

The dynamics of the Ankara-Moscow partnership in relation to the South Caucasus

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Overview

While on the one hand Ankara carries out a balancing act between the Euro-Atlantic and Moscow; on the other hand, it pursues both rivalry and cooperation with Russia in the two countries’ shared neighborhood of Eurasia/the Black Sea. Therefore, the nature of Ankara’s orientation to Moscow over the years has been related to how Ankara’s relations with the West fare, Ankara’s assessments of the power balance (relative power and level of cooperation) between the West and Russia, the state of Russia’s influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as economic benefits from bilateral trade and investment.

In the first years after the USSR collapse, Ankara’s conception of Turkish power in the region revolved around a Western anchor. Accordingly, rivalry with Russia was in the forefront. However, disillusionment and divergences with the West, a drive to deter Moscow from putting up challenges to Turkey’s regional ambitions, recognition of Russia’s relative leverage in the Caucasus, as well as various political and economic interest groups led Ankara to seek more partnership with Moscow. It has been widely assumed among Turkish diplomats and political strategists, that working together with Russia will catapult Turkish leverage in the Caucasus more than confronting Russia would.

This shift in approach to Russia is also in line with the general tendencies of Turkish foreign policy since the late 90s. Particularly since the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) consolidation of foreign policy making power, Ankara has been less indexed to the West in its foreign policy orientation, and more bent on setting up win-win equilibriums in its neighborhood. This policy framework has also envisioned turning Turkey into an ‘energy hub.’ Reaching these overarching goals was thought to require minimizing tensions and geopolitical clashes with Russia, developing bilateral economic

cooperation, as well as mutual trust and dependence.

However, in recent years, pursuing this agenda in practice has been more complicated, particularly when faced with dilemmas such as pipeline project proposals that are effectively mutually exclusive, or war between Russia and Georgia. Ankara has disappointed some parties by not taking sides forcefully enough in such occasions. On other occasions, Ankara has itself been disappointed by being pushed out of the equation by the West, or in other occasions, by Russia. In yet other cases, Turkey has found itself pursuing initiatives that could not play out as conceived.

Turkey's positions towards overcoming the stalemates in the region have been relatively benign but not necessarily applicable. For example, Ankara remains interested in opening business channels with Abkhazya but not at the cost of going against Tbilisi; Ankara is in principle supportive of Georgia's NATO membership but not of countering Moscow for this end; Ankara wants to open borders with Armenia but not at the cost of angering Baku.

Particularly in the 2009-2011 period, perceptions about the development of a Russia-Turkey axis drew mixed reactions from within Turkey, the South Caucasus capitals, and the West. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia had tailored their strategic positioning with various assumptions involving Turkey and Russia being counterbalances in the region. When Ankara and Moscow drew closer, all three countries' had concerns about the sustainability of their foreign policy balances, not only in terms of Russia versus Turkey, but also because of the potential implications for Transatlantic influence in the region. Turkey weighing in on the side of Moscow with regards to the security arrangements for the Black Sea was a sign of Turkish-Russian alignment for a range of observers.

In light of not only Turkey and Russia drawing closer but also developing relations between Ankara and Tehran, Yerevan's strategic axis, which has traditionally 'curbed' Turkish capacity in the region, appeared to be breaking apart. For Tbilisi, the potential blow to Western traction in the region was most worrisome. Some in Baku hoped Ankara could bring Moscow on board vis a vis a workable solution to Karabakh. However others were skeptical, and concerned that Moscow would instead convince Ankara to take steps in the region which would leave Baku more dependent on Moscow. Concerns also prevailed that Ankara would enable Moscow to dominate energy routes in the region, to the detriment of Azerbaijan itself, as well as to European energy security.

The debate in Turkey about the course of its relations with Russia has not been comprehensive. While some analysts and decision makers implied Turkey should foster ties with Russia to increase Ankara's leverage over the EU, others focused on the economic gains for big business in Turkey. A few skeptical voices in the policy community expressed concern that Turkey was trading strategic assets for short term gains that benefited particular individuals or groups in Turkey more than the public or national interests at large. With the EU and NATO having lost popularity in Turkey, little concern was voiced about the risk of alienating allies in the West.

Though risks had not been articulated in public debates, the past couple of years have

brought to the fore reality checks in Turkey about the limits of alignment with Russia, and achievability of win-win solutions in the Caucasus – at least in the time frames envisioned. Meanwhile, the Arab spring has somewhat brought about a conjunctural strategic re-orientation of Turkey to the West, to the detriment of alignment with Russia.

