

## The Turkey/Cyprus Conflict and its Implications for Russia

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Relations between Ankara and Washington, which have hardly been harmonious, recently became extremely tense, especially when Turkey decided to deal with Kurdish enclaves nearby its border. Russia naturally took advantage of the tension by providing Turkey with advanced S-400 missiles and by trying to play a peacemaking role in contested regions within Syria. Ankara's dealings with Moscow alienated it from NATO and the USA, and complicated relations with Russia and its allies in Syria, where Turkey's interests collided with those of Tehran and Moscow. While these aspects of the Ankara/Moscow relationship are well known, this article explores how the discovery of natural gas in the Mediterranean has increased Ankara's importance to Moscow, as a means of sowing dissension within NATO and helping Moscow hinder the emergence of alternative gas suppliers to Europe.

**Key Words:** Turkey, Greece, Gas lines, Foreign policy, Geopolitics

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## **The Turkey/Cyprus Conflict and its Implications for Russia**

In 2019, Turkey deployed a gas-seeking ship to explore potentially large reserves near Cyprus, prompting strong protests from Cyprus, the EU, and the USA. Ankara, however, insisted that it had full rights to explore the gas fields and extract the gas. Russian observers also implied support for the Turks, and noted that Turkey could use S-400 missiles in case of confrontation with its neighbors. Conflict between Turkey and Cyprus suits Russian interests by pulling Turkey closer to Russia and away from NATO, and helping Moscow hinder the emergence of alternative gas suppliers to Europe. Besides these obvious outcomes, this study of the gas and oil conflicts reveals: 1) the nature of Russia's Realpolitik geopolitical posture; 2) increased global instability and shifting alliances; and 3) the emergence of a multi-polar world in which the USA is increasingly unable to project power to bend smaller and purportedly weaker countries to its will.

### **Turkey's Alienation from Europe**

Turkey's conflict with the Greek portion of Cyprus and Greece, and increased friction with NATO and the EU cannot be understood without recognizing Turkey's continuous drift away from the West. After the repeated rejection of its decades-long dream to join the EU, Ankara finally lost interest in European integration, which has manifested in Turkey's increasingly negative view of NATO. In 2011, a Transatlantic Trends survey revealed Turkey as the NATO member with the lowest level of popular support for the alliance: just 37% (down from 53% in 2004),<sup>1</sup> which coincided with revival of neo-Ottomanism and a peculiar Turkish brand of 'Eurasianism.' Both stressed the uniqueness of Turkish civilization in integrating East and West, happily bringing together various creeds and ethnicities, including Armenians, under the benign aegis of the Ottoman sultan. The Turkish elite believed, as Graham E. Fuller noted, that "its interests in Europe represent only the western wing of Turkey's cultural wingspan, but (this) is not even the most defining wing of the Turkish geopolitical and cultural entity."<sup>2</sup> Many in Ankara also undoubtedly believed that the West had lapsed in a sort of general Spenglerian decline, so to speak, with Asia on the rise. Consequently, a Eurasian power, such as Turkey, could itself become a major global center.<sup>3</sup> Turks

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<sup>1</sup> Evgeny Buzhinsky, "Buying Russian Missile Systems would be Political Breakthrough for Turkey," *Valdai Discussion Club*, August 15, 2018, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/turkey-russia-usa-s-400-missiles>.

<sup>2</sup> Graham E. Fuller, "Who Lost Turkey?" August 6, 2019, <https://grahamefuller.com/who-lost-turkey>.

<sup>3</sup> Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem, *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in A Changing World Order* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2019).

viewed Europeans as unaware of this fundamental change and blamed ancient hatreds for their refusal to accept Turkey as an equal. Turkish President Recep Erdogan even proclaimed that critics of Turkey as “descendants of the Byzantines” were seeking revenge, “unable to reconcile themselves to defeat in 1453.”<sup>4</sup> The EU denied Turk claims, pointing to “Erdogan’s treatment of basic human rights during the two-year-long state of emergency declared after the July 2016 attempted coup,”<sup>5</sup> as responsible for sanctions from Berlin and postponement of Turkey’s EU application. Erdogan’s attempts to retaliate against Germany, the EU’s most powerful member and ardent Turk critic through “aggressive political campaigning among expatriate Turks living in Western Europe and Germany”<sup>6</sup> further exacerbated tensions with the EU.

## Turkish Tensions with the USA

Turkey’s disputes with the USA are comparatively recent compared to longstanding grievances with Europe, yet they threaten NATO’s unity and strength. Turkey’s rancor with the USA demonstrates the unpredictability of history and the emergence of a new geo-political arrangement in which even medium-sized countries can ignore the U.S. superpower.

As one of the USA’s most steadfast allies during the Korean War (1950-1953),<sup>7</sup> Ankara strongly desired NATO membership as protection from its mighty and hostile northern neighbor: the USSR. Ankara’s fears were not groundless, as following World War II Stalin sought control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to seal the Black Sea from attack by a hostile navy, as had occurred in the Crimean War. Moscow also made claims on Turkish territory. After securing NATO membership in February 1952, Turkey remained a staunch Cold War ally “defending the alliance’s southeastern flank,”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Razborka. Erdogan Naekhal na SShA i Evrosoiuz i Rasskazal o Zagovore ‘otpryskov Vizantiitsev’” (Erdogan Confronted the United States and the European Union and Spoke about a Conspiracy of the “Offspring of the Byzantines”), *Kavkaz Center*, October 12, 2017, <https://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2017/10/12/115626/razborka--erdogan-naekhal-na-ssha-i-evrosoyuz-i-rasskazal-o-zagovore-otpryskov-vizantiitsev.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Aris, “Moscow Blog: Turkey’s Crisis a Golden Opportunity for the Kremlin,” *Intellinews.com*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.intellinews.com/moscow-blog-turkey-s-crisis-a-golden-opportunity-for-the-kremlin-146777>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Buzhinsky, “Buying Russian Missile System.” Turkey was the first country, after the United States, to answer the United Nations’ call for military aid to South Korea after the North attacked. Turkey sent four brigades (21,212 soldiers, a considerable force for a comparatively small country) to a country 7,785 km away. Turkey lost 741 soldiers in the Korean War and 462 are buried in the U.N. Memorial Cemetery in Busan.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

and long pursued “a foreign policy of allying with Western countries.”<sup>9</sup> Until recently, Turkey mostly relied on US-made weapons, and as a member of a multinational consortium to build the next generation F-35 Lightning II fighter, “had committed to buy more than 100 of the aircraft.”<sup>10</sup>

