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# Russia and Turkey: Approaches to Regional Security in the Middle East

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## Abstract

*In recent years, Russia and Turkey have increased their presence in the Middle East, where several factors influence their views on security. This article analyses Russia–Turkey relations in the context of recent developments in the Middle East, and considers the latest approaches to managing regional security there. Special attention will be given to four main issues: terrorism, nuclear weapons, the Syrian crisis and the region’s security architecture. Despite residual differences in Russia and Turkey’s approaches to Middle Eastern and global politics, the article concludes that there are a number of areas, such as combatting terrorism, resolving the Syrian conflict, producing “peaceful” atomic power, and engaging in economic cooperation in the MENA region, in*

*which common interests and the potential for mutual benefit outweigh any obstacles.*

## Key Words

Regional and Global Security, Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Syrian Crisis.

## Introduction

Transformational processes in the Arab world in the beginning of the 2010s led Russia and Turkey to an understanding of the need to form new foreign policy approaches towards the Middle East. This article seeks to identify the impact of the approaches Russia and Turkey have taken on this issue on relations between Moscow and Ankara. This topic is not only extremely relevant (and will remain so for years to come), but it is also quite voluminous and ambitious. For this reason, the authors propose focusing on the following four main issues: terrorism, nuclear weapons, the Syrian crisis and the security architecture in the Middle East.

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At the beginning of 2010, Russia and Turkey had different views on the situation in the region. However, a certain degree of political involvement in the affairs of the Middle East and the development of other areas of bilateral cooperation allowed them to avoid overt conflict. The growing number of threats from the Middle East- international terrorism, the crisis of statehood, the proliferation and/or use of WMD- led to an increase in Russian and Turkish interest in the region, as Moscow and Ankara were forced to respond to the growing security challenges there. However, insufficient communication between the two influential players on harmonizing their interests and creating joint approaches to regional security led to a crisis on the Turkish-Syrian border on 24 November 2015. This incident again called into question the level of relations between Russia and NATO member states. Together with a military coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, the so-called “jet crisis” had a special importance for the role of Turkey in NATO.

The crisis in Russia-Turkey bilateral relations has been resolved and relations are now restored. The normalization of relations required revised approaches to regional policies and a frank dialogue between the parties. Both Moscow and Ankara now coordinate their regional security policies and try to be flexible to avoid future tensions. Russia and

Turkey have significant potential for joint actions in stabilizing the region and taking part in a new regional security system.

## Terrorism as a Threat to National and Global Security

Domestic and international terrorism is one of the key security issues for Russia and Turkey. For Russia, the struggle against extremist groups in the North Caucasus- particularly Chechnya and Dagestan- has been a vital issue since the mid-1990s. Despite the successful completion of the second Chechen campaign and the counter- terrorist operation in North Caucasus in 2009 which resulted in the restoration of Moscow’s control over all of Chechnya and Dagestan, the local terrorist groups did not completely cease their activity thanks to links to international terrorist groups of Islamist persuasion.<sup>1</sup> After the referendum which resulted with the unification of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol with Russia in 2014, a number of Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar nationalist associations and other groups intensified their activities, which are defined by the Russian official structures as terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

In their efforts to counter the domestic terrorist challenges in both regions, Russian law-enforcement agencies have

repeatedly faced the need to cooperate with Turkish security agencies. The reason for this is the historically close cultural and religious ties between the Turkish population and the peoples living in Russia's southern regions. Despite having a certain conflict potential, these ties also hold great promise for constructive development along the lines of mutual respect and understanding, to the benefit of both Russia and Turkey.

Since the disintegration of the USSR, Russia has maintained a zero-tolerance approach to terrorism, refusing to recognize it as a legal and legitimate method of political struggle in the modern world in general, and in Turkey in particular. Therefore, despite the fact that a sizable Kurdish community resides in Russia, Moscow has never recognized organizations such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), nor has it supported their objectives so long as terrorism remains the main instrument of achieving them. At the same time, however, Russia also does not officially recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization despite Turkey's requests. This is mainly because Russia considers an organization as a terrorist organization only when it causes a threat to Russia and operates on the territory of the Russian Federation.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Turkey remains a permanent and

paramount principle for Russia. Unlike the USSR, for which communist ideology was the cornerstone of its foreign policy, contemporary Russia approaches Turkey and the Middle East as a whole from the standpoint of pragmatism and appropriate responses to actual challenges and threats to security, both conventional and non-conventional.