Turkey and Russia have different strategies and strengths in their general foreign policy, as well as in the Caucasus in particular. While Russia has more grasp of the inner workings as well as strategic levers in the South Caucasus, Turkey has a more benevolent image among many domestic constituencies in particularly Georgia and Azerbaijan. Turkey sees its interests to lie in less inflammation in the region – be it between Russia and the West or between countries in the region, such as Georgia and Russia or Armenia and Azerbaijan. However Ankara clearly does not have sufficient control over the actors involved to be able to prevent such inflammation, and has not yet demonstrated an ability to play a central role in mending existing divisions.

The approach that seems to have gained traction most recently in Ankara is that the avoidance of rifts with both Russia and the West (but not in full partnership with either), greater self-reliance, and, a stronger partnership with Azerbaijan can maximize Turkey's influence in the Caucasus.

Ankara vocalizes the stance that regional problems should be solved by regional actors – with less outside interference. This approach has been in line with Russian preferences as well, suggesting that Turkey will not necessarily aim to aide US or EU penetration in the neighborhood, particularly as long as it feels excluded from EU membership.

However ultimately, Turkey's interests are relatively aligned with the goals of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy – more economic and social integration within the region and between the region and Europe, the resolution of conflicts, improved governance models, and the like. However, Ankara decision makers frequently express cynicism about the ability of the EaP to transform the region, resent being excluded from EU designs in the region, and do not believe that plans which do not have Russia on board can bear fruit.

The course of Turkey-EU relations and how the foreign policy “agenda” of Ankara takes shape will play a central part in determining the role Turkey plays in the future of the Caucasus, as well as its relations with Russia.

Patterns and dynamics in Turkey-Russia relations

In the 90s, the disintegration of the USSR spurred aspirations in Ankara for economic and political influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. At the beginning, Moscow had not yet formulated a post Cold War foreign policy based on dominance in this region. However in a short time, pan-Turkic rhetoric towards the region emanating from Turkey was seen as a challenge to Russian prominence in the Turkic countries within Russia's ‘sphere of influence.’ Hardliners in Moscow viewed Turkey's encroachment into Russia's ‘near abroad’ as a threat, not only because of Turkey's own ambitions but also due to Turkey's close relations with the US. Economic interests in the Eurasian region

fueled the mode of rivalry.

Ankara's vision included three interrelated pillars: increasing Turkey's influence, strengthening the independence of the South Caucasus countries from Moscow, and increasing Western leverage in the region. Turkey would integrate the region with the West, facilitating energy transit from the Caspian to Europe, the development of political and social ties, and trade. This would supposedly render Turkey strategically important and deliver economic opportunities, ensuring that Turkey's anchor to the West continued, post Cold War.

Though Turkey's rhetoric was ambitious, it became clear towards the late 90s that it did not have the instruments needed to substantiate the lofty goals. As Russia felt encircled and challenged over Central Asia and the Caucasus, it started to push back – pressuring these republics not to take part in Turkish-led initiatives. Turkey and the West did not have the will and/or capacity to counterbalance in order to follow through with the initiatives they had embarked on to orient the region Westwards. Russia also had an upper hand in the region due to the ethnic conflicts (within Georgia and between Azerbaijan and Armenia), which increased Russia's relative leverage. In short, Russia's cards in the region were stronger than Turkish and Western political will, political, strategic, or economic resources, could reckon with. Ankara was consumed with domestic challenges, and its ability to grasp and steer the political dynamics of the region were relatively weak.

In the course of the 90s, gradually, a new guiding principle had emerged in Turkey's approach to Eurasia: that it would not be possible to make leeway in increasing Turkey's leverage in the region by clashing with Russia's interests, and that instead this course could lose Turkey the ground it already had. A two-pronged approach of balancing Russia and the West evolved.

Energy has been one of the areas of both cooperation and rivalry – in a sense depicting the general dichotomy of the Russia-Turkey relationship and the underlying global geopolitical struggles. In the late 90s, both the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline bypassing Russia in carrying Azerbaijani oil to world markets, and the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline connecting Turkey and Russia under the Black Sea were agreed on. The latter was debated intensely both in the West and among critics in Turkey for limiting the possibility for Caspian (particularly Turkmenistan) natural gas from reaching European markets through Turkey, and for increasing Turkey's natural gas dependence on Russia.