A combination of recent events has contributed to weaken Turkey-US ties. Erdogan accused the USA of participation in a botched 2016 coup attempt and expressed outrage over American unwillingness to deport the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, whom Erdogan regards as the plot’s leader. Another example concerns the supply of American weapons, military training and guidance<sup>11</sup> to the Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units) which Turkey regards as a “terrorist organization, affiliated with the PKK.”<sup>12</sup>

These events must be placed in the broader context of the USA encountering increasing difficulty, not just with Turkey, but with other allies as well. The USA’s conflict with allies, seen through Trump’s proclamation that NATO was a parasite, and the increasing willingness of American allies to defy Washington, was clearly seen in Europe’s approach to Trump’s Iran policy. While Washington sought to economically strangle Tehran, leading European powers looked for ways to engage in business with Tehran. Even smaller powers, such as Azerbaijan, defied Washington. Azerbaijan, which regarded itself as a U.S. ally, has had issues with Tehran since the beginning of the post-Soviet era, and in fact U.S. National Security Advisor, John R. Bolton visited Baku to explore the possibility of using the country as a launching pad for a possible invasion of Iran. Bolton’s mission failed and he could hardly have been pleased to see Baku’s recent expansion of economic relations and intensive military and intelligence cooperation with Tehran.

Ankara’s brush with Washington thus should be seen in the context of a growing international perception of the socio-economic limits on the USA’s ability to project force, evident in American abandonment of the “Two-War construct,”<sup>13</sup> leaving the USA in what Michael Mazarr called a state of “strategic insolvency.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, one could speak more assertively to Washington, as Erdogan’s op-ed in the *New York Times* makes clear:

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<sup>9</sup> Min Wei, “Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Syrian Crisis: Dynamics of Transformation,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 3 (2019): 465.

<sup>10</sup> Buzhinsky, “Buying Russian Missile System.”

<sup>11</sup> Mikhail Smotriev, “Mezhdru Moskvoi i Vashingtonom: Turtsiia na Pereput’e” (Between Moscow and Washington: Turkey at a Crossroads), *BBC*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-44336369>.

<sup>12</sup> Wei, “Turkish Foreign Policy,” 472.

<sup>13</sup> Jim Mitre, “A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct,” *The Washington Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (2019).

<sup>14</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, “The Risks of Ignoring Strategic Insolvency,” *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2012).

Before it is too late, Washington must give up the misguided notion that our relationship can be asymmetrical and come to terms with the fact that Turkey has alternatives. Failure to reverse this trend of unilateralism and disrespect will require us to start looking for new friends and allies.<sup>15</sup>

Turkey's search for alternative players began back in 2009, when "military teams from Turkey and its neighbor, President Bashar al-Assad's Syria, crossed the border and visited outposts during joint military drills,"<sup>16</sup> marking the first joint military exercise between a NATO army and the Syrian military. Turkey has also attempted to use the future global hegemon, China, as a counterbalance to the USA, conducting the first joint exercises between a NATO airforce with Chinese jets in September 2010 in Turkish airspace.<sup>17</sup> In 2012, Turkey joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (or SCO, whose leading members are Russia and China, along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) as a dialogue partner in September 2013, and initially selected a Chinese company (CPMIEC) to construct its first long-range air and anti-missile defense system under the \$3.5 billion T-LORAMIDS program, before canceling the contract,<sup>18</sup> and flirting with Beijing over full SCO membership in 2017.<sup>19</sup>

## Turkey's Turn towards Moscow

While Turkey's flirtation with China has a long history, Ankara's comparatively recent sharp turn toward Moscow has surprised Western observers. Despite rising tensions in 2016 following Turkey's downing of a Russian jet fighter and assassination of Russia's ambassador by an off-duty Turkish police officer, two years later a contributor to the *Wall Street Journal* noted that "the budding trade and military partnership between Russia and Turkey is a remarkable turn of events...Moscow has signed contracts to supply its southern neighbor with more natural gas, a nuclear power plant, and an advanced antimissile shield."<sup>20</sup>

At an August 2018 meeting, Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin framed their decision to move closer together in terms of enjoying sufficient power to determine

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<sup>15</sup> Buzhinsky, "Buying Russian Missile System."

<sup>16</sup> Burak Bekdil, "Turkey: Putin's Ally in NATO?" *Gatestone Institute*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/13882/turkey-putin-ally-nato>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Townsend and Rachel Ellehuus, "The Tale of Turkey and the Patriots," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/the-tale-of-turkey-and-the-patriots>.

<sup>19</sup> Bekdil, "Turkey: Putin's Ally."