International terrorism became one of the most important, non-conventional security threats at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Network organizations like Al-Qaeda are capable of overcoming the ethnic differences which used to divide domestic terrorist cells, despite the fact that they have common or similar goals. By maintaining socioeconomic and politico-military instability, which is their preferred state of affairs, these organizations antagonize the traditional national states and undermine their monopoly on violence and the protection of citizens both at the local and global levels. The mutually beneficial multilevel cooperation between Russia and Turkey in fighting first Al-Qaeda and then DAESH in 2016-17, was an example of pragmatic rapprochement in addressing a number of common problems.

Despite the many contradictions that had accumulated over the past several decades of cooperation, and in the face of regular crises of mutual trust, Russia

and Turkey have sizable experience in working jointly to combat terrorism. There have been mutual criticisms, but there have also been moments of cooperation when required, and a certain amount of mutual understanding on specific aspects of the problem.<sup>4</sup> In the early 2000s, Moscow and Ankara managed to agree on a joint approach to coping with the internal challenges posed by the Chechen and Kurdish separatists, respectively, and to neutralize the terrorism problem that had surfaced repeatedly on the agenda.<sup>5</sup> This was largely due to the economic growth the two countries enjoyed in the 2000s, which was accompanied by a sharp increase in the volume of bilateral trade.

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however, due to the consequences of the global economic crisis and the impact of the transformation processes taking

place in the Arab world, including the socio-political upheavals brought about by the so-called Arab Spring movement. Turkey, which was more closely involved in regional affairs and shares a common border with some of the Arab countries, found itself under greater threat and was forced to respond more actively to the ongoing processes in the Arab world. By siding with the Syrian opposition in 2011, Ankara lost contact with the official Syrian government. Further deteriorating the security situation on Turkey's southern borders were the internal political processes in Iraq, the radicalization of that country's population, and the expansion of the territories controlled by the DAESH terrorist organization. In addition, the confrontation between the PKK and Turkish security forces gained speed in the summer of 2015. All of these events had a negative impact on Turkey's security.

Against this background, Russia's policy in the North Caucasus did not undergo any radical transformations during the same period: the role of Chechnya in domestic and foreign policy actually increased. In the context of the Syrian crisis, ever since the active phase of the Russian military operation in Syria began in September 2015, the so-called "Chechen factor" has in fact become an effective instrument of Russia's domestic policy, as well as its foreign policy in the Middle East

and North Africa. Chechnya's role in establishing informal and formal ties in different parts of the region helped Russia resolve a number of issues, for example in Libya, Syria and Iraq.<sup>6</sup> By using Chechnya's informal foreign policy resources, Russia has successfully diversified its anti-terrorist toolkit while developing new ways of participating in efforts aimed at addressing acute humanitarian and economic problems. For example, established in Chechnya in 2004, the Akhmad Kadyrov foundation continues to deliver humanitarian aid to Syria.<sup>7</sup> A Russian military police battalion represented mainly by Chechens was also deployed to Syria as part of a law enforcement and peacekeeping force after the liberation of Aleppo in December 2016.<sup>8</sup>

Both Russia and Turkey are officially committed to combating international terrorism. However, in the absence of a common understanding of this phenomenon (including at the international level), each works to develop its own criteria and approaches. As with several other areas of bilateral cooperation, the partnership between Russia and Turkey in countering terrorist threats still lacks a developed institutional foundation that would, within its scope, be based on strategic trust. Despite the differing approaches to international and third-country political crises, Russia and Turkey tend to view each other's internal problems

as their domestic affairs, refusing to capitalize on them for political gain. This mutual restraint could contribute to unifying the countries' approaches to understanding the essence of terrorism and fighting it effectively.

## Nuclear Weapons and the “Peaceful Atom” in the Middle East

The issue of nuclear weapons is not often raised when analyzing relations between Russia and Turkey, but it does come to the fore during times of crisis. In the 1950s, the U.S. and Turkey held talks on deploying nuclear warheads at İncirlik Air Base as part of NATO's deterrence and defense posture.<sup>9</sup> The fact that tactical nuclear weapons were in fact deployed in Turkey in 1961 urged the USSR to intensify its own program to deploy nuclear warheads in close proximity to U.S. borders. What followed was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, which was resolved through direct negotiations between the heads of state of the two superpowers. The parties agreed that the USSR should dismantle its nuclear weapons in Cuba, while the U.S. agreed not to invade Cuba, and to dismantle the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.<sup>10</sup> The resolution alleviated the global tension. However, NATO retained its nuclear weapons in five countries that were not officially

nuclear powers- Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Turkey signed a number of international non-proliferation agreements, and supported the idea of creating a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. Ankara signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty on 28 January 1969 and ratified it in 1980.

