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## AN UNPREDICTABLE AND UNRELIABLE NEIGHBOUR- WILL ERDOGAN'S VISIT RESTORE THE BROKEN TIES BETWEEN RUSSIA AND TURKEY?

**Chandra Rekha**  
Associate Fellow, CAPS

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met Russian President Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg on 9 August 2016. This visit is seen as one of the many efforts made by President Erdogan to normalise ties with Russia post the shooting down of a Russian Sukhoi 24 fighter bomber aircraft on 24 November 2015 that resulted in the death of the pilot. Tellingly, the event led to high tension between the two countries. Russia called the act as a 'stab in the back' and banned business with Turkey including boycotting tourism. However, it put conditions of normalising the interaction only if the President publically apologised for the act, prosecute the pilot involved in the shooting and compensation to be given to the family of the deceased.

The Turkish President initially was unapologetic for the act, but has recently conceded to the Russian demands. In this

direction, the President wrote a letter apologising for the irresponsible decision that led to the death of the pilot which also hampered the bilateral ties. 'Why the sudden change of heart?' is what has left many wondering. Erdogan's unpredictable behaviour and actions are well known. But the other argument would be that every action of the current Turkish President is well calculated and that he is also well aware of its consequences. Unfortunately, for the President, though aware of the consequences, he has often failed to provide a contingency plan to fend off the impact and outcome as was seen post the shooting down of the Russian fighter aircraft.

Nevertheless, some of the variables identified for the change of position by President Erdogan and his efforts in normalising the relations between Russia and Turkey are:



- Sanctions imposed by Russia on Turkish fruits and vegetables and also ban on tourists visiting Turkey since November 2015 has impacted its economy as Russia is a huge import market and second only to Germany in terms of tourism to Turkey. However, Russia has lifted the ban on tourists visiting Turkey after an apology by Erdogan and assurance of security to Russian visitors.
- Domestic crisis in Turkey such as the failure to pass an amendment that was to grant unlimited powers to the President, military coup attempt last month, stagnation of economic growth performance, the rise in refugee crisis, intensification of attacks by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the external threat to Turkey's national security by Islamic State
- Huge condemnation of Erdogan government for human rights violations by the international community after the arrest of thousands of individuals including military personnel, judges, professors, teachers and others suspected of plotting the military coup in July 2016.
- In recent times, there is a shift in geopolitical interests of Turkey which is moving closer to the Middle East but drifting away from Europe. Strengthening ties with Israel, Egypt and Iraq is among top priorities of Turkey's new government.<sup>1</sup> Ankara is strengthening ties with these countries as it may assist in establishing its status quo in the geopolitics of Middle East. Russia too is fast gaining prominence in the regional politics post Syrian crisis. By normalising relations with Russia, Turkey sees Moscow as a potential option to create a 'comfort zone' for its interests in the region.
- Russia's seemingly more successful anti-ISIS military action as compared with that of the West, and its support to Bashar al Assad regime. On the other hand, the failure of the US led allies in overthrowing Assad government and curtailing the Kurdish and IS threat (Istanbul airport attack) has caused further anxiety to Erdogan.
- Europe is busy dealing with its own crisis post Brexit and sequence of terrorist attacks in its region. Turkey may begin to see no prospect of becoming a permanent member of European Union
- The Turkish stream pipeline project is set to be back on track (after apology by Erdogan) after unilateral suspension of the initiative by Russia post Turkish shoot down of Russian Su-24 aircraft. This project replaced the Blue Stream pipeline project in 2014. The Blue Stream Agreement, signed on 29 August 1997, proved to be a turning point in the

relations between Russian and Turkey. The economic interdependence had compelled the two countries to reconsider their relations post Soviet collapse based on peaceful co-existence and cooperation.

- The Presidents are also set to restart the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power station, in Akkuyu, which is also way behind schedule.

In this light, it is with an optimistic mindset that the visit by Erdogan may normalise ties between Russia and Turkey thus bringing it back on the right track. However, the current bilateral engagement is marred by anxiety, disappointment, uncertainty, hostility and suspicion that existed during the Cold War period. The question here is, is the current reconciliation aimed at long term effort to stabilise the bilateral relations or is this another 'honeymoon phase' between the two countries? In this context, one cannot avoid comparing the unpredictable and unreliable behaviour of Turkey towards Russia to Pakistan which has displayed similar pattern of behaviour and has been a major cause of concern for India's national interests and security. In this context, let us analyse the similarities between Turkey and Pakistan as neighbouring states to Russia and India respectively.