<sup>20</sup> David Gauthier-Villars, "Turkey Shifts Toward Russia as Sanctions Sour U.S. Relations," *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-shifts-closer-to-russia-1534289856>.

their own course and secure autonomy from U.S. domination.<sup>21</sup> At a meeting of the two country's foreign ministers, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu lashed out against Western sanctions: "This era when we are being bullied must end," while Russia's top diplomat, Sergei Lavrov, echoed the sentiments, "They are using methods of sanctions, threats, blackmail, and diktat," promising to explore shunning the dollar in bilateral trade with Turkey. "We are looking for new allies," Erdogan concluded.<sup>22</sup>

### **Turkey's Purchase of the Russian S-400 Missile Defense System**

Putin's offer to supply the advanced Sukoi fifth-generation fighter planes and Erdogan's decision to purchase the highly advanced Russian S-400 surface to air missile defense system displeased Washington, leading Washington to cancel delivery of the advanced F-35 fighter jets.<sup>23</sup> The S-400 deal compromised NATO defenses by providing Russian technicians with access to classified information about American and European fighter aircraft. While the agreement was signed in 2017 and finalized in 2018, several high-ranking officials in Russia<sup>24</sup> and the United States<sup>25</sup> initially expressed skepticism that the S-400 deal would be finalized, citing the potential damage to U.S.-Turkey relations. As Burak Bekdil noted, the purchase of the system signaled that Turkey viewed its Western allies rather than Russia, as a main security threat, since "it is an elementary military

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<sup>21</sup> "V. Putin i R. Erdogan Pozitivno Otsenili Realizatsiiu Sovmestnykh Proektov v Energetike" (V. Putin and R. Erdogan Positively Assess Implementation of Joint Projects in the Energy Sector), *Neftegaz.ru*, August 13, 2018, <https://neftgaz.ru/news/politics/199300-v-putin-i-r-erdogan-pozitivno-otsenili-realizatsiyu-sovmestnykh-proektov-v-energetike>.

<sup>22</sup> Gauthier-Villars, "Turkey Shifts Toward Russia."

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Russian Lieutenant General Evgenii Buzhinsky doubted that Turkey would actually get the S-400s: "There should be no drastic and tragic changes in relations between Turkey and the United States. Of course for Washington Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a 'complex partner,' a so-called 'Sultan,' who tries to pursue an independent foreign policy. Erdogan, in turn, also has a grudge against the U.S. for the attempted coup in 2016, when the Americans tried to physically liquidate him. However, despite all these 'red lines,' the Russian-Turkish S-400 deal is unlikely to be finalized." In Buzhinsky, "Buying Russian Missile System.;" Mikhail Moshkin, "Turtsiia Ispol'zovala S-400 Dlia Shantazha Ameriki" (Turkey used the S-400 to Blackmail America), *Vzgliad*, June 4, 2018, <https://vz.ru/politics/2018/6/4/926098.html>; Vasilisa Morozova, "Gosdep Prigozil Turtsii Sanktsiiami iz-sa Priobretenia S-400" (State Department Threatened Turkey with Sanctions over the Acquisition of the S-400) *Tvzvezda*, June 26, 2018, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/201806262027-on0i.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Lieutenant General Evgenii Buzhinsky relates that "a U.S. deputy defense secretary, in the days of Donald Rumsfeld, remarked: 'You (Russia) can sell rifles, automatic weapons, armored vehicles, even tanks to a NATO member state, but you will never sell aircraft, warships, air defense systems, because this is not military-technical cooperation, not commerce – this is politics.' Therefore, if Russia succeeds to supply the S-400s to Turkey, it will be a fundamental political breakthrough." Buzhinsky, "Buying Russian Missile System."

software fact that Turkey cannot use this system (the S-400) against Russian aggression or Russian-made weapons.”<sup>26</sup> The deal weakened NATO military deterrence of Russia and advanced Russian aims of sewing division within the western military alliance. Even though the U.S. responded by blocking Turkey from acquiring the F-35 and the Patriot missile defense system, Erdogan made clear that he would not abrogate the deal, defending “Turkey’s sovereign decision,”<sup>27</sup> doubling down by promising to cooperate with Russia to build S-500 air defense missiles.<sup>28</sup> Rapprochement with Turkey came at the expense of Russia’s relationship with Iran, though, which did not receive S-400s, despite the USA’s repeated threats of attack.<sup>29</sup>

## The Idlib Problem

Russia’s tilt towards Turkey, away from Syria and Iran, can also easily be seen in its Idlib policy in the Syrian crisis. At the behest of Turkey, Russia refused Iran’s requests to attack extremist Islamic rebels in Idlib province. While flexibly maintaining relations with both Turkey and Iran, Moscow’s maintenance of the status quo in Syria signaled a tilt towards Ankara. Moscow initially engaged in the crisis on Tehran’s behalf, facilitating Assad’s reassertion of control over the country, relentlessly bombing Aleppo, for instance, to secure Damascus’ victory.

While Damascus and Tehran sought Russia’s help to conquer Idlib, one of the last remaining Islamist strongholds, Ankara regarded the province as a protectorate, despite its control by Islamists. Erdogan, in fact, was been blamed for “objectively hastening” ISIS’ rise in order to dislodge al-Assad and weaken regional rival Iran.<sup>30</sup> Ankara’s protests succeeded, though, in dissuading Putin from implementing an initial plan to back Damascus’ full-fledged attack of the province.

Russia, Turkey, and Iran discussed Idlib in Astana, Kazakhstan in May 2012, agreeing to “a memorandum of cooperation on the establishment of ‘conflict de-escalation zones,”

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<sup>26</sup> Bekdil, “Turkey: Putin’s Ally.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Turtsiia Zakhotela Delat’ S-500” (Turkey wanted to Make the S-500), *Lenta.ru*, June 14, 2018, <https://lenta.ru/news/2018/06/14/s500>.

<sup>29</sup> “Bloomberg Bloomberg Uzhal ob Otkaze Rossii Prodat’ Iranu kompleksy S-400” (Bloomberg Learned about Russia’s Refusal to sell Iran the S-400), *Rossija Segodnya*, May 30, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190530/1555129061.html>; Iya Kramnik, “Ucheniia v Zalize: Kakim Budet Vzaimodeistvie Rossii i Irana (Exercises in the Gulf: How Russia will Interact with Iran), *Izvestia*, August 3, 2019. <https://iz.ru/905940/ilia-kramnik/ucheniia-v-zalive-kakim-budet-vzaimodeistvie-rossii-i-irana>; Maxim A. Sushkov, “How Russia is Deepening Military Ties with Iran to Counter the U.S.,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, August 6, 2019, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/how-russia-is-deepening-military-ties-with-iran-to-counter-the-us>.