Taking into consideration the emerging dynamics of the post Cold War order - the global shift of political and economic gravity and the challenge to US prominence – Ismail Cem (Foreign minister, 1997-2002) formulated new parameters for Turkish foreign policy. Calling for a 'multi-dimensional' foreign policy, he set higher goals for Turkey, as a global player and center of attraction for its neighborhood. Cem argued that Turkey should develop strong relations with the regions with which Turkey has historical and cultural bonds – the Balkans, Eurasia and the Middle East. He began to implement

policies along these lines to the limited extent possible at the turn of the century.

In November 2001, Foreign Minister Cem signed an Action Plan for Cooperation between Turkey and Russia in Eurasia, with his counterpart Ivanov, stating that the two countries would partner in dealing with regional problems. Cem explained that the priority in terms of external economic relations was to develop relations and trade with the neighboring large-scale economies, such as Russia.

Indeed, a factor playing into the rise in Turkey's positive inclination to Russia, particularly from the late 90s onwards, was the growing 'appreciation' of the opportunities which collaboration with Russia might bring to political and business circles in Turkey – such as big projects in the construction and energy sectors.

Indicative of the shifting of relations was Turkey's changed stance on the plight of Chechnya. The turn was marked during then-Prime Minister, Bülent Ecevit's trip to Moscow in late 1999 when he stated clearly that Chechnya was Russia's internal affair. Until then, due to Turkish public opinion sensitivity about the issue, support for the plight of Chechens was voiced periodically by Turkish politicians, and had been a constant irritant in Moscow-Ankara relations. Moscow had claimed that Chechens obtained assistance (intelligence, arms, volunteers) from Turkey. The conscious choice to disassociate from this issue demonstrated Ankara's realization that the cost of taking an adversarial position to Moscow was too high to sustain.

Indicative of the positive atmosphere emerging between the two countries, in November 2001, the foreign ministers, Ismail Cem and Igor Ivanov signed a document entitled "Action Plan for Cooperation between the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation in Eurasia."

From 2002 onwards, other factors – at the global, regional and domestic level- started kicking in to contribute to the shift in Turkey-Russia relations.

Towards the end of 2002, AKP came to power with a single party government, expediting what had been a gradual post Cold War restructuring process of Turkish foreign policy. Taking into consideration the changes in the regional and global power balances, Turkey's foreign policy was geared more on the opportunities in the neighborhood, leading to a pronounced effort to mend problems with neighbors, with a pro-business approach.

According to the concept of Ahmet Davutoglu, who has been the central architect of Turkey's foreign relations since 2002, Turkey would need to solve the existing problems with neighbors and increase mutual dependency, in order to strip neighbors of the incentive to counter Turkey's regional ascendance. He noted in particular that Russia and Iran were united in their intention to 'contain' Turkey in their respective spheres of influence, and lifting their motivation to do so would be important for Turkey to

maximize its geopolitical potential.¹

The March 2003 rejection by the Turkish parliament of the resolution that would have enabled the US to open a northern flank in its military operation against Iraq, was a sign for Moscow that Turkey might have indeed turned a new leaf, no longer aligned strictly with the US in the region. Thereafter, a factor that brought Ankara and Moscow together on occasion was their shared apprehension about US ‘infiltration’ into the neighborhood, particularly the Black Sea region. With the visit of Russian president Vladimir Putin to Turkey in 2004 – the first time a Russian head of state did so—the intensity of the relationship took a step up.

Particularly after 2005, the apparent European reluctance to pursue Turkey’s EU accession to fruition gave Ankara the incentive to foster and showcase closer relations with Russia. Some analysts viewed this as a tactic to ‘scare’ Europeans about how its East could turn adversarial if Turkey is left out of the EU. Others believed Turkey’s ‘rapprochement’ with Russia was simply a result of Turkey’s pursuing its raw national interests, and lack of reason to weigh in on the side of US or European positions. It is likely that there is truth in both interpretations. No matter what the motivation, the close relations depicted between Moscow and Ankara effected regional power balances and had effects on the strategic calculations in the capitals of the South Caucasus.²

Turkey and Russia’s partnership being partially defined by both countries relations with the US and the EU arguably dates back to the second half of the 1990s. Oktay Tanrisever explains that after 1997, Turkey and Russia were more converged because they had both been “taken for granted” by and excluded from meaningful participation in the geopolitical designs of the West, feeling encircled and excluded. In 1997, Tanrisever reminds his readers, that the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland signed accession protocols with NATO, despite Russia’s objections. In the same year, the EU Summit in Luxembourg decided not to give candidate status to Turkey.³ With the same logic, 2005 onwards offered many reasons for Turkey and Russia to unite in their frustration with the West. While Turkey was bitter about the stall in Turkey’s accession process because of Cyprus and public opinion in EU member states, Russia was challenged by the continued enlargement agenda of NATO. Both the EU and NATO subsequently tried to appease Turkey and Russia, respectively, over the years, but the inconsistencies made the West seem unreliable to both.