In the period that followed the Soviet-U.S. confrontation, it became clear to many observers that the availability of nuclear weapons to nations had grown irrelevant.<sup>12</sup> Serious discussions began within NATO as to the future of nuclear warheads in Europe; these talks were largely related to the very sense of retaining the alliance now that the “communist adversary” was gone. NATO started looking for new “threats,” eventually identifying a number of Middle Eastern states, such as Iran, Syria and Iraq.<sup>13</sup> As Western rhetoric about the danger of the Iranian nuclear program and the need to “deter” Iran gained pace, many observers, including those in Turkey, began to believe that nuclear weapons were still of political and military significance. Other experts begged to differ, arguing that the presence of nuclear weapons in Turkey was counterproductive since there was no longer a threat to “deter,” and that NATO was unable to counter the new challenges and threats.<sup>14</sup>

The nuclear control situation began

to deteriorate in 2000-2010 against the backdrop of the U.S.-led coalition invading Afghanistan and Iraq, and also due to a series of nationhood crises in the region and the Saudi Arabia-Iran and Israel-Iran rivalries. The general belief is that Israel is the only country in the region that possesses nuclear weapons, while Israel maintains a “nuclear policy of ambiguity.” Even though Israeli nuclear arms can be considered a serious security guarantee for Tel Aviv, the topic hampers the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the region.<sup>15</sup> The possibility of nuclear proliferation is linked to the threats perceived by other Middle Eastern states. It was in response to U.S. dominance in the Middle East and Washington’s invasion of Iraq, as well as to Israel’s refusal to as much as discuss its nuclear capability, that Iran launched its own nuclear program. Saudi Arabia followed suit, arguing that Iran’s nuclear efforts were a threat to the state. Given the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East and the ambiguity over the U.S. security guarantees for Saudi Arabia, the latter has increasingly turned to the idea of developing nuclear arms itself. Riyadh has developed strategic ties with Pakistan, which possesses nuclear capability.<sup>16</sup> Despite this, on the record, Saudi Arabia supports the non-proliferation regime.

Turkey had two options in the post-

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bipolar world. In a 2008 article, Turkish scholar Mustafa Kibaroglu noted that the country needed to have tactical nuclear arms withdrawn from its territory, which he said would improve the atmosphere of confidence in the region and strengthen international strategic stability.<sup>17</sup> There is, however, a conflicting opinion that favors keeping the warhead weapons in the country. Its proponents argue that the status quo will secure Turkey's position as a NATO member, despite the fact that Washington and Ankara have harbored mounting mutual grudges ever since the 2003 war in Iraq.<sup>18</sup>

Relations between the U.S. and Turkey had a direct impact on the rhetoric of the two countries and their actions within NATO, including in terms of the presence of nuclear weapons in Turkey. Tensions began to mount with the onset of the Syrian crisis and the increasing rift between Washington and

Ankara with regard to the approaches of the two countries in fighting DAESH. Turkey, for one, was unhappy with the U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are dominated by the YPG (People's Protection Units), the armed wing of the PYD (Democratic Union Party)-both, as Ankara stresses, affiliated with the PKK. The YPG gained control of major border towns in northern Syria after the withdrawal of the government forces.<sup>19</sup> Muted responses from the Western governments about the military coup attempt in Turkey also led to the deterioration of Turkey's relations with the U.S. and individual EU member states. The country's NATO membership and the maintenance of nuclear weapons on its soil were once again called into question. Reports began to circulate about plans to transfer the warheads from Incirlik to other countries (including Romania, although this rumor was subsequently denied).<sup>20</sup>

