

Russia, Turkey and the Great Game: Changing teams

Written by Eric Walberg

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Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's visit to Turkey last month shows that Turkey and Russia are rapidly developing close economic and political ties, notes Eric Walberg. For all intents and purposes, Turkey has given up on the European Union, recognising it as a bastion of Islamophobia and captive to US

diktat

. As Switzerland bans minarets and France moves to outlaw the

niqab

, the popular Islamist government in Istanbul moves in the opposite direction -- supporting the freedom to wear headscarfs, boldly criticising Israel and building bridges with Syria. This is nothing less than a fundamental realignment of Turkish politics towards Turkey's natural allies -- the Arabs ... and the Russians.

This new alignment with Russia began in 2001 when Turkish and Russian foreign ministers signed the Eurasia Cooperation Action Plan. It went into high gear in February 2009, when Turkish President Abdullah Gul made a state visit to Russia, including a visit to the Russian Federation's thriving and energy-rich Autonomous Republic of Tatarstan, populated by a majority of Muslim Turks, with pipelines, nuclear energy and trade the focus of attention.

In the past, Russia had poor relations with Turkey, which since its founding as a republic in 1922 was firmly in the Western camp and seen by Moscow as a springboard for infiltration into the Caucasus and its Turkic southern republics. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Yeltsin's Russia acquiesced to US hegemony in the region, and as part of this opening to the West, Turkish schools, construction firms and traders came in great numbers to the ex-Soviet "stans" (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). 9/11 convinced Russian president Vladimir Putin to go so far as welcoming US military bases in the most strategic "stans". The old Great Game appeared to be over, lost resoundingly by Russia.

But as the world tired of the US-sponsored "war on terrorism", it seemed the Great Game was not over after all. A NATO member, Turkey was soon joined by Bulgaria and Romania, making the Black Sea a de facto NATO lake, alarming a now resurgent Russia.

Ukraine's Western-backed "Orange Revolution" in 2004 further tilted the balance away from Russia, with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko defiantly vowing to join NATO and kick the Russian fleet out of Crimea. He even armed Georgia in its war with Russia in 2008.

However, not only Russia was fed up with the new pax americana. Over 90 per cent of Turks had an unfavourable view of the US by 2007. It is no surprise that Turkey began to back away from unconditional support of NATO and the US, notably, during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, by its refusal in 2008 to allow US warships through the Bosphorus Strait to support Georgia, and by its outspoken criticism of Israel following the invasion of Gaza that year.

In contrast to the US-sponsored colour revolutions in the ex-socialist bloc, Turkey's "Green Revolution" brought the religious-oriented Justice and Development Party to power in 2002. Its political direction has been in search of balance in the region and peaceful relations with its neighbours, including Armenia and the Kurds. In 2004 Russian president Vladimir Putin signed

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a joint declaration of cooperation in Ankara, updated in February 2009 by Gul and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in Moscow. Gul declared, "Russia and Turkey are neighbouring countries that are developing their relations on the basis of mutual confidence. I hope this visit will in turn give a new character to our relations."

Key to this is Turkey's proposal for the establishment of a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform. Following Gul's visit, Turkish media even described Turkish-Russian relations as a "strategic partnership", which no doubt set off alarm bells in Washington.

None of this would be taking place without solid economic interests. Turkish-Russian economic ties have greatly expanded over the past decade, with trade reaching \$33 billion in 2008, much of it gas and oil, making Russia Turkey's number one partner. They may soon use the Turkish lira and the Russian ruble in foreign trade.

This is the context of Medvedev's visit 13 January to Ankara, which focussed primarily on energy cooperation. Russia's AtomStroiExport had won the tender for the construction of Turkey's first nuclear plant last year, and Medvedev was eager to get final approval on Turkish cooperation in Gazprom's South Stream gas pipeline to Europe. Turkey will soon get up to 80 per cent of its gas from Russia, but this dependency is no longer viewed as a liability in light of the two countries' new strategic relations.

Just what will happen to the West's rival Nabucco pipeline, also intended to transit Turkey, is now a moot point. Nabucco hopes to bring gas from Iran and Azerbaijan to Europe through Turkey and Georgia. Given the standoff between the West and Iran and the instability of Georgia, this alternative to Russia's plans looks increasingly unattractive. Azerbaijan, shrewdly, has already signed up with South Stream. Kommersant quoted Gazprom officials as saying that Turkey could soon join Italy and Germany as Russia's "strategic partner". Italy's ENI is co-funding the South Stream project. The other arm of Gazprom's pincer move around Ukraine is Nord Stream, and Germany late last year gave its final approval for Nord Stream. A Polish minister compared the Russia-Germany Nord Stream project to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, because the pipeline allows Russia to deliver gas to Western Europe and "turn off the taps" to Ukraine in case it stops paying or starts stealing gas as happened several times under the Orange revolutionaries.

Turkey is very much a key player in this new Great Game, only it appears to have changed sides. The Russian and Turkish prime ministers voiced the hope that their trade would triple by 2015, and announced plans to for a visa-free regime by May this year. "In the end, without doubt, [a visa-free regime] will lead to activating cooperation between our countries," said Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan.

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The presidential elections now in progress in Ukraine could take some of the wind out of the sails of South Stream. Its rationale could be brought into question if the new Ukrainian president succeeds in convincing Moscow that s/he will make sure no further hanky-panky takes place. Ukraine, in dire economic straits, needs the transit fees, which would disappear if current plans go ahead. But the damage the Orange revolutionaries did to Ukraine's economy and relations with Russia is already a

fait accompli

i. Says Alexander Rahr at the German Council on Foreign Relations, "Under every leadership, Ukraine will try to make use of its geographical position and the Russians realised this some time ago. This is why they desperately need a way to circumvent Ukraine."

Even if Ukraine, too, changes teams and rejects NATO expansion plans, it will still have to thrash out a new role, most likely minus its gas transit commissions. Contender Viktor Yanukovich has signalled he would sign up to an economic cooperation agreement with Russia and smooth over existing political problems like the question of the Russian fleet and possibly the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Turkey could well follow suit. "If any Western country is going to recognise the independence of Abkhazia, it will be Turkey because of a large Abkhazian diaspora there," says Rahr.

There is no reason why Ukraine couldn't join the budding Russian-Turkish alliance, founded on regional stability and peace, unlike the current NATO-led one of confrontation and enmity. This would leave only the mad Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili quixotically fighting his windmills, dictator of a rump state -- the very opposite of his intended role as NATO's valiant knight leading its march eastward. Even inveterate Turkish foe Armenia seems eager to join the new line-up, as last year's exchange of ambassadors demonstrated.