Between 2005 and 2010, among key decision makers and big business in Turkey, the rhetoric concerning Turkey-Russia relations was overall upbeat. Strategic differences seemed to be set aside in favor of economic advantages. The volume of bilateral trade increased steadily, as did the tourists traveling from Russia to Turkey. Turkey’s

¹ Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, Kure Yayinlari, 2001. Ahmet Davutoglu was the leading foreign policy advisor of Prime Minister Erdogan until May 2009 when he became foreign minister.

² Diba Nigar Goksel, “**Turkish Policy Towards Caucasus: A Balance Sheet of the Balancing Act**”, EDAM Black Sea Discussion Paper Series 2011/1, November 2011, http://edam.org.tr/eng/document/Black_Sea_Paper_Series1.pdf

³ Oktay Tanrisever in “The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy”, Edited by Lenore Martin and Dimitris Keridis, the MIT press, 2004.

dependence on Russia in the energy field was questioned by only a small segment of analysts, while authorities consistently downplayed differences with Moscow. Moscow and Ankara gave aligned messages when it came to Black Sea region security, reiterating that the current structures, BSEC (Black Sea Economic Cooperation) and Blackseafor (Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group), were 'adequate' in ensuring regional security, and they jointly took a stand against Euro-Atlantic initiatives to 'meddle' in the region's institutional architecture. Turkey's position against the extension of NATO's Operation Endeavor to the Black Sea depicted Turkey's caution about the de-stabilizing role of Western intervention in the region.

The August War of 2008 brought the divergence of Turkey from Georgia in terms of the desirability of US presence in the region to the fore starkly. Turkey maintained commitment to the Montreux Convention (1936), blocking access of US ships headed to support Georgia. Analysis in the press and statements from Ankara about the war were unsubstantial. This war demonstrated that the grounds were hardly suitable for realizing Ankara's advocacy of win-win solutions, or for Turkey's order-setting role.

Turkey's proposal of a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP), declared in Moscow, was supported by Moscow, but not seen by the South Caucasus capitals to have the potential to be effective under current circumstances. Despite Ankara's ambitious claims of being the natural mediator of regional conflicts, it was Paris that was in the forefront of mediation between Moscow and Tbilisi.

An expectation of Turkey from its cooperation with Russia was that Russia would aide in the resolution of the deadlock in the Turkey-Armenia and related Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. The high-profile normalization between Turkey and Armenia subsequently collapsed, as Yerevan and Ankara were at odds about the necessity for progress to be made in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict before Ankara proceeded to ratify the protocols, which would normalize relations with Armenia.⁴ The process not only failed but strained relations between Baku and Ankara, and was detrimental to Turkey's image in the West because Ankara appeared to be renegading from its agreements. In the retrospective soul-searching debates, Russia's role was raised. The assumption that it is not in Russia's interest for Armenia and Turkey to normalize relations and the observation that the strains between Turkey and Azerbaijan would potentially strengthen Russia's hand in the region led to conclusions that Russia had encouraged Turkey to proceed with the protocol-process, predicting its eventual failure, and the tensions it would spark. Though few within the Turkish policy community echoed this speculation, there was an expressed disappointment that Moscow had not used its strong hold on Yerevan to pressure the Armenian leadership to take positions more conducive to reaching an agreement towards the solution of the Karabakh conflict to 'unlock' the triangular deadlock between Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

⁴ Diba Nigar Goksel & Gulshan Pashayeva, "The Interplay of the Approaches of Turkey, Russia and the United States to the Conflict over Nagorno Karabakh" SAM Review (Strategic Research Center under the President of Azerbaijan), Baku, February 2011

High level visits and strategic agreements continued between Turkey and Russia – following Abdullah Gul’s visit to Moscow in February 2009, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev visited Turkey in May 2010, at which time new agreements were declared, such as plans for Russia to build a nuclear power plant in Turkey, and Russia’s participation in an oil pipeline to be built from the Black sea port of Samsun to Ceyhan, in the Mediteranean.

