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# Approaching and Distancing: Diplomatic and Geopolitical Strategies in Russia and Türkiye Relations

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## ABSTRACT

The article intends to contribute to discussions on the foreign policies of Moscow and Ankara focused on their immediate surroundings. Through an analysis of agreements and pacts, it understands how the infrastructure works, ethnic-cultural issues and military aspects are amalgamated in an extremely dynamic scenario since the end of the 20th century. It is in the field of economics that the mainstays of structural problems are found, which has origin in historical rivalries for hegemony in the territory, which is seen here as an expression of power. These disputes are, therefore, very specific forms managed by the diplomacies of countries sensitively guided by the logic of national identities. The result is questions arising whether in the field of international relations there are limits to so many distances and approximations, rivalries and pragmatisms between Turkey and Russia.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the acceleration of networks and international flows of goods, people and ideas, has expanded the discussion on the role of National States in the future in a context of intensified sharing of products, wealth and global problems.

A more attentive reading of the current geopolitical framework, where materiality and immateriality ideologies and economies are

amalgamated, aim to a future where the increasing density in the use of territory will lead to intersections of interests in the context of disputes between nations and business corporations.

Obviously, diplomacy can and must work so that peaceful solutions are found and thus any clash of interests is seen as something that can be resolved. However, it is possible to observe that certain strategies of some national states are totally immersed in geopolitical conditions that treat the aspirations of countries as imperative issues for national survival. When disagreements between nations reach this level, diplomacy loses much of its negotiation capacity.

Projects for inter-oceanic and inter-maritime channels, gas pipelines, oil and mineral pipelines, highways and railroads, new maritime routes that were little used before, submarine cables, airports and info-roads create nodal points that involve the interests of large corporations and national states that, in addition to the environment for negotiations and multilateral organizations press to exert influence in large portions of the geographic space.

Understanding the foreign policies of Russia and Turkey is one of the most important and challenging tasks of current geopolitics.

## II. RUSSIAN AND TURKISH EURASIANISMS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL POLITICAL IDENTITIES

The end of the Cold War (1945-1991) gave rise to the transition in the former planned economy

countries, so-called socialist countries linked to the Soviet Union, to a market economy. This reignited discussions about the possibility of expanding capitalist relations of production. This perspective includes all of Eastern Europe and the gigantic territorial mass represented by the Eurasian dimension of Russia and the former Soviet republics.

They were literally new frontiers for diplomacy and the world economy. In many of these countries, the considerable reserves of raw materials attracted investors and attracted investors and new business conglomerates were born, which are also fundamental for understanding the current geopolitical situation.

For this new reality, it was possible to notice the gradual resumption of discussions on the theses of Halford Mackinder (1861-1947), British professor at the London School of Economics who defended in 1904, at a conference at the Royal Geographical Society, the ideas that became the important article entitled “The Geographical Pivot History”. He supported the view that the existence of the Heartland or Earth-Heart, which would correspond to the centre of Russia and surroundings, once dominated would allow the control of a considerable part of the terrestrial globe. This is how Russia and its surroundings reassumed its position as a global geostrategic pivot.

Due to its hegemonic role, it was in the United States of America that this theme attracted a lot of centrality with an enormous intellectual production on the subject. An example is the work of one of the most influential American scholars, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928-2017) who in one of his works entitled *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* says:

*“Eurasia, however, retains its geopolitic importance. Not Only is its western periphery – Europe- still the location of much of the world’s political and economic power, but its eastern region – Asia – has lately become a vital center of economic growth and rising political influence. Hence, the issue of how a globally engaged America copes with the complex Eurasian power*

*relationships – and particularly whether it prevents the emergence of a dominant and antagonistic Eurasian power – remains central to America’s capacity to exercise global primacy”*

In Russia this corollary was called Eurasianism. Prof. Angelo Segrillo in his work – *Occidentalism, Slavophilism and Eurasianism: intellectuals and politicians in search of Russian identity* – points out that in the 19th century western thinkers defended the modernization of Russia by looking at the most industrialized countries in Europe. They denounced human misery and the social tragedy of an archaic and obscurantist Russia. Slavophiles, on the other hand, refuted emphatically characterizing Europe as a decadent civilization.

The conception of a Eurasian Russia prevailed, originating from Slavophilia and contrary to the socio-political model of industrialized Europe. This Russian self-image, as individualized and unique to the rest of the world, survived within the intellectual production of the Communist Party until 1985, when the foundation of Perestroika (economic reformulation) and Glasnost (political opening) were laid.