<sup>30</sup> Wei, “Turkish Foreign Policy,” 469.

and by the next conference in Hamburg in July 2016, Moscow made clear its intention to tilt towards Ankara.<sup>31</sup> Iran expressed its displeasure at Turkey's actions in Syria through the Russian-language online publication *Iran.ru* which often conveys official Iranian positions, calling on Moscow to choose a true ally, Iran or Turkey,<sup>32</sup> making clear it had not provided a *carte blanche* for Turkey's operations in Iraq.<sup>33</sup>

While Erdogan's September 2017 pledge in Sochi to Putin to cooperate with military action against Idlib Islamist failed to yield concrete results (with Islamist influence actually increasing in Idlib )<sup>34</sup> Erdogan succeeded at a September 2018 meeting in pressuring Putin not to engage in full-fledged military operations,<sup>35</sup> despite a thriving ISIS and Islamist presence.<sup>36</sup> Agreements in October 2018 to demilitarize parts of Idlib,<sup>37</sup> and January 2019 to support Syria's territorial integrity, yielded no practical outcomes.<sup>38</sup> To placate Turkey and Iran, Russian detachments began joint patrols with Turkey in the spring of 2019 with Idlib still under Islamist control.<sup>39</sup> In the end, Moscow showed no interest in engaging in Idlib on Tehran's side.

By strengthening ties with Ankara through the delivery of the S-400s and backing Turkish over Iranian interests in Syria,<sup>40</sup> Russia seeks to sow dissension within NATO

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 475.

<sup>32</sup> Sergei Shakariants, "Rossii Pridetsia Vybirat' Svoego Real'nogo Partnera na Blizhnem Vostoke" (Russia will have to choose its real partner in the Middle East), *Iran.ru*, July 11, 2018, [https://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/110252/Rossii\\_pridetsiya\\_vybirat\\_svoego\\_realnogo\\_partnera\\_na\\_Blizhnem\\_Vostoke](https://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/110252/Rossii_pridetsiya_vybirat_svoego_realnogo_partnera_na_Blizhnem_Vostoke).

<sup>33</sup> "Iran Zaiavil o Podderzhke Turetskoi Operatsii Protiv Kurdsikh Boevikov na Granitse s Severnym Irakom" (Iran Pledges Support for Turkish Operation Against Kurdish Fighters on the Border with Northern Iraq), *Iran.ru*, June 13, 2018, <https://iran.ru>.

<sup>34</sup> Andre Ontikov, "Ustanovili rasshireniye: terroristy zakhvatili pochti ves' Idlib" (Expansion Secured: Terrorists Capture almost all of Idlib), *Izvestia*, January 16, 2019. <https://iz.ru/834046/andrei-ontikov/ustanovili-rasshirenie-terroristy-zakhvatili-pochti-ves-idlib>.

<sup>35</sup> "Glava MID Irana dal Otsenku Peregovoram Mezhdru Putinym i Erdoganom po Siriiskomu Idlibu" (Iranian Foreign Minister Assesses Talks between Putin and Erdogan on Idlib in Syria), *Iran.ru*, September 18, 2018, [https://www.iran.ru/news/politics/110989/Glava\\_MID\\_Irana\\_dal\\_ocenku\\_peregovoram\\_mezhdu\\_Putinym\\_i\\_Erdoganom\\_po\\_siriiskomu\\_Idlibu](https://www.iran.ru/news/politics/110989/Glava_MID_Irana_dal_ocenku_peregovoram_mezhdu_Putinym_i_Erdoganom_po_siriiskomu_Idlibu).

<sup>36</sup> Eduard Limonov, "Erdogan Khochet Kusok Sirii" (Erdogan wants a piece of Syria), *Zavtra*, September 20, 2018, [https://zavtra.ru/blogs/opyat\\_dvadcat\\_pyat\\_siriya](https://zavtra.ru/blogs/opyat_dvadcat_pyat_siriya).

<sup>37</sup> Andrei Ontikov, "Zdkoldovannoe Mesto: 'Zachem Nuzhen Novyi Sammit po Siriiskomu Idlibu'" (An Enchanted Place: Why a new Summit on Syria's Idlib is Needed), *Izvestia*, December 5, 2018, <https://iz.ru/819747/andrei-ontikov/zakoldovannoe-mesto-zachem-nuzhen-novyi-sammit-po-siriiskomu-idlibu>.

<sup>38</sup> "Iran, Rossiia i Turtsiia Opublikovali Sovmestnoe Saiavlenie Otnositel'no Sirii" (Iran, Russia and Turkey Publish Joint Statement on Syria), *Iran.ru*, May 16, 2018, [https://www.iran.ru/news/politics/109608/Iran\\_Rossiia\\_i\\_Turciya\\_opublikovali\\_sovmestnoe\\_zayavlenie\\_po\\_Sirii](https://www.iran.ru/news/politics/109608/Iran_Rossiia_i_Turciya_opublikovali_sovmestnoe_zayavlenie_po_Sirii).

<sup>39</sup> "V Turtsii Soobshchili o Nachale Sovmestnogo s Rossiei Patruirovaniia v Idlibe" (Turkey Announces the beginning of Joint Patrols with Russia in Idlib), *RT*, March 8, 2019, <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/608999-turciya-rossiya-idlib>.

<sup>40</sup> Avigdor Eskin, "Iran v Sirii: iz Soiuznikov v Supostaty" (Iran in Syria: From Russia's Ally to Adversary), *Aurora Network*, July 19, 2019, <https://aurora.network/articles/153-geopolitika/69892-iran-v-sirii-iz-sojuznikov-rossii-v-supostaty>.

and advance geo-political and economic interests, namely to build gas lines to Europe which circumvent Ukraine, while minimizing potential competition from alternative gas lines from Cyprus, Israel, or Greece.