The Samsun-Ceyhan oil pipeline (SCP) would have increased the centrality of the Ceyhan terminal and carried Turkey a step further in the goal of being an energy hub.

Though the debate was never wide, skeptical analysts in Turkey questioned what Turkey had ‘compromised’ to Russia in back-door bargaining, on behalf of whose interests, in return for Russia’s agreeing to participate in SCP. Adding to the speculation was the fact that Calik Holding, run by the Prime Minister’s son in law was the 50% shareholder of the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline Company, which was awarded the construction of the project (included a storage facility in Ceyhan) in 2006, with no public tender process.

Meanwhile, Ankara agreed to support Russia’s South Stream project that would run beneath the Black Sea and could render a Southern Corridor route infeasible, countering Azerbaijan’s diversification and European energy security. A nuclear plant agreement followed. Problems such as benefits being delivered to pro-government businesses, and transparency deficits were raised in the public debate.⁵ Questions were also raised by observers about Russia’s commitment to participate in the project with the terms Ankara requested.

In parallel, other strains and negotiations erupted, feeding into the cloud of suspicion about whether there was a ‘grand package’ being wrangled over, or how the different negotiations between the two countries were interrelated. In 2009, Russia and Turkey had what has been referred to as a trade row or customs dispute in which Turkish trucks were held at the Russian border for up to 4 weeks. Though Moscow has denied any political motivation, speculations were made to the contrary.

There were also limits as to how far Turkey would go in backing Russia’s regional positions, even at the times Ankara was most enthusiastic about strengthening its relations with Moscow. Turkey did not, for example, go so far as to make statements on issues that gave the Russian position credit or legitimized the quest for independence of South Ossetia or Abkhazia.

Nevertheless, 2009 and 2010 were ‘high’ years for Turkey-Russia collaboration. These were also arguably the years that Turkey was most dissatisfied by US and EU traction in the region. Washington and the EU displayed inconsistent and ineffective policies toward the region in the course and aftermath of the August war, showed disunity in their approaches to Russia, imposed ill-conceived pressure on Turkey to normalize relations with Armenia, seemed ineffectual in democracy promotion efforts, and were in general losing ground to Russia in the Caucasus. The continued stall of Turkey’s EU accession

⁵ Saban Kardas

and the perception of being excluded from regional integration efforts also fed into Turkey's efforts to develop stronger collaboration with Russia.

Recent reality checks and the longer term

From a Turkish perspective, the last couple of years have seen the development of reality checks about shared interests with Russia. The over-optimism, and, some would say naivety, about the partnership has somewhat worn thin, and the realization of current limits of cooperation, in depth and breadth, is more apparent. This is not to say that Turkey is antagonistic, or will be interested in increasing the tone of rivalry, only that it is somewhat more realistic, and perhaps cautious.

Since late 2010 though, doubts have crept into the Turkish side about whether in the spirit of partnership, Russia will indeed *aid* Turkey's penetration into the region. Taking a critical view, it appears that Moscow did not act in line with Turkey's interests on issues the Turkish government attributes importance to. Examples that strike Turkish audiences are such like the fact that Russia did not list the Kurdish separatist PKK as a terrorist organization, strengthened cooperation with the Greek Cypriot government, took stances against Northern Cyprus in the UN Security Council, did not come through regarding the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline, and has not allowed the Gulen Movement to function on Russian territory.⁶ Perhaps, most importantly is the conviction that Moscow did not use its leverage over Yerevan to bring about more conducive situations for progress in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict, which could have led to relatively smooth normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey. This final point is perhaps the most significant one, as the deadlock of the Nagorno – Karabakh conflict arguably remains the single most limiting factor to Turkey's regional influence, and was an area in which Turkey rested its expectations on Russia's delivering a solution. Likewise, in the past 1-1.5 years, in regard to some of the most key issues Moscow attributes importance to in the region, Ankara has been in relative disaccord with Russia.

