoman Empire's history and culture as an example, reiterating the influence of Turkey in the world. It seems that Turkey and Russia are estranging from the Europe, they do not want to affiliate with any international parties or organizations. It is worthwhile mentioning that Moscow and Ankara are vigilant for enemy's approach, therefore, they always stress their historical identities and warn "the other" to be caution about the strategic steps that they make.

3.2.3. International Interaction

Russia and Turkey have formed their own geopolitical doctrines, it is the major factor that establish their diplomatic interaction. According to activities that Russia have taken, it is demonstrated that Russia is estranging from Europe after Ukraine crisis and put forward "Greater Eurasia" initiative. Russia has its own geopolitical doctrines and gradually shapes Eurasianism. Russian scholar Alexander Dugin and Marlene Laruelle have made great contribution on Russian Eurasianism. The main content of Russian Eurasianism can be listed as follow: "the ideology have a inclination for rejection of Europe, the West and stress cultural unity and common historical destiny of Russians, besides, it advocates that deeper meaning of contemporary political events can be explained by using a belief in the existence of cultural constants." Russia and Turkey are two major powers in the region, so Turkey also has its own foreign policy and it sticks to Turkey's geopolitical doctrines. In the early stage of Erdogan's rule, the main goal of Turkish foreign policy was to strengthen strategic depth, but in 2015, "Ankara abandoned most of the doctrines of strategic depth because the discrepancies between Turkey's domestic politics and the image that Turkey's leader wanted to present to the world." Turkey also advocates its own version of Eurasianism in order to form Turkish geopolitical discourse. First of all, Turkey emphasizes the special important role in Caucasus and Central Asia, and views Eurasia as the Turkic world. Secondly, the territory of Ottoman Empire used to occupy are the real centre of Eurasia. Therefore, as the paper have analyzed above, Turkey and Russia's Eurasianism are totally different from each other, which may cause some obstacles during the way of shaping a genuine strategic partnership. Even though differences between two countries still remain unsolved, both countries manage to prevent major issues or direct conflicts from causing a permanent rupture. After they have interacted with each other for decades, they will continue to start pragmatic cooperation instead of making direct conflicts or imposing sanction to another because cooperation is correspondent to their national interests and conducive to regional development.

4. Conclusion

The distinctive feature of relationship between Russia and Turkey can be described as complex and competitive, each periods of their relationship has different characteristics. Both countries can stay calm when they come across serious international issues. When attempting to predict the likely future trajectory of the relationship, it is more likely to make progress while keeps stability, which is correspondent to both countries' national interests. In personal interaction level, Putin and Erdogan have the same characteristics, and they will give tough response to their opponents, they will spare no effort to guarantee nation's sovereignty and security, they will always be vigilant the threats from the West. Besides, there are still some divergences between two countries, first of all, each has their own historical mythology and its historical influence on the world in order to stress its unique international position, both Russia and Turkey put forward Eurasianism to create their own Eurasian path, each of them claims itself as the authentic leader in the Eurasian region. Although two countries have several direct conflicts, they can alleviate tension situations in order to keep sound relationship. One international incident like Turkish shoot down the Russian jet along the Syrian-Turkish border, less than a year, the conversation between Turkey and Russia was held, Erdogan apologized for the incident and Putin expressed his support for Erdogan in the July 2016 coup attempt. Both countries' mass media emphasize the relationship between Russia and Turkey. Therefore, keeping stability is their common will.

One of the possible rupture between Russia and Turkey is the role of religion, because religion plays very important role in geopolitical identities of both countries. Russia is the central place of Orthodoxy and Turkey wants to promote the influence of Islamism, both countries wants to

have religious discourse which may cause serious conflicts, creating religious enmity. Religious enmity is a serious geopolitical issues which will increase distrust and exacerbated the nature of the relationship. From the historical perspective, Orthodoxy and Islam have different ideologies. It is advisable that scholars and policymakers should take religious intolerance into consideration, religion issues may not be the major rupture between Russia and Turkey, but it will become potential threat of amplifying differences.

Economic interaction can be considered as one of the positive factors to make Russia and Turkey collaborate together. When there is some inevitable diplomatic and military incidents happening, economic interaction will alleviate tension to some extent, they manage to preserve some key element of economic cooperation because economy are like "engine" for both countries. From geographical perspective, Russia and Turkey are close to each other, that is one of the reasons why they can take further expansion of economic collaboration. Russia has always been the dominant position in bilateral trade, but the situation has changed since new, unconventional natural gas is found in U.S and Australia, Turkey have established several pipeline infrastructures and Turkey gradually become energy storage and transport hub, which will definitely weaken economic cooperation between Russia and Turkey. From this perspective, we cannot overestimate that cooperation, like economic cooperation can prevent war from happening once and for all. It is necessary to take some precautions and restrain potential threats.

From the analysis above, it is advisable that what the West should not do is to buildup a gap between Russia and Turkey because cooperation between Russia and Turkey is historical trend and they have their national interests to fulfill. Russia and Turkey's relationships are closer than ever before, the West should prepare themselves as Turkey has tendency for quitting from NATO and become an ally of Russia. Our final goal is to maintain balance in Eurasia, it will provide sound international environment for the West. Russia always remain tough attitude toward the West, but it will deal with international conflicts in more rational ways. We should pay special attention on Turkey, Turkey is one of the member in NATO but it is inclining to Russia. What the West should do is to closely follow Turkish actions and policies, analyzing it in geopolitical way and it will be conducive for policies-making toward Russia-Turkey relation.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by China Scholarship Council.

References

- [1] Hossein Aghaie Joobani, Mostafa Mousavipour.(2015) Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Moving Towards Strategic Synergy in the Middle East? Strategic Analysis, 39(2),pp 141-155.
- [2] Muhittin T. ÖZSAĞLAM.(2013) State Centric Russian Energy Policy and Rapprochement in Russia-Turkey Relations. Journal of Social Sciences, 5(2), pp158-176.
- [3] Didem Ekinici.(2017) Russia-Turkey Relations(1991-2016): Diverging Interests and Compelling Realities, Turkish Foreign Policy, pp 151-172.
- [4] Balta, Evren.(2019) From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after The Cold War, Uluslararası İlişkiler,16(63), pp 69-86.
- [5] Erdem Ozluk.(2016) Understanding the Crisis between Turkey and Russia: A Normalization or Escalation? Proceedings of International Academic Conferences, International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences.
- [6] Şener Aktürk(2016). The Crisis in Russian-Turkish Relations,2008-2015, Russian Analytical Digest, 179, pp2-5.
- [7] Toni Alaranta(2016). Russo-Turkish Relations: Completely in Tatters for the Time Being.Russian Analytical Digest,179, pp5-7.

- [8] Dimitar Bechev.(2016) Russian-Turkish Relations in Crisis.Russian Analytical Digest,179, pp9-12.
- [9] Titov, A.(2015) Russia and Turkey: a long history of turbulent relations, The Conversation, 28, pp1-4.
- [10]Dimitar Bechev.(2017) Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [11]Imzalandi, K.A.N.(2015) A Glimpse of History: How the Treaty of Kars was Signed, Review of American Studies, 32, pp199-208.
- [12]Alexander Nazaroff.(1992) Russia's Treaty with Turkey, Current History(1916-1940), 17(2), p276-279.
- [13]Elena Korosteleva and Zachary Paikin.(2021) Russia between east and west, and the future of Eurasian order, International Politics, 58, pp321-333.
- [14]Binnur Ozkececi-Taner.(2017) Disintegration of the 'strategic depth' doctrine and Turkey's troubles in the Middle East, Contemporary Islam, 11, pp201-214.