- a) Dependable western allies and members/ex-members of United States initiated security organisations. Turkey is

a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and Pakistan (was) a member of Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO)

- b) During bipolar politics, both Turkey (Middle East and Europe) and Pakistan (South Asia) played a key role in putting a check to Moscow's interests in their respective regions. The two regional players thus played a crucial part in preserving the geopolitical interests of the US.
- c) Confidence Building Measures have been undertaken between Russia and Turkey and India and Pakistan to revive the bilateral relations respectively. Unfortunately, for both Russia and India, the efforts have been in vain. Citing some of the initiatives undertaken by both the countries to restore the relations, i.e., the Delhi-Lahore Bus diplomacy agreed to by the PMs of India and Pakistan in New York in September 1998. But, India's friendly gestures and security was challenged by Kargil War, Parliament attack, 26/11 Mumbai attacks and the recent Pathankot terrorist attacks (after invitation to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi). Similarly, despite the rapprochement and economic ties between Russia and Turkey, Ankara's

imprudent act of shooting down a Russian fighter plane disturbed the equation between the two countries.

- d) An external actor has often steered the foreign policy behaviour and interests of both the countries mostly to encircle or halt a country's regional and global aspirations with which it has shared a common 'threat' factor. In case of Turkey, the Washington administration has influenced its behaviour towards Russia which led Ankara to become a NATO member. China/US have played a prominent role in influencing the behaviour of Pakistan towards India. However, their individual acts and political leadership cannot be ignored as it has often led both Turkey and Pakistan on the wrong side of the fence respectively.
- e) Turkey's strategic location has made the country a key transit route and destination especially for pipeline diplomacy and trade. Its geographical proximity has also elevated its strategic relevance in foreign policy goals of key global players. For instance: Turkish pipeline project, economic trade, its religious and historical linkages with Middle Eastern countries and Central Asian region etc. Likewise, Pakistan too has similar geographical features that have made it an indisputable actor in defining the strategic goals of external

players and also an important economic corridor for trade and commerce. For instance: its strategic importance post US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the TAPI pipeline project.

- f) More importantly, the current Erdogan government's moderate Islamist party has drifted away from Kemal Ataturk's vision of a secular Turkey. Additionally, its support to the IS in Syrian conflict and its involvement in oil trade for a lesser rate than the market price has caused anxiety to its neighbours including Russia and Syria. Comparably, Pakistan has drastically shifted away from the secularist vision of its founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Pakistan's policies and military posturing have always been blatantly targeted towards India. It has also promoted Islamist fundamentalism and resorted to funding terrorist organisations that have been a major cause of concern to India's national security.

Based on the above mentioned factors, the two countries— Turkey and Pakistan— have been unpredictable and unreliable neighbours. Unlike Pakistan, which has often been a disappointment to India's peaceful gestures, the current efforts by Turkey to revive its relations with Russia should otherwise focus on establishing a strong partnership. One of the key impediments is that

it has acted as a reliable ally of Western countries and supported their interests in putting a check on Russia's regional and global aspirations, even at the cost of its relations with Russia. If Turkey's current efforts are directed towards long and stable engagement with Russia, it has to therefore overcome the post-Cold War inhibitions towards Moscow as its partner. In addition, it has to act independently to promote its national interests and not based on serving the interests of external players alone. In this context, isolating Russia from its foreign policy interests may result in losing a huge economic market and a key player in pipeline diplomacy which Turkey requires for reviving its current economic status. In this direction, Erdogan's government should make the most from this visit and take 'necessary' but 'careful' steps to strengthen its ties with Russia for a long term partnership.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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<sup>1</sup> Vali Golmohammadi, "Normalization of Relations between Turkey and Russia: Conditions and Possibilities", *Iran Review*, 29 June 2016, <http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Normalization-of-Relations-between-Turkey-and-Russia-Conditions-and-Possibilities.htm>