## Moscow's Gas Plans

The discovery of huge gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea has hardly pleased Russia, which is concerned that the construction of Cypriot, Israeli and Egyptian gas lines could complicate its own plans to sell gas to Europe through the southern corridor. The Russian plan, originally known as the South Stream project, has a long history, with Russia sending gas via a southern route to Serbia, Hungary, Austria, and Italy. Russia's initial 2012 plan was blocked two years later by opposition from the EU, which was under strong pressure from Bulgaria.

After the initial collapse of the South Stream project, Moscow renewed efforts, with Turkey playing a key role. Turkish and Russian plans to launch four new strings then collapsed after a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M near the Syria–Turkey border in 2015. After surviving a failed coup attempt in 2016, ties warmed and Turkish President Erdoğan signed a new agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which implied the construction of two new strings: the first providing gas for Turkey's domestic consumption, and the second supplying the European market, although neither Moscow nor Ankara were certain that the second would be of much use.<sup>41</sup>

The construction of the so-called Turkish Stream continued successfully, and by March 2019 the sea and land portions of the first string had been completed.<sup>42</sup> While construction of the second string continued,<sup>43</sup> by the fall of 2018 the timeline for

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<sup>41</sup> “Est’ Nadvodnyi Zakhlest. Morskaiia I Nazemnaia Chasti Gazoprovoda Turetskii Potok Soedineny V Turtsii” (Linked: The Offshore and Onshore Sections of the Turkish Stream gas Pipeline are Connected in Turkey), *Neftgaz.ru*, March 19, 2019, <https://neftgaz.ru/news/transport-and-storage/193725-est-nadvodnyy-zakhlest-morskaya-i-nazemnaya-chasti-gazoprovoda-turetskiy-potoka-soedineny-v-turtsii>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> “Vtoroi ‘Turetskii Potok’ Zatiagivaiut V Turtsiiu” (The Second “Turkish Stream” is coming to Turkey), *EurAsia Daily*, June 26, 2018, <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2018/06/26/vtoroy-tureckiy-potok-zatyagivayut-v-turciyu>; “Sudno *Pioneering Spirit* Vozobnovilo Ukladku 2 Nitki Gazoprovoda Turetskii Potok” (*Pioneering Spirit* Resumes Laying Second String of the Turkish Stream Gas Pipeline), *Neftgaz.ru*, June 26, 2018, <https://neftgaz.ru/news/transport-and-storage/200493-sudno-pioneering-spirit-vozobnovilo-ukladku-2-y-nitki-gazoprovoda-turetskiy-potok>; “Gazprom’ Vozobnovil Ukladku Vtoroi Nitki ‘Turetskogo Potoka’” (Gazprom Resumes Laying the Second String of Turkish Stream), *Izvestia*, June 26, 2018, <https://iz.ru/759888/2018-06-26/gazprom-vozobnovil-ukladku-vtoroi-nitki-turetskogo-potoka>.

completion remained unclear,<sup>44</sup> but by winter of 2019 prospects for delivery of gas along the second string to Europe had improved, mostly due to the shifting positions of Serbia, and in particular of Bulgaria, which no longer firmly backed Brussels' opposition to the project. Serbia and Bulgaria, in fact, were reportedly "making plans to proceed with constructing gas pipelines across their respective territories to enable the delivery of Russian natural gas into Central Europe via the TurkStream pipeline."<sup>45</sup> The new prospect of Bulgaria as a gas hub and provider for the Southern Gas Corridor, not just of Russian, but also Azerbaijani gas, had softened opposition from Brussels, which had long supported Azerbaijani gas as an alternative to reduce dependence on Russia. In December 2018 Bulgaria's Bulgartransgaz opened a construction tender for a pipeline to Serbia to bring Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz gas from Greece to Europe through the Southern Gas Corridor. Transporting Russian gas also lent credibility to Bulgaria's bid to become a regional gas hub.<sup>46</sup> While the Balkan countries' positions were important, Turkey was critical for the success of the project, and Moscow was legitimately concerned that Ankara might make a U-turn, as it had in the past.

Strong ties with Turkey were also important for Russia's interests in blocking potential competition from a proposed TransCaspian gas line project, which would bring a pipeline through Turkey, connecting the abundant Turkmen gas fields to European markets. The EU supported the plan, meeting with a Turkmen delegation in October 2018,<sup>47</sup> and Washington backed the plan as well. Although Russia formally acquiesced to the project at a 2018 agreement among Caspian states, Russia could always call on its navy, the largest in the region, to block construction on environmental grounds. By pulling Ankara away from Washington and Brussels, Russia's delivery of S-400s helped to secure Turkey's support in thwarting the construction of the competing Turkmen gas pipeline.

## **Turkey's Conflict with Cyprus over Mediterranean Gas**

By backing Turkey, Moscow also hoped to forestall exploitation and delivery of gas from the 'Aphrodite' gas fields, valued at \$9 billion, recently discovered by ExxonMobil near

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<sup>44</sup> David O'Byrne, "Gazprom's Bulgarian Transit Plan Pitches TurkStream Against TANAP," *EurOil, Europe Oil & Gas Monitor* 455, Week 24, June 21, 2018; Anastasiia Bashkatova, "Izrail' Gotovit Udar Po 'Gazpromu'" (Israel is Preparing a Blow for Gazprom), *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, November 28, 2018, [https://www.ng.ru/economics/2018-11-28/2\\_7450\\_strike.html](https://www.ng.ru/economics/2018-11-28/2_7450_strike.html).

<sup>45</sup> "Serbia, Bulgaria Ready For TurkStream," *Energo, CEE/FSU Power Monitor* 947, Week 6, February 14, 2019, 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> "ES Gotov Proinvestirovat' Stroitel'stvo Transkaspiskogo Gazoprovoda" (EU Ready to Invest in the Construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline), *Neftegaz.ru*, October 23, 2018, <https://neftegaz.ru/news/finance/197561-es-gotov-proinvestirovat-stroitelstvo-transkaspiskogo-gazoprovoda>.