Another important nuclear issue in the Middle East was Iran's nuclear program. The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 on 14 July 2015 was a major breakthrough. The agreement reflects Russia's position as a participant in the negotiation process regarding the Iranian nuclear program. The parties expected the implementation of the JCPOA to "positively contribute

to regional and international peace and security.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, the JCPOA “addresses the [P5+1] concerns, including through comprehensive measures providing for transparency and verification.”<sup>22</sup> The document will “produce the comprehensive lifting of all UN Security Council sanctions as well as multilateral and national sanctions related to Iran’s nuclear program, including steps on access in areas of trade, technology, finance and energy.”<sup>23</sup> Turkey welcomed the agreement. A statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey reads: “We expect the uninterrupted and full implementation of the JCPOA in full transparency under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency.”<sup>24</sup>

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in January 2016, had been expected to ease global political tensions. However, no changes to the regional situation materialized.<sup>25</sup> The developments in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, the

establishment of, and de-facto lack of a regional institutional security framework exacerbated the Middle Eastern crises and regional rivalry. The Obama administration’s revision of the U.S. approach to the region (manifested in Washington’s distancing itself from Middle Eastern affairs) led to the activation of regional forces. Nevertheless, the reluctance of the U.S. and the inability of regional powers to face up to the new challenges and threats gave Russia, as a long-standing regional player and a member of the nuclear club, the opportunity to step in.

Russia has consistently promoted non-proliferation and called for the development of nuclear capabilities for civilian use. This is corroborated by Moscow’s projects to build nuclear power plants (NPP) across the world, including in the Middle East. In particular, Russia took part in building the region’s first NPP, to the IAEA’s requirements, in the Iranian city of Bushehr.<sup>26</sup> More nuclear power units are expected to be built in the country. Russia’s state-owned corporation Rosatom has also begun building the Akkuyu NPP in Turkey and the El Dabaa NPP in Egypt. Russia is participating in the tender for building an NPP in Jordan,<sup>27</sup> while it is also in talks with Saudi Arabia and has reached a number of agreements with the United Arab Emirates.<sup>28</sup>



Just like the USSR in the bipolar configuration of the world order, Russia is critical of Turkey hosting U.S. nuclear munitions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation continues to urge the U.S. to return its nuclear weapons to their home country, stressing that Moscow has already done a similar thing and now expects the Americans to follow suit.<sup>29</sup> Global Research reports that the U.S. keeps around 200 B61 thermonuclear bombs in Europe. The U.S. National Resources Defense Council says a further 90 or so B61s are kept in Turkey.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia currently views Turkey as a partner rather than a threat. The two countries have made significant progress in economic cooperation over the past two decades, including in the development of the peaceful atom. It was with Russia that Turkey signed the contract for the construction of the Akkuyu NPP in Mersin Province. The plant will be constructed on Build-Own-Operate terms: Rosatom will act as the general construction contractor, and will maintain and run the facility upon its completion. Rosatom plans to commission four power units fitted with VVER-1300 reactors.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the existing problems, Russia and Turkey are both officially committed to nuclear non-proliferation and support the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. Both

countries understand the importance of the civilian use of nuclear energy and cooperate in this field.

## The Syrian Crisis

The commencement of the Russian Aerospace Forces' military operation, which is defined as a counterterrorist operation by Damascus and Moscow, on 30 September 2015 at the request of the Syrian government made Ankara and Moscow realize that the Syrian situation was directly affecting relations between the two countries.<sup>32</sup> The road towards understanding each other's positions and finding a compromise was long and difficult. The sensitive nature of the issue and the inability of the parties to compromise resulted in the incident on 24 November 2015, when a Turkish fighter downed a Russian warplane. This incident led to a drastic deterioration in Russia-Turkey relations and the introduction of Russian economic sanctions against Turkey. Simultaneously, Moscow significantly stepped up its assistance to the Syrian government in the latter's fight against terrorism, emphasizing the need, as Russia's MFA stated, "to fully separate the units of the so-called "moderate" opposition from ISIS and [Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist organization] Jabhat al-Nusra."<sup>33</sup> However, according to Russian officials this condition was not met; none of the

actors supporting the opposition groups (including the U.S.) volunteered as the guarantor of the dissociation process.<sup>34</sup>

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The freeze of relations between Moscow and Ankara adversely affected both parties. As the U.S. continued to support the YPG in northern Syria, the Turkish leadership's pragmatism prevailed and resulted in Ankara sending a letter of regret for the incident in 2015. In 2016, Turkey, under new Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, set a course towards mending relations and reducing tensions with its neighbors. Ankara began this process by restoring ties with Israel (the associated talks took several years), and then went on to make better relations with Russia.<sup>35</sup> The sheer volume of bilateral economic cooperation and the historic ties between Russia and Turkey going back to the 1990s helped the two countries overcome the crisis in their bilateral relations. While the interaction

mechanisms needed to be improved and direct dialogue was required on a variety of institutional levels, economic prospects played an important role in the mending of ties between Ankara and Moscow. Nevertheless, Syria remained the key unresolved issue between the parties. Turkey continued to consider the Syrian opposition as the only legitimate representative of Syria, and was supportive of anti-government groups, while Russia remained committed to backing the Assad regime.