It was during the Gorbachev Era (1985-1990) that controversial thinkers and commonly associated to the dissident Soviet movement started to expose their ideas with greater amplitude willing to fill the gap left from the socialist thinking. It was the case of the intellectual Lev Gumilev (1912-1992) who through his ethnological approach defended that Eurasia, with emphasis to Russia, had legitimacy to defend its identity which was unique.

In this environment of reformulation of the Russian national thought that emerged the figure of Aleksander Dugin. Since the 1980s he has led several Euroasianist movements. In his work “The Fourth Political Force” he proposes to overcome liberalism, communism and fascism by strengthening the Russian state in opposition to the West and rejecting any system of global governance.

This new Russian Eurasianism began to coexist with a novelty in the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey that adapted to the new geopolitical conditions of the New World Order anchored in the contradictions and dualities of the country. Secular but with growing influence from Islam, a NATO member with regional power aspirations, an Asian with European ties and pretensions.

In 1985 the English researcher and journalist David Barchard coined the term “neo-Ottomanism” in an article entitled “Turkey and West” published by the Royal Institute International Affairs – Chatam House. He tried to show the extent of Turkish interference in the internal affairs of Cyprus since the 1974 invasion, when the Turkish army took over the northern part of the island, which became the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

The use of the term Neo-Ottomanism generates academic debates inside and outside Turkey. Prof. Karabekir Akkoyunlu researcher at the Center for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, Austria says in his article “The defeat of the 'real' neo-Ottomanists”:

*In fact, the neo-Ottomanism of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) is not only intellectually unrelated, but also diametrically opposed to the principles of the original Ottomanists, the nineteenth and early twentieth century proponents of pluralism, constitutionalism and parliamentarism in the Ottoman Empire”.*

The Armenian Genocide in 1915 is proof that it really wasn't like that. Calling neo-Ottomanism the current Turkish geopolitical pretensions is certainly an exaggeration that is based solely and exclusively on the dimensions of the ancient Sublime Porta(1). The Erdogan Era (2002) is definitely marked by the religious conservatism that permeated Kemalist nationalism (2).

### III. AREAS OF INFLUENCE, DIPLOMACY AND GEOPOLITICS: PRAGMATISMS THAT DO NOT ERASE NATIONALISMS

One of the first actions that allows us to understand the importance of diplomacy for the

new geopolitics that was under construction in the post-Cold War era was the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States – CIS in 1991. It was a political effort to maintain commercial relations between the former Soviet republics now sovereign, which still had very interdependent production chains.

The ambitions of this community to transform itself into a broad and powerful common market have been emptied over time. Its first constituent documents were still undergoing adjustments when the UN had already granted the status of a regional organization with the right to participate in the 1994 General Assembly. After that, the provisional text of the CEI became generic and with reservations in many subjects.

It is interesting to note that in the final text of the CIS statute signed in 1993 is one of the initial marks of Russia's problems with Ukraine. The Ukrainian President, in that time, Leonid Kravchuk (1934-2022) did not sign the document, claiming that he was affronting his country's internal legislation and that he would remain a collaborator of the bloc. Even if initially, this was already a demonstration of Ukrainian nationalist bias.

In that same period, a new character came to figure in this equation. Turkey, a NATO member country, governed at the time by Turgut Ozal (1989-1993), attentive to the geostrategic issues of the Black Sea, was one of the first countries to recognize the constitution and the new Ukrainian government, as well as its territorial integrity. Over the years Turkish-Ukrainian relations have deepened. Bilateral trade and technological exchange grew. Just remember that the Turkish government provided the powerful Bayraktar TB2 drones to the Ukrainian armed forces in the war against Russia and this was done after having provided them to be tested by Azerbaijan against Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 (3).

In addition, Turkish foreign policy played a leading role in multilateral arrangements of global scope during the government of Necmettin Erbakan (1996-1997). Ankara encouraged the creation of the D-8 (Developing 8) Organization

for Economic Cooperation along with Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia and Bangladesh, which became a group to discuss alternatives to reduce global disparities and create various cooperation programs.

In few years, the growth of the Turkish economy, in ever greater contact with European and Middle Eastern markets, brought Turkey to the geopolitical scene with intentions of expanding its influence. Between 2001 and 2010, Turkey tripled its trade with Syria, quadrupled with North Africa, quintupled with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (4) - United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and sevenfold with Egypt.

One of the main vectors of this power were the large companies and conglomerates from the most diverse sectors. Builders, weaving, food industries, transport, telecommunications, all expanding their businesses in a framework that allowed the resumption of the term neo-Ottomanism.