Cyprus.<sup>48</sup> The Republic of Cyprus (Greek Cypriot) government signed an agreement with the American firm Noble, British-Dutch company Shell, and Israeli firm Delek to extract gas from the fields beginning in 2024-2025, which led to conflict with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and Turkey, which laid its own claims on the gas.<sup>49</sup> Turkey seeks to tap the gas resources near Cyprus to increase self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on potentially unreliable imports from Russia or Iran, as well as solidify its role as a gas supplier to Europe. Turkey has provided Azerbaijani gas to Europe since June 2018 through the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), and may construct a second line of the Russian Turkish Stream pipeline.<sup>50</sup>

While Turkey claimed permission from its protectorate, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, to drill in the republic's territorial waters, the ROC government in Nicosia asserted that Turkey had violated its territorial integrity.<sup>51</sup> Nicosia sought to serve as a gas hub for two large gas fields discovered by Israel in the last decade,<sup>52</sup> and the two nations signed an agreement with Greece in February 2019 to deliver gas through a proposed Eastmed pipeline to Europe.<sup>53</sup> Greece already serves as an important hub for the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), which delivers Azerbaijani gas from Turkey to Europe.<sup>54</sup> By constructing an LNG factory<sup>55</sup> Cyprus could challenge Russia as a supplier of regular gas and LNG to Europe.

<sup>48</sup> “‘Afrodita’ Prineset Kipru \$9 mld” (“Aphrodite” will bring Cyprus \$ 9 billion), *Oilcapital.ru*, June 13, 2019, [https://oilcapital.ru/news/upstream/13-06-2019/afrodita-prineset-kipru-9-mlrd?utm\\_source=cyplive&utm\\_medium=news\\_link](https://oilcapital.ru/news/upstream/13-06-2019/afrodita-prineset-kipru-9-mlrd?utm_source=cyplive&utm_medium=news_link); “‘ExxonMobil’ Obnaruzhila Krupnye Zapasy na Shel’fe o Kipra. Budut Problemy so Storony Turtsii?” (ExxonMobil has Discovered Large Gas Reserves Offshore Cyprus. Will there be Problems from Turkey?), *Neftegaz.ru*, March 1, 2019, <https://neftegaz.ru/news/Geological-exploration/194188-exxonmobil-obnaruzhila-krupnye-zapasy-gaza-na-shelfe-o-kipr-budut-problemy-so-storony-turtsii>.

<sup>49</sup> Sergei Belashko, “Vo Vzryvoopasnyi Region Dobavili Nemnogo Gazovykh Strastei” (Gas Passions have been Added to an Explosive Region), *Strana.ua*, June 8, 2019, <https://strana.ua/opinions/205448-vo-vzryvoopasny-rehion-dobavili-nemnogo-hazovykh-strastej.html>.

<sup>50</sup> “Turkey Opens TANAP pipeline that will Bring Azeri Gas to Europe,” *Deutsche Welle*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-opens-tanap-pipeline-that-will-bring-azeri-gas-to-europe/a-44192422>; “Turtsiia Zapustila Gazoprovod v Obkhod Rossii” (Turkey Launches a Gas Pipeline Bypassing Russia), *Lenta.ru*, June 12, 2018, <https://lenta.ru/news/2018/06/12/tanap>.

<sup>51</sup> “Turtsiia Gotovitsia Dobyvat’ Gaz v Vodakh Kipra” (Turkey Prepares to Extract Gas in Cyprus’ Waters), June 7, 2019, *Smotrim.ru*, <https://smotrim.ru/article/1386524>.

<sup>52</sup> “Kogda Net Svoego Gaza: Turtsiia Prigrozila Kipru Usmirenem po Stsenarii Sirii,” *Eadaily.com*, November 6, 2018, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2018/11/06>.

<sup>53</sup> Bashkatova, “Israel’ Gotovit udar po ‘Gazpromu’”; Aleksandr Neukropnyi, “Novyi ‘Gazovyi Gigant’: Izrail’ Brosil Vyzov Rossii” (The New “Gas Giant”: Israel Challenges Russia), *Topcor.ru*, November 28, 2018, <https://topcor.ru/3790-novyj-gazovyj-gigant-izrail-brosil-vyzov-rossii.html>.

<sup>54</sup> “Kommentarii: Gaz iz Izrailia Nemnogo Potesnit ‘Gazprom’ na Iuge ES” (Commentary: Gas from Israel will Pressure Gazprom in the South of the EU), *Deutsche Welle*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/ru/комментарий-газ-из-израиля-немного-потеснит-газпром-на-юге-ес/a-46459897>.

<sup>55</sup> “Turtsiia Gotovitsia Dobyvat’”

The tension between Turkey and the Republic of Cyprus, which started to mount in 2018, serves Russian interests by fomenting division within NATO and stymying progress on the competing Eastmed pipeline. In 2018 Turkey threatened to use military force to block two ROC attempts to drill for gas in Cyprus' claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), first by the Sarpent 1200, and next by Stena IceMax under contract by ExxonMobil.<sup>56</sup> After Greek and Turkish Ministry of Defense negotiations failed to reduce tensions,<sup>57</sup> Greece promised to send its own drilling ships,<sup>58</sup> and Cyprus threatened to arrest the crew of a Turkish drilling ship,<sup>59</sup> accusing the Turks of a "second invasion."<sup>60</sup> Turkey promised to defend their ships,<sup>61</sup> reiterating that only Turkey and Northern Cyprus enjoyed legitimate rights to the gas fields.<sup>62</sup> Turkish Cypriots further inflamed tensions by occupying a historically Greek inhabited city in Turkish Northern Cyprus.<sup>63</sup>

The conflict between the Greek-backed Republic of Cyprus and Turkey could widen, dividing NATO by bringing in the USA and E.U. in opposition to Turkey. Former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, in fact, stated that conflict with Turkey would involve the entire EU, while Brussels threatened tough sanctions against Ankara.<sup>64</sup> President Emmanuel Macron of NATO member France also demanded an

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<sup>56</sup> "Kogda Net Svoego Gaza."