Turkey and Russia decided to interact on the Syrian issue in 2016, despite their totally opposite views of the problem. This interaction, and Ankara's revision of its foreign policy, began several weeks prior to the military coup attempt in July 2016.<sup>36</sup> Russia's support for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came as another sign of Ankara's commitment to restoring and developing bilateral dialogue. The presidents of the two countries and working groups began meeting more often, which resulted in a certain amount of mutual understanding, including the development of specific mechanisms for cooperation in Syria. Nevertheless, the issue of the YPG was a matter of principle for Ankara, which believed the YPG units operating in that country were affiliated with the PKK and did not allow them to participate in the intra-Syrian talks. Russia viewed the

situation in a somewhat different light, believing it was necessary to bring all the influential Syrian actors, including various Kurdish representatives, to the negotiating table.<sup>37</sup>

On 24 August 2016, Turkey sent ground troops to northern Syria. Acting in support of the pro-Turkish opposition groups, Ankara launched Operation Euphrates Shield in order to ensure the security of the border between Turkey and Syria, fighting against DAESH and pursuing the less explicitly mentioned objective of preventing the U.S.-backed SDF/YPG from establishing an autonomous corridor in the north of Syria.<sup>38</sup> The operation was completed on 29 March 2017 with the establishment of control over the town of al-Bab, which effectively cut Afrin in the northwest of the country from Kobani and Jazira in the northeast. The operation in Al-Bab was the first airstrike Russia executed to assist Turkey's fight against DAESH.<sup>39</sup>

In September 2016, after the failure of the Lavrov-Kerry talks, Russia made adjustments to its own policy on Syria. Moscow temporarily halted attempts to resolve the Syrian conflict in concert with the U.S., which had come to be of little help as a partner in light of the upcoming U.S. presidential election. Instead, Russia decided to rely on those regional powers which had actual influence on the situation in Syria. This

led, in late 2016, to the proposal of the Astana format of Syrian negotiations, with Russia, Turkey and Iran acting as guarantors. The process began at the same time that Aleppo returned to the full control of the Syrian government forces. Given these developments in the Middle East, at the theoretical level, Russian researchers concluded that with the decrease in the role of the U.S., the era of the unipolar world is ending and a world with elements of poly-centricity is emerging.<sup>40</sup>

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All the parties involved in the Astana process are committed to resolving the political crisis in Syria within the framework of the Geneva process and UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Russian officials have repeatedly stressed that the Astana process is aimed at resolving technical issues related to reducing the level of violence.<sup>41</sup> The parties and participants have succeeded in reducing the level of violence in the country thanks to an agreement on

setting up de-escalation zones in Syria. It should be noted that these zones do not establish any borderlines that would compromise Syria's sovereignty. From the standpoint of international law, Syria maintains sovereignty over its entire territory, and the de-escalation zones are merely a temporary measure.

Following the military defeat of DAESH in Syria and the liberation of territories previously occupied by terrorists, the situation generally has transformed. However, the conflict that began in 2011 is far from being resolved, and the potential for violence along the lines of existing political, economic and ethno-confessional schisms remains quite high. It is becoming increasingly obvious that it is impossible to postpone the solution of the whole set of humanitarian problems, and with it, the restoration of the destroyed social and economic infrastructure, as an indispensable condition for the survival of the Syrian population and the return of refugees. The latter is seen as an important goal, of clear interest to the countries in whose territories the displaced persons from Syria are currently located. First of all, these are the countries that have a common border with Syria- Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Russia, Turkey, and Iran, despite their differing positions on other issues, are indispensable participants in

facilitating the settlement in Syria. They have a wide range of tools to influence the situation and they are interested in the speedy normalization of the humanitarian, socio-economic and political situation. The key task for these countries in 2018 will be to preserve the compliance reached in 2017 and develop the experience of interaction.