Turkey's agreement to host an anti-missile shield on its territory to defend NATO members, Turkey's alignment with Euro-Atlantic positions on various Arab Spring developments, and finally the agreement with Baku on a Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) to carry Caspian gas to EU markets, is widely seen to have countered Russian interests. In general, Ankara seems since late 2011, to have realigned some of its regional considerations, in alignment with Baku. This policy is also supplemented by the religiously inspired power-leveraging and networking emanating from Turkish centers.⁷

⁶ Though the content of the private negotiations between Putin and Erdogan were not announced, that Erdogan asked for affiliates of this religious network to be allowed to be active in Russia is considered. Even if not a component of the official negotiation, Russia's banning these organizations is largely seen as curbing the 'soft power' of the "Muslim-conservative" Turkish political establishment.

⁷ **Religiously Inspired Bonding – Changing Soft – Power elements of Turkey's Relations with Azerbaijan**, Center for Conflict Prevention and Early Warning, CPCEW Bucharest, 2011, http://www.cpc-ew.ro/occasional_papers/008.pdf

Ankara and Moscow shared frustration with the West for not sufficiently taking their positions into consideration in regional endeavors. Both were also skeptical about democracy promotion and intervention of the West in the neighborhood. However, the Arab spring, and particularly Syria has interrupted this alignment. While Ankara sees opportunities arising for itself in the changes of the Middle East and in working with the West to shape and take advantage of the changing ‘order’ in the Middle East, Moscow perceives a growing threat to its strategic footholds in the region. This fault-line is most apparent over Syria.

On Syria, Ankara and Moscow have taken opposite positions. However the fact that in July 2012 Erdoğan visited Putin in Moscow to try to mend these differences face to face, also shows that straight-talk between the leaders, even if not transparent to the publics, remains one of the strengths of this relationship. On the Syria issue too, Turkey maintains the position that solutions in the region require having Russia on board. In driving home the message that it wants this respect, Moscow has thus been successful with Ankara.

In the longer term, the evolution of Moscow-Ankara relations and each capital’s relative influence in the South Caucasus will be affected by the dynamics stated below:

Turkey is likely to continue its *balancing act*, aligning with Russia on an ad hoc basis, in line with joint interests and conflicting agendas, conjuncturally. While neither side will favor antagonizing the other, they will also need to be cautious about being outsmarted by the other. Their relations will likely continue to be fine -tuned on the basis of the relations between the West and Russia and the West and Turkey, as well as the relative influence of each actor in the South Caucasus. This assumption though could ultimately fall apart if the divergence of Turkey and Russia on the larger stage, as has surfaced over Syria, spreads to other issues and regions.

Just as their preference for multi-polarity on the global stage, Turkey and Russia are aligned in their preference for less Western ‘meddling’ in the Black Sea/Caucasus region. However, if this were to take place, in other words if the US and EU disengaged further from the region, this might create new strains and heightened rivalry between Moscow and Ankara.

On the other hand, in the case that EU commitment to the Caucasus region rises and the South Caucasus inner dynamics evolve in favor of EU integration policies, the region may break out of the conundrum of being caught between Russia and Turkey. The resolution of conflicts and democratization in the region may be decisive to this end – as will the path Ankara and Moscow take in terms of their own domestic development – economic and political.

Like Turkey’s Russia relationship, its Western alignment is also conjunctural. As long as Turkey perceives that it is excluded from the EU categorically, its foreign policy coordination with the EU remains pragmatically driven, thus relatively unpredictable.

Given the vast differences within the EU itself, as well as the stall of Turkey's EU accession process, it may be unlikely to expect strong alignment between Turkey and the EU in the near future. Collaboration with individual Western countries on a case-and-need-basis is more likely.

Nevertheless, in terms of governance & development models, Western approaches to the region arguably suit Turkey's interests more than other models – such as sovereign democracy attributed to Russia. Although Turkish businesses have been able to operate in challenging business climates, a larger scale of them flourish in economies with more rule of law, wider middle classes, more free market competition, and predictable regulation.

The choices of Tbilisi, Baku and Yerevan will also play a role in determining the relative influence of Ankara versus Moscow in the region. Turkish bureaucracy and business communities are, relative to Russian counterparts, still learning the ropes of the region. As Turkey's regional ambitions rise, it hopes to 'transform' the order of the region, rather than continue to be viewed as a geostrategic "counterbalance" for respective actors. The favorability of Turkish influence for their counterparts in the Caucasus will be dependent on how Turkish understanding of the region develops, and to what ends Turkey uses its regional clout.

Turkey may be faced with hard choices in the case of political rivalries or regime challenges within countries of the South Caucasus, or in the case of eruption of conflict in the North Caucasus. Resumption of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan or Georgia and Russia would put Turkey to a test in terms of resolve and regional effectiveness.