<sup>57</sup> "Turtsiia ne Otstupit ot Svoikh Interesov v Sredizemnomor'e – Ministr Oborony" (Turkey will not Deviate from its Interests in the Mediterranean: Defense Minister), *EurAsia Daily*, June 27, 2019, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/06/27/turciya-ne-otstupit-ot-svoikh-interesov-v-sredizemnomore-ministr-oborony>.

<sup>58</sup> "Gretsiia Nachet Gazovuiu Razvedku Vozle Krita na Fone Konfliktka s Turtsiei" (Greece will Begin Gas Exploration near Crete amid Conflict with Turkey), *Eurointegration.com.ua*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2019/06/24/7097692>.

<sup>59</sup> "Gretsiia Grozit Turtsii Sanktsiiami ES iz-za Burovykh Rabot u Poberezh'ia Kipra" (Greece Threatens Turkey with EU Sanctions for Drilling off the Coast of Cyprus), *EurAsia Daily*, June 17, 2019, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/06/17/greciya-grozit-turcii-sankciyami-es-iz-za-burovyh-rabot-u-poberezhya-kipra>.

<sup>60</sup> "Turtsiia Gotovitsia Dobyvat."

<sup>61</sup> "MID Turtsii: Zhestko Otvetim na Popytku Aresta Ekipazha Burovogo Sudna" (Turkish Foreign Ministry: We will Respond Toughly to any Attempt to Arrest the Crew of the Drilling Vessel) *EurAsia Daily*, June 10, 2019, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/06/10/mid-turcii-zhyostko-otvetim-na-popytku-aresta-ekipazha-burovogo-sudna>.

<sup>62</sup> "Prezident Erdogan Somnevaetsia v Tom, Chto Prezident SShA Trump Vvedet Sanktsii v Otnoshenii Turtsii" (President Erdogan Doubts U.S. President Trump Will Impose Sanctions Against Turkey), *Trt.net.tr*, June 27-28, 2019, <https://www.trt.net.tr>.

<sup>63</sup> El'nur Eminoglu, "Turtsiia i Zapad Mogut Stolknut'sia na Kipre" (Turkey and the West may Collide in Cyprus), *Haqqin.az*, June 26, 2019, <https://haqqin.az/news/152930>.

<sup>64</sup> "Glava Evrokommisii Prigrozil Turtsii Merami iz-za Deistvii u Beregov Kipra" (The Head of the European Commission Threatened Measures against Turkey Due to Actions off the Cyprus Coast), *Rossiia Segodnya*, June 21, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190621/1555767811.html>.

end to Turkey's actions<sup>65</sup> and implicitly promised France's military backing for the ROC. France has a direct stake in the crisis, with French energy firm Total conducting natural gas operations with Italy's ENI off the coast of Cyprus. French actions demonstrate tacit military support for the ROC:

In January 2019, the French frigate *FS Aconit* conducted three days of interoperability exercises with ROC naval vessels. Four days after Turkey's May 12 announcement that it would send a second drillship to Cypriot waters, France signed an agreement with the ROC to service its warships at Cyprus's Mari naval base where a new docking area is being constructed to accommodate the French navy's larger warships.<sup>66</sup>

As previously mentioned, Turkey has strongly opposed the American backing of the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units). The conflict came to a head when the Turks launched Operation Olive Branch in 2018 against Kurdish forces in Syria, some under U.S. protection. The possibility of conflict with Turkey led the US to pursue stronger ties with Greece, which had long been marginalized in favor of Ankara. In fact, Washington had done little to prevent the Turkish occupation of Cyprus or stop Turkey from threatening war against Greece, despite both being NATO members.

Before turning towards Turkey, Russia had pursued friendly relations with Greece. Moscow and Athens signed a "military-technological" (*voenno-tekhnicheskoi*) agreement in 2013,<sup>67</sup> and a cultural/scientific exchange agreement in November 2015 despite Russia's 2014-2015 invasion of Crimea. Russia enjoyed historical and cultural connections with Greece and emphasized the importance of the Kievan Rus' 10<sup>th</sup> century CE adoption of Orthodox Christianity from the Byzantines. This context provided the framework for Putin's 2016 visit to Greece coinciding with the 1,000-year presence of "Russian monks" (*Russkoe monachestvo*) on Mt. Athos, an important Orthodox center.

Russia's tilt toward Turkey and consequent cooling down of the Athens/Moscow love affair led to closer American relations with Greece and Greek Cyprus, as described by Tanchum:

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<sup>65</sup> "Frantsiia Podderzhivaet Kipr v Voprose Turtsii" (France Supports Cyprus on Turkey Issue), *News.am*, June 28, 2019, <https://news.am/rus/news/521103.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Micha'el Tanchum, "A Dangerous Policy of Turkish Containment in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Turkey Analyst*, July 3, 2019, <http://turkishpolicy.com/blog/35/a-dangerous-policy-of-turkish-containment-in-the-eastern-mediterranean>.

<sup>67</sup> "Rossii i Gretsiia: Puti i Perspektivy Vzaimovygodnogo Sotrudnichestva" (Russia and Greece: Means and Prospects for Mutually Beneficial Cooperation), *Dostoino.pro*, <https://www.dostoino.pro/sobutia/rossiya-i-grecziya-puti-i-perspektivy-vzaimovygodnogo-sotrudnichestva.html>, Accessed August 6, 2019.