In the case of Russia, the conjunctures of the 1990s also played a decisive role. Moscow understood that the diplomatic or geopolitical projection must obligatorily go beyond the CIS agreements. The new Russian leaderships and the emerging oligarchies needed to guarantee their influence in the so-called “near abroad”. Between 1992 and 1993, the documents that gave rise to the Collective Security Treaty Organization were signed, the first arrangement of a military alliance between the former Soviet republics.

Following the 1994 Bucharest Memorandum, which was backed by the United States, United Kingdom and Russia, Ukraine removed physical control of dozens of nuclear weapons, including warheads and tactical devices. The signing of these documents was shrouded in controversy. If, on the one hand, it was another Ukrainian step towards moving away from Russia and its Soviet past, this implied that Kiev signed the NPT – Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and gave up this strategic path. It is important to remember that operational control of weapons of mass destruction stationed in

Ukraine has always been in the hands of Moscow's high command.

In 1999 the Collective Security Treaty Organization fractured. Azerbaijan has not renewed its membership in the OTSC. Azerbaijani leadership held the Russians responsible for their defeat by the Armenians in the Nagorno–Karabakh (Artsakh to Armenians) conflict that took place between 1988–1994 resulting in the creation of the internationally unrecognized Armenian Republic of Nagorno Karabakh. At that time, the Baku government accused Russia of creating a diplomatic environment that favored the Armenians.

This further pushed Azerbaijan towards a formal military alliance with Turkey, which was the first country to recognize post-Soviet Azerbaijan in 1991, asserting the Turkish ethnic identity that unites the two countries. In 2000, that is, shortly after Azerbaijan withdrew from the OTSC, the Training and Education Center of Armed Forces was created, a military school where the Turkish Armed Forces command began to provide training for Azerbaijani military personnel, including NATO protocols.

Certainly, Turkey's approachment to Azerbaijan and Ukraine generated Russian distrust in the diplomatic field. The most important economic and trade issues deserved a different treatment between Moscow and Ankara. In 1999, for example, the mega project of the Blue Stream gas pipeline was signed. With an approximate cost of US\$ 4 billion, it started operating in 2003 bringing natural gas from Russia, via the Black Sea, to be distributed through Turkish territory, especially to Europe. This is not a simple work. It is a partnership between the powerful Russian company Gazprom and the Turkish company Botas Petroleum.

From a geopolitical point of view, the Russian government understood that its problems with Ukrainians and Turkish were added to the advance of NATO, which was expanding strategic partnerships in its former area of influence in Eastern Europe. Strategically, it was important to ease possible pressures coming from other regions

and borders to concentrate war power on a European front in the event of an eventuality. This thesis proved adequate to the crisis with Ukraine that led to the retaking of Crimea by the Russians in 2014.

In 1996, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan committed themselves at a summit meeting in Shanghai to reduce troops at the borders and expand mechanisms of mutual trust in the area of security. The success of this agreement brought Russia and China even closer together, which in 2001 led the formalization of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. With the rapid adherence of Uzbekistan, the organization began to expand collaboration from energy sources to the modernization of transport and telecommunications. Later, with the accession of India and Pakistan, the gradual construction of a new order in International Relations became more and more explicit, since the members of the Shanghai Summit represented the largest population and the largest area of the globe.

The high point of this process was when, in the same period in 2001, Russia and China signed the Treaty of Cooperation and Good Neighborhood, expanding mutual trust and enabling the execution of large contracts for the supply and management of energy resources between the two countries.

The multifaceted quest to expand partnerships and influence through multilateral agreements has become the world's keynote. Because they have contiguous zones of influence and theoretically are on opposite sides (Turkey has been a member of NATO since 1952), this new diplomatic cartography of Russia and Turkey came to have a different weight in international relations.

From 2003 onwards, in Erdogan Era, in Turkey, the motto "One nation, two states" gained strength to refer to links with Azerbaijan. For Ankara, Azerbaijan is a political and territorial spearhead in its intentions to restore ties with the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, with which it has historical and cultural ties. Diplomatic efforts and multilateral talks that

began in the 1990s allowed Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev to sow the seed in 2006 for what in 2009 would become the Cooperation Council of Turkish-Speaking States, today the Organization of Turkish States. This institution has an agenda ranging from collaboration in the field of technology to discussions on foreign policy. The most recent advance is the project for customs facilitation corridor between the member countries launched in 2022. With a strong presence of Turkish companies, business between Turkey and these countries is already approaching the figure of US\$ 20 billion annually. Furthermore, members admitted the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as an observer to the organization last year, which is sure to create embarrassment with Greece and the Greek-majority Cypriot government.