There is a constant need to coordinate the interests of a large number of actors both inside and outside Syria. Many of these interests are amorphous and do not have a permanent political representation. In these conditions of objective complexity, none of the main areas of cooperation should become a "hostage" of another. Russia and Turkey in the medium term have the opportunity to continue developing cooperation in three main areas.

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The first is to help overcome the humanitarian crisis and restore the social and economic infrastructure in Syria. In the medium term these issues will be strongly interconnected.

Russia and Turkey have experience in conducting humanitarian operations in Syria and can develop cooperation both with each other and with third parties, including international organizations, to provide direct assistance to those in need. The already established institution of de-escalation zones and existing opportunities for their development may prove to be an important help. The experience of creating de-escalation zones can be used to create humanitarian zones designed to provide support to the population, regardless of whose political and military-political control they may be under.

The second area is the promotion of a political settlement. Russia and Turkey are able to develop existing formats, such as the negotiating platforms in Astana (under the auspices of the three guarantor countries) and Geneva (under the auspices of the UN), and to propose and create new ones. At the same time, new platforms can be developed at the local level, given in particular the experience of the Russian Coordination Center in reconciling the opposing sides on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic in Khmeimim, as well as on the national level. In particular, the format of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress can become a lynchpin, if the work on its preparation and holding is supported and continued, taking into account all the shortcomings revealed in 2017. It is

extremely important for Moscow and Ankara to promote the preservation and development of a trilateral format to help resolve the Syrian crisis with the participation of Iran. Iran will continue to be an important participant in what is happening in Syria due to a number of objective indicators, which makes it an indispensable participant in the negotiation process. Nevertheless, the trilateral format with the participation of Russia and Turkey remains the only one that recognizes and takes into account this factor as part of the objective reality. This makes the format valuable in the search for real solutions to the stalemate.

The third area is cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Using their accumulated experience and relying on the commonality of tactical and strategic interests, at least in the medium term, Russia and Turkey can significantly improve the effectiveness of the fight against terrorism both bilaterally and with the involvement of other countries in the region, including Iran and Iraq.

Following the events of 2015-2017, both Russia and Turkey have become inalienable participants in the process of political settlement and post-conflict reconstruction in Syria. Considering the enormous amount of money needed to revive the country as well as the limited resources of Moscow and

Ankara , the parties are able to interact on the way to a pragmatic solution amenable to both.

## Regional Platforms and Security Architecture Systems

The Russian military doctrine states that one of the main threats to the country's security is NATO's expansion to Russia's borders.<sup>42</sup> However, a number of experts, as well as the President of the Russian Federation, believe that this threat has been largely offset in the past few years by Russia's choice of foreign policy, the successful rearmament of the Russian armed forces, and the development of other deterrence mechanisms.<sup>43</sup> In this context, even though Turkey is a NATO member, Moscow and Ankara have resolved many issues in the past through direct dialogue.

It follows from the Russian military doctrine that one of the objectives of military-political cooperation is "to develop the negotiation process for the purpose of creating regional security systems with Russia as a participant."<sup>44</sup> Both Turkey and Russia cooperate within a number of international security organizations, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as member countries, and the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which Russia is a member and Turkey a dialogue partner.

The need for a regional security system in the Middle East with the participation of Russia and Turkey is becoming even more topical today. Both countries play a significant role in the region and have interests to protect. The Middle East is a poorly institutionalized region when it comes to security. The multilateral organizations that are active in the region have proven to be ineffective. One of these is the Arab League, which was founded in 1945 to serve the interests of individual actors. This organization has failed to respond to the emerging challenges in the context of current regional transformations. The creation of working groups on security issues and new multilateral interaction formats could have a positive effect on the restoration of post-war countries in the post-crisis period.<sup>45</sup>

The region can only build an effective security architecture based on the principle of inclusiveness. Russia and Turkey seek to maintain working relations with all the regional powers. Regional affairs in 2017 were affected by the decision of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to isolate Qatar with a blockade. While Russia chose not to interfere in this regional conflict, Turkey largely sided with Qatar. Ankara's close relations with

Doha urged it to deploy troops in Qatar, which also hosts the Al Udeid Air Base- the largest U.S. military installation in the region.<sup>46</sup> The GCC-Qatar dispute remains unresolved, but the excitement surrounding it has largely abated. Nevertheless, this incident is an indicator of the GCC being another regional association that has failed as a regional security format.