The U.S. maintains a base in Crete, less than 500 miles from Cyprus. On December 13, 2018, the U.S. greatly enhanced its security partnership with the inauguration of a U.S.-Greece Strategic Dialogue. In April 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act was introduced in the U.S. Senate by Senators Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Marco Rubio (R-Fla.). In addition to promoting energy cooperation between Greece, the ROC, and Israel, the bipartisan legislation provides for \$3 million of military financing assistance for Greece and \$2 million to Greece and the ROC each for military training assistance. Most significantly, the legislation would remove the arms embargo against the ROC.<sup>68</sup>

In March 2019, the leaders of Israel, ROC, and Greece met with the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to discuss the creation of the EastMed pipeline to send gas from Cyprus and Israel to Europe.<sup>69</sup> In response to Turkey's acceptance of the Russian S-400 missile defense systems and escalation of tensions over Mediterranean natural-gas exploration, hawkish voices in the USA, including in *Bloomberg* news, called for a host of retaliatory measures against Turkey including freezing high-level contacts, reducing financial aid, sanctioning Turkish drilling companies, canceling F-35 fighter jet delivery and exclusion of Turkish aircraft parts manufacturers from the project, freezing assets of top Turkish officials, blocking large loans and cutting Turkey off from the U.S. financial system, ejecting Turkey from NATO, and removing Western military personnel and nuclear weapons from NATO bases in Turkey.<sup>70</sup> Turkey responded to its exclusion from the F-35 fighter jet program with the largest naval military maneuvers in its history.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Turkey could also use S-400s to protect its gas fields.<sup>72</sup> Conflict with NATO allies in the Mediterranean or with the Kurds could also serve Russian interests by forcing Turkey to redeploy forces currently engaged in

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<sup>68</sup> Tanchum, "A Dangerous Policy."

<sup>69</sup> "SShA razygryvaiut protiv Rossii i Turtsii 'Kiprskii gambit'" (The United States is Playing the Cyprus Gambit against Russia and Turkey), *Topcor.ru*, April 17, 2019. <https://topcor.ru/7853-ssha-razygryvajut-protiv-rossii-i-turtsii-kiprskij-gambit.html>.

<sup>70</sup> "Turkey has abandoned the West. Good Riddance," *Bloomberg News*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-07-18/turkey-under-erdogan-has-abandoned-the-west>.

<sup>71</sup> Igor' Subbotin, "Kipr Prevratilsia v Platsdarm Bor'by SShA s Turetskim Potokom" (Cyprus has become a Staging ground for the US Fight against the Turkish Stream), *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, May 16, 2019. [https://www.ng.ru/world/2019-05-16/2\\_7575\\_cyprus.html](https://www.ng.ru/world/2019-05-16/2_7575_cyprus.html).

<sup>72</sup> Bloomberg Uzhal ob Otkaze Rossii Prodavat' Iranu kompleksy S-400" (Bloomberg Learned about Russia's Refusal to sell Iran the S-400), *Rossija Segodnya*, May 30, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190530/1555129061.html>; "Bloomberg Soobshchil, Kak Turtsiia Mozhet Ispol'zovat' S-400 v 'Gazovom Konflikte,'" (Bloomberg Reports how Turkey can Use the S-400 in a "Gas Conflict"), *Gazeta.ru*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2019/05/30/13035847.shtml>.

Idlib. One Russian observer noted that Turkey has already started to withdraw its forces from the province.<sup>73</sup>

Ankara, though, like many other powers, likely seeks a “multivector” foreign policy, with no desire to completely break with Washington or unreservedly embrace Moscow. Turkey continues to encounter problems with Moscow; and Shoigu, Russia’s Minister of Defense, complained in late August 2019 that the Russo-Turkish Idlib agreement had not progressed smoothly and still encountered problems.<sup>74</sup> Russia and Turkey also back opposing sides in conflicts in the Caucasus (Turkish backed Azerbaijan vs. Russian supported Armenia) and Libya (Turkish-supported Government of National Accord in Tripoli vs. Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, supported by the Russian Wagner Group).

Furthermore, segments of the American elite are also in no hurry to break with Ankara, and Trump’s decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, so as not to impede the Turkish advance against the Kurds could be interpreted as a friendly gesture toward Turkey, although Washington’s decision may actually testify to American weakness. Thus, one can assume that Turkey’s movement away from the USA, Europe, and, implicitly, NATO is likely to continue.

## Conclusion

Many conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of Russia’s relations with Turkey and states in the Mediterranean. Apparent is the peculiar nature of Russian geopolitical culture, which demonstrates the Moscow elite’s understanding, not just of the opportunities, but also of the limits of projecting power. In different geopolitical contexts, Russia has drifted towards either Iran, Greece, or Turkey. Moscow has been more flexible and more successful in its maneuvering than Washington, which still believes, in neo-con fashion, in bending practically everyone to its will. Secondly, the article shows the instability inherent in a multi-polar world. During the Cold War, the US-Soviet rivalry was not only a source of tension but also of stability, with each policing its respective sphere of influence. At present, no global “policeman” exists, and conflict could erupt at any time or place. Finally, Turkey’s conflicts over Cyprus’ gas fields and in Syria reflect the new realities of a multi-polar world. Not only China and Russia, but Turkey as well, has emerged to challenge the USA and hunt for new backers, Russia being one of them. The conflict over Cyprus’ gas has provided Russia with a win-

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<sup>73</sup> Liubov’ Shvedova, “Russkie Izgoniaut Turok iz Idliba” (Russians Expel Turks from Idlib), *Svpressa.ru*, August 3, 2019, [https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/239751/?utm\\_source=warfiles.ru](https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/239751/?utm_source=warfiles.ru).

<sup>74</sup> “Shoigu Zaiavil o Trudnostiakh i Problemakh pri Vypolnenii Soglashenii po Idlibu” (Shoigu Spoke about Difficulties and Problems Implementation Idlib Agreements), *Rbc.ru*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5d655c3a9a794767f6117103>.

win situation. Discord between Turkey, NATO, and the EU has solidified Moscow's importance to Ankara, reducing the likelihood that Turkey would backtrack on Turkish Stream's continued expansion into Europe. This conflict between Turkey and other NATO members weakens the alliance and stymies the construction of competing gas pipelines to Europe.

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