

*Turkish-Russian Relations: Competition and Cooperation in Eurasia.* By Fatma Aslı Kelkitli. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. Paperback 2019. 146 pp. ISBN: 9780367264659  
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The rivalry between Turkey and Russia in Eurasia is longstanding, dating back to the days of the Romanov and Ottoman Empires. Since the end of the Cold War, elements of this rivalry have taken on new dimensions in the post-Soviet space and beyond. At the same time, however, there have been possibilities for cooperation as well, particularly on economic issues. Fatma Kelkitli's brief volume usefully surveys many elements of the Russian-Turkish relationship in Eurasia, highlighting in particular how aspects of interdependence between the two countries have reduced possibilities for conflict while at the same time opening up avenues for cooperation.

After a brief introduction, the book is divided into three parts. The first, encapsulated in Chapter 1, examines what the author calls a "flourishing multifaceted relationship." This includes not only institutionalized dialogue among political and military officials, but, perhaps more importantly, people-to-people relationships, including business ties, student exchange, academic cooperation, travel and tourism, and inter-marriages. Kelkitli nests these features in the confines of complex interdependence theory, and states that these various ties "acted as transmission belts at the time of political disagreements between Turkey and Russia by urging and motivating governmental elites to re-open channels of communication and to take measures to put the relationship back on track" (p. 30). In other words, even when Turkish or Russian political elites might find grounds for conflict and disagreement, complex interdependence has empowered a variety of actors who benefit from mutually good relations. The main theme of this volume is thus probing "to what extent the multilayered nature of the relationship restrained the policies of Turkey and Russia vis-à-vis each other when they were embroiled in discord and rivalry in the post-Cold War period" (p. 33).

The second part of the book delves into this question. It includes five short chapters on some prominent issues that have been the basis, in the recent past if not today, of conflict. These include conflicts in the south Caucasus (Chapter 2), Central Asia (Chapter 3), the Black Sea (Chapter 4), support given to the other state's ethnic separatists (Chechens and Kurds) (Chapter 5), and several issues of contention in the Middle East, especially Syria (Chapter 6). Many of these issues will be familiar to those well-acquainted with Turkish and/or Russian foreign policy. Overall, the findings are rather mixed. For example, Turkey and Russia remain on the opposite sides of numerous conflicts (e.g. Turkey supports Azerbaijan whereas Russia backs Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkey opposed Russian intervention in Georgia and Ukraine, and Turkey has backed rebels against the Russian-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria). Kelkitli suggests that in some areas, burgeoning economic ties between

Ankara and Moscow have tempered conflict. She makes this argument most clearly with respect to Central Asia, which she argues “has been turning gradually from a region of divergence and competition between Turkey and Russia into one of engagement and cooperation” (p. 57). She points in particular to various bilateral (e.g. Turkish-Russian Action Plan for Cooperation in Central Asia) and multilateral (e.g. the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) forums for dialogue and cooperation. In contrast, she finds

less cooperation in the Caucasus, although she suggests that even there Turkey has been wary of pushing too hard against Russia because such action could jeopardize economic relations. Turkey’s refusal to go along with European Union sanctions against Russia after Russian actions in Ukraine stand as another example of how interdependence has ameliorated the potential for larger conflict.

The third part of the book (Chapter 7) documents this interdependence on various economic fronts, including bilateral trade, energy, construction, and investment. There is little doubt that Turkey and Russia have an important — and growing — economic relationship. One might ask, however, whether the notion of “complex” interdependence best captures it. Instead, one might suggest that the better adjective is “assymetrical,”<sup>1</sup> as Turkey depends much more on Russia (especially for energy) than Russia depends on Turkey. This point was driven home in 2016 after Moscow imposed crippling sanctions on Turkey after Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft along its Syrian border, an event Kelkitli suggests could be a turning point in relations. However, with the advantage of hindsight, we can see that this event’s aftermath led not to a worsening but a strengthening of ties, as President Erdoğan eventually apologized for the incident and in turn received support from President Putin in the aftermath of the failed July 2016 coup attempt. Today, one sees much greater cooperation between Turkey and Russia in Syria, in part a reflection of the US withdrawal but also due to a recognition that Russia is the dominant player in Syria and that if Turkey wishes to have any influence in post-conflict Syria it will have to work with Russia. In other words, Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria is driven less by complex interdependence and more, at least from the Turkish side, of cost-benefit calculations of *Realpolitik*. Turkey and Syria are also working together on military matters, as seen by Ankara’s purchase of the S-400 air defense system.

Turkish-Russian relations are, to be sure, quickly evolving, and one weakness of this volume is that it does not address these new twists. More seriously, one could suggest that while the volume provides a useful overview of aspects of the relationship,

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<sup>1</sup> See Ziya Öniş and Şahnaz Yılmaz, “Turkey and Russia in a shifting global order: cooperation, conflict and asymmetric interdependence in a turbulent region,” *Third World Quarterly*, 37, no. 1 (2016): 71-95.

it does not go into great depth on many questions (e.g. the chapter on Central Asia is less than ten pages and offers little in terms of policies toward individual countries) and that its conclusions are far more suggestive than definitely demonstrated. For example, while one could certainly argue that economic ties are pushing Moscow and Ankara closer, one could counter, in more realist fashion, that Turkey simply lacks the power to confront Russia in the Middle East, Central Asia, or the Caucasus, where it casts a much larger geopolitical shadow, and is therefore making do as best it can, focusing on areas where it can usefully cooperate. Furthermore, beyond business ties, it is unclear what, if any, the impact of people-to-people ties has on the “high politics” of Russian or Turkish foreign policy. However, readers interested in Russian-Turkish relations would still be advised to consult this work which provides a useful, multidimensional account of a crucial relationship in Eurasia.

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