



Russia, Turkey mend ties

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Foreign policy experts have praised the meeting on Tuesday between Russian President Vladimir and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the first between the two since Ankara shot down a Moscow warplane in November.

The meeting in Putin's hometown of St Petersburg was Erdogan's first trip abroad since the failed coup against him last month that has marred Turkey's relations with the United States.

"Your visit today, despite a very difficult situation regarding domestic politics, indicates that we all want to restart dialogue and restore relations between Russia and Turkey," Putin said after the two leaders shook hands, according to an AFP report.

Erdogan, who has said the trip represents a "new milestone", told Putin that ties had entered a "very different phase", and he thanked the Kremlin leader for his backing after the coup attempt.

Ted Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, described the meeting as "very significant." He said the summit meeting is the latest manifestation of a rapprochement that has been gradually taking place since the downing of the Russian plane.

"Vladimir Putin sees Turkey both as a potential ally in the Middle East against Islamic extremism and as a way to split NATO and weaken its anti-Russian orientation. Erdogan is hedging his geopolitical bets, pursuing closer ties with Moscow in case Turkey's Western allies begin to shun the country because of his increasingly corrupt, authoritarian rule," Carpenter said.

Carpenter believes both leaders currently benefit from a closer relationship, but he said the US and the other leading NATO powers will not be happy about the warming relations between Ankara and Moscow, and will likely pressure Erdogan to cease his efforts.

Many in Turkey have accused the US and the CIA of being the masterminds behind the failed coup. Turkey also hoped the US would repatriate Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim cleric who has lived in Pennsylvania since 1999 and whom Ankara believes was behind the attempted coup.

Mikhail Antonov, a George F. Kennan Fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington, described Putin and Erdogan as "emotionally united in their discontent with the Western

policies of 'double standards'."

"Erdogan seems to be tuned to the same wavelength as Putin, condemning the EU and the US for stirring up subversive elements in his country," said Antonov, who is also a professor at the High School of Economics in St Petersburg.

Antonov believes that through the meeting, Putin was able to demonstrate that Russia is not isolated after the Ukrainian conflict and is ready to continue shattering the NATO, the EU, and other Western alliances.

Russia imposed economic sanctions on Turkey and launched a war of words with Erdogan following the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by a Turkish F-16 over the Syrian border last fall.

But in late June, Putin surprisingly accepted a letter expressing regret over the incident from Erdogan as an apology and quickly rolled back a ban on the sale of tour packages to Turkey, signaling that Moscow would end measures against Turkish food imports and construction companies.

Putin was one of the first foreign leaders to phone Erdogan offering support after the coup attempt.