The Erdogan-Aliyev partnership has gained even more importance with the current scenario of heightened tensions in the West with Russia, Iran and China. Turkey is undoubtedly Azerbaijan's biggest ally. It is an important "landlocked country"<sup>(5)</sup> that has skillfully managed its availability of energy resources, especially oil and natural gas, in international trade. From the Shah Deniz gas fields in the Azerbaijani Caspian to the Erzurum terminal or the Port of Yumurtalik, both in Turkey, a strong partnership has developed between British Petroleum, SOCAR (State Oil Company Azerbaijan Republic) and the Turkish state TPAO, all shareholders of extensive gas and oil pipelines that span the entire region.

In that period of favorable economic conjunctures, pragmatism in the commercial field, between Russia and Turkey, was present once again in 2010. That year, the agreement was reached which made possible the start of construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Complex in southwest Turkey, on the shores of the Mediterranean. The project and a good part of the initial investments are in charge of the Russian company Rosatom. Construction was carried out by the Turkish mega-construction company Ozdogu, which also operates in the mineral sector. There will be 4 power generation plants and the project will cost between US\$ 20 and 30 billion.

Since the War in Syria (2011), Ankara – Moscow relations have created yet another different page in geopolitics. For Turkey, Syria has always been a threat to its interests. Former President Hafez Assad's (1971-2000) alignment with the Russians was always a point of tension for NATO during the Cold War.

The civil war that destroyed part of Syrian territory was fueled by the support of foreign intelligence agencies, including the Turkish one, which were trying to get rid of yet another anti-Western leader, in this case, Bashar - Al -Assad. As for the Russians, Syria is a historical ally that allowed, in 1971, the leasing of the Port of Tartus on its Mediterranean coast as a support base for the Russian naval fleet.

After 20 years without strategic-military use, the Port of Tartus region has returned to activity. It was from there that Russia launched the first attacks against jihadist positions in Syria in 2013.

It is important to remember that the Turkish government used the conflict in Syria to try to violently repress the Kurdish people in their libertarian, democratic and feminist struggle in Rojava, Syrian Kurdistan. In 2017 Russia and Syria renewed and expanded the possibilities of using Tartus with projects to expand the berths and facilities.

Between comings and goings Putin and Erdogan met pragmatically once again in 2014. During a visit by Putin to Turkey, the signing of an agreement between the oil companies of both countries was announced. GAZPROM and BOTAS undertook to create the TurkStream, a mega gas pipeline that would connect Krasnodar in Russia to Kiyikoy in Turkey and from there to all of Southeast Europe. The execution of the project was suspended when, in 2015, in the midst of the conflict in Syria, Turkish air defense shot down a Russian Sukoy military plane, generating a serious diplomatic crisis. It was only with the reconciliation in 2016 that the works really took off.

#### IV. THE RECENT EFFORTS FOR PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE AND TURKEY AS A POSSIBLE TRUER OF THE GEOPOLITICAL BALANCE

In 2017 Ankara made one of its highest bets in the geopolitical field. The Turkish government purchased S-400 anti-missile systems from Russia despite being a member of NATO. Retaliation by the United States was not long in coming. Turkey was formally accused of breaking the military alliance pact and for this reason it was suspended from the development program of the ultra-modern F-35 Strike Fighter fighters. This will prevent the country from continuing to participate in the construction of these warplanes and will obviously not receive them when they are ready.

In 2022, Turkey claimed problems maintaining the anti-missile purchase agreement with the Russians due to bureaucratic issues involving its participation in the technological development and production of equipment. This once again opened channels of dialogue with Washington even if momentarily as the dynamics of Turkish and Russian foreign policies could and can change rapidly.

For Russia, the international situation was extremely unfavorable in 2018. The growing tensions and conflicts with Ukraine and the totally adverse international scenario with blockades and sanctions led to a new Russian diplomatic and economic offensive.

That year, the 5<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Heads of State of the Caspian Countries was held in the port of Aktau in Kazakhstan. Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have finally begun to close the diplomatic void that has existed over Caspian boundaries and jurisdictions since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Among many resolutions, the prohibition of the military presence of any other country in those waters other than those bathed by the Caspian was defined. It was a clear message from Moscow to the Azerbaijani government of Ilham Aliyev to



allow warships from Turkey, its biggest ally, to navigate the Caspian.

