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Bumps ahead in Russia, Turkey ties despite US exit from Syria

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It has been a good year for Turkish-Russian relations, marked by a love fest between the two countries' presidents and a degree of cooperation that led some to question Ankara's NATO membership. However, ties between Ankara and Moscow could be tested in 2019, even after the United States announced a military exit from Syria.

No leader of a major country could match Russian President Vladimir Putin's frequent consultations with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the last 12 months. Official reports and counts by news media said the two heads of state met at least eight times face to face and had at least 16 telephone consultations since the start of the year. "Our cooperation is causing envy from others," Erdogan quipped during a meeting with Putin in South Africa in July.

Syria is key to the Turkey-Russia rapprochement. Ankara needs Moscow as the strongest military player in the Syrian conflict and because of Turkey's row with the United States over Washington's support for a Kurdish militia in Syria. Russia also needs Turkey, the most powerful Syrian neighbour. Even though Russia supports Syrian President Bashar Assad while Turkey has been a sponsor of anti-Assad rebels, Putin and Erdogan are acutely aware that they cannot reach their political objectives alone.

After overcoming a major crisis following the downing of a Russian military jet by the Turkish Air Force on the Turkish-Syrian border in 2015, the two presidents and their governments have developed a rapport that allows them to put their strategic differences over Syria on the back burner. Russia has tolerated two Turkish military incursions into northern Syria since 2016 and Turkey issued only muted protests when Russia-backed Syrian forces overran rebel groups in so-called de-escalation zones around the country to strengthen Assad's hold on power.

Erdogan and Putin diffused a potentially explosive situation in the border province of Idlib, the last rebel-held area in Syria, by agreeing to postpone a Syrian government assault that could have sent hundreds of thousands of refugees into Turkey. The two leaders also found common ground in opposing the US presence in eastern Syria.

Outside the Middle East, Erdogan angered Turkey's NATO partners by agreeing to buy Russia's S-400 missile defence system. Turkey has become a hub for Russian natural gas exports and is cooperating with Russian companies to build the first Turkish nuclear reactor. The number of Russian tourists on Turkey's beaches has reached 6 million, a record.

Doug Bandow, a former special assistant to US President Ronald Reagan and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, argued in an article for the American Conservative magazine in May that “Washington should abandon its illusion that Turkey remains an ally in anything but name.” The headline of Bandow’s analysis asked: “Is it time to carve Turkey out of NATO?”

However, there is no guarantee that Turkish-Russian relations will keep improving. The Syrian conflict could spark tensions between Ankara and Moscow as the fighting winds down, exposing competing political interests.

Damascus has vowed to take Idlib back under Syrian government control, despite Turkey’s concerns about another refugee crisis at its southern border. Months of talks sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran in the so-called Astana format were unable to produce an agreement on a committee to work on a new Syrian constitution.

Turkey’s determination not to allow any form of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria could become problematic for Russian efforts to end the war and Turkish occupation in the north with it.

“The two leaders will try and prevent a crisis,” Orhan Gafarli, an expert on Russia at the Ankara Policy Centre, said about Putin and Erdogan. “They will try to find ways to balance things out. But there may not be immediate results.”

Kerim Has, a Moscow-based analyst, said the situation in Idlib is a potential source of friction. “The Idlib deadlock is going to hang over relations like a Damocles sword,” Has said via e-mail. “A military operation by [the] Russia-backed Assad regime aiming to retake territory in the demilitarised zone in a piecemeal fashion while herding jihadists into a pocket near the Turkish border may become a reality” in 2019.

Erdogan’s determination to drive the Kurdish militia People’s Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria away from the Turkish border could produce problems for Turkish-Russian relations. Erdogan said December 17 that a new Turkish cross-border intervention against the YPG east of the Euphrates River was imminent.

The decision by the United States to withdraw its troops from Syria removes an irritant for both Turkey and Russia from the Syrian equation but that does not mean that Turkey can do what it likes in northern Syria. Has pointed out that any Turkish military operation would need Russia’s consent. “Moscow’s demands on Syria’s territorial integrity, sovereignty may be harmed” by a Turkish intervention, he wrote.

Another issue that could loom in 2019 is the political future of Assad himself. Turkey, like the United States and Europe, has called on the Syrian leader to step aside, while Russia has been Assad’s most important foreign partner. Gafarli said Turkey, as well as Russia, had to make concessions. “For Russia, there are alternatives to Assad,” he said.

Turkey also signalled flexibility on the issue. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Ankara would consider working with Assad if the Syrian leader won a democratic election. In case of an election victory by Assad, “if it is a democratic election and if it is a credible one then everybody should consider” working with the Syrian president, Cavusoglu said.

Both sides appeared to be determined to keep their good relationship in place despite the challenges awaiting them, Gafarli said. “2019 will be an interesting year.”