The fact that all the current integration formats in the Middle East and North Africa are either poorly equipped, or unable to perform effectively, directly affects the ability of regional actors to ensure not just their own national security, but also the security of the region as a whole. A format similar to what U.S. President Donald Trump proposed following his visit to Saudi Arabia in spring 2017- the so-called Middle Eastern NATO as it was dubbed by journalists- has no chance of success in the region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>47</sup> Such an institution would substitute the strategic aspirations of regional countries with the narrow agenda pursued by a handful of regional powers and certain external actors such as the U.S. The main disadvantage of such an association would be the lack of inclusive open dialogue among all the countries without exception. On the contrary, it would promote exclusivity, and even the exclusion of countries that have fallen from grace for whatever political reason.

This approach completely disregards the fact that the strategic long-term challenges to the effective development and security of the Middle East and North Africa are not so much political as they are economic and humanitarian. Its purpose would be to unite *against* someone, not cooperate for the sake of something. Iran, without whose support countries like Russia and Turkey cannot imagine a successful future for the region, has certainly found itself excluded from such formats.

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Another proposal calls for the creation of a format that would bring together the GCC, Iran and Iraq (so-called GCC+2).<sup>48</sup> In the initial phase, this new format might require the participation of external actors, such as the U.S. and Russia. Under its auspices, direct dialogue between the Gulf states could reduce the level of mutual negative

rhetoric and strengthen confidence-building measures in the region. This is believed to be necessary to free regional policies from the ineffective and counterproductive mechanism of unilateral sanctions against individual states. In addition to Iran, which is the most glaring example of a state excluded from foreign political processes through sanctions, there are quite a few countries in the Middle East and North Africa whose full involvement is required in order to work effectively on the problems in the region. The role of Sudan, which has been under sanctions for many years now, in addressing such problems as counteracting terrorism, enforcing the safe navigation of the Red Sea, controlling migrant flows from Africa to Europe, and ensuring water and food security is enormous, if only because of the country's geographical location.

Many of the major regional conflicts, including the long-standing confrontations in Libya and Yemen, cannot be resolved solely by the neighbors of the affected countries, which are already affected, directly and severely, by the challenges and threats spreading from the zones of military, socioeconomic and humanitarian instability. Both Libya and Yemen might seem far away from either Russia or Turkey, but it would be wrong to say that the latter cannot play a positive role in resolving the local contradictions

and disagreements while overcoming the consequences of the destructive wars.

Both Russia and Turkey have, at various stages in history, contributed positively to the development of Libya and Yemen. Furthermore, they both have the economic potential required to solve the current problems of the Libyan and Yemeni populations in terms of their survival. Russia and Turkey are not economic rivals. Rather, they may be described as potential partners with regard to a very broad range of economic activities. For these two powers, the Middle East and North Africa represent an extremely promising long-term market for both state-run companies and private businesses. Both Turkey and Russia command enormous long-term potential for assisting the Arab countries in overcoming the natural limitations and consequences caused by water shortages. Such assistance is not just about food supplies in the form of Russian grain and Turkish food products, but also about strategic investment in transportation and energy infrastructure, and in the highly promising sectors of the mining and processing industries. Both Turkey and Russia are interested in regional security and they both have great opportunities to develop contacts with regional players in order to advance the cause of peace and stability in the Middle



East and North Africa. By working together, Russia and Turkey would be able to offer a realistic regional security framework with the participation of the region's countries as well external players such as the European Union and China.

## Conclusion

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia-Turkey relations gained unprecedented dynamism and intensity. Against this background, Russia's consistent "return" to the Middle East on the new geopolitical playing field is not a strategic threat to Turkey's interests either regionally or globally. Pragmatic partnership between the two states is characterized by de-ideologization and independence from the global conjuncture and previous trends. This

makes this new stage of Russia-Turkey interaction remarkable in comparison to the dialogue between the Turkish Republic and USSR before and after the Cold War. Such cooperation is becoming a mutually beneficial format for interaction between the two countries, which together can offer a real alternative to the world order that existed previously in the Middle East and which had formerly determined the region's interaction with external players.

Despite the residual differences in Russia and Turkey's approaches to regional and world politics, there are no insurmountable obstacles to cooperation on those issues where real and potential mutual benefits and common interests outweigh any differences.

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