The Aktau agreements in 2018 ended up also generating new expectations in the area of infrastructure. Gas and oil pipelines will finally be able to cross the Caspian at the bottom of its waters, linking its western and eastern banks and more precisely integrating in an even more dynamic way the energy resources coming from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

If Russian demands that there be no alien vessels in the Caspian caused any unease in Ankara, it soon dissipated. It is very likely that most of the new energy sharing and distribution projects that arise will have to be integrated into the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline, known as TANAP and which drains Azerbaijani gas to Europe and is controlled by Turkish investments that will thus benefit.

It is very likely that the most recent movement of pieces on this board that brought Russian and Turkish pieces closer together took place in the last week of February 2023, when the 12th Conference on the Middle East of the Valdai Club was held. This is an important think tank that brings together specialists from the strategic area of Russia and foreign guests. Obviously, the discussion environment was influenced by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

One of the subjects of the conference was the project “International North-South Transport Corridor” - INSTC. Conceived since 2002 by Russia, India and Iran, the intermodal transport project aims to connect the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, via Iran, with the Caspian Sea and then Russian territory. The goal of the mega-project is to replace the traditional, long and expensive route between the Port of Saint Petersburg and Mumbai via the Suez Canal. Reduce the current 17,000 km to around 8,000 km using land connections, especially rail and optimizing the use of navigation in the Caspian Sea, the border between Russia and Iran. Enthusiasts even say that it would save 50% in time and 30% in transportation costs.

As a mark of the new phase, in early May 2022, a large Russian freighter anchored in the Port of Noshahr in the Iranian Caspian after decades of absence of this type of vessel in that location. Due to these new opportunities, Russians and Iranians began to project the creation of a special shipyard. As it is a lake-river-sea connection, the vessels that sail there need very specific technical characteristics.

Being an inland sea (or closed sea) the Caspian drains its ships through the Don River, through the Russian southwest until reaching the Volga-Don canals, built in the Soviet era. When these ships arrive on the Volga River they head directly to the Sea of Azov and from there to the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, i.e. an open sea. The Putin government allocated around US\$ 1 billion to modernize and provide more security for navigation on these rivers and canals. Obviously, this expands commercial possibilities for Iran, which is linked to the Russian industrial park, including the war sector.

The ambitions of the United States of America and even NATO in maintaining effective embargoes and sanctions against Russia and Iran may be compromised if these projects to boost navigability linking the Caspian to the Mediterranean help Moscow and Tehran to reduce losses.

If you imagine that Turkey is out of the problem this time, it's necessary to understand it isn't. Ultimately, any projection of power by Russia or Iran into the waters of the Black Sea that the US-led bloc finds threatening will need to rely on Turkey to exert counterpressure or deterrence. It remains to be seen whether Ankara will want to play that role. Perhaps this is not the geopolitical strategy chosen by the most rebellious of NATO members.

## V. CONCLUSION

The paths trodden by the foreign policies and geopolitical ambitions of Russia and Turkey are approaching and overlapping in the territory since the end of the Cold War.

The regional and global geographical space requires special attention from Ankara and Moscow to each other's political, economic and ideological pretensions. Both in the Caucasus and in Central Asia, the possibilities for cooperation are visible and the clashes of interests are worrying, which could intensify conflicts and tensions between the two countries. If they converge in some energy infrastructure projects, they may obviously diverge in others in the future. Due to the dynamics of transformations, relations between Russia and Turkey are on the way to being decisive on a global scale. Their respective interfaces and relations with China and the US have a determining potential in the construction of new international arrangements. Even in the face of economic, social and financial vulnerabilities, Turkey now occupies a central position in international politics and part of this image comes from its proximity to Russian interests. Its mediation in the Russian-Ukrainian War is just one example of what Ankara's foreign policy options can represent. The Eurasian identity, interpreted by each of the two countries with their particularities, is a fundamental element to understand what today seems to be a mutual geopolitical surveillance.

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### Footnotes

1. Sublime Porta - term found in diplomatic documents, especially French, between the 18th and 19th centuries to designate the Ottoman Empire. Its origin is in the great gate (bab-i-ali, in Turkish) that gave access to the governing bodies of the empire in Constantinople, today Istanbul. Among the buildings stood the current equivalent of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
2. Kemalism - ideology that refers to the founder of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938), who promoted a modern and secular state apparatus based on positivist and enlightenment principles. This view brings Turkish nationalism to the decisive role of the armed forces in the country's political reality.
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