

Turkey and Russia seal pipeline deal

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While the conflict between the United States and Russia in Syria is intensifying and threatening to provoke a direct clash between the two nuclear-armed powers, NATO member Turkey is once again drawing closer to Russia. On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with his Turkish colleague Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the sidelines of the World Energy Summit in Istanbul. They discussed the Syrian conflict and sealed an agreement to construct the long-planned Turkish Stream oil pipeline.

Turkish Stream is to supply Turkey and large sections of Western Europe with Russian gas, while bypassing a number of transit states. The first of two pipelines, which will connect the Russian with the Turkish Black Sea coast, will begin operations as early as 2019. In addition, the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant at Akkuyu by Russian firms is to go ahead.

The meeting was already the third between the two leaders since earlier this summer, when diplomatic ties began to thaw after a deep freeze in relations accompanied by mutual economic sanctions provoked by the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet over Syria by Turkey in November 2015. In August, Erdogan visited St. Petersburg and the two leaders also spoke on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in China in September.

The renewal of relations was accelerated by the failed military coup against Erdogan on July 15, which the Turkish government blamed on the Hizmet movement of US-based preacher Fathullah Gülen. Government representatives and the Turkish media have repeatedly accused the US of having been involved in the coup.

In addition, there are sharp tensions between Ankara and Washington over policies being pursued in the Syrian war.

Erdogan was initially one of the strongest proponents of a regime change operation in Damascus backed by the US and its European allies. But the first frictions

were provoked when US President Barack Obama announced the halting of a planned military intervention three years ago.

These tensions grew when the US decided to bombard the Islamic State (IS), which had been overtly or covertly supported as part of the anti-Assad alliance by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. The Turkish army only reluctantly joined the fight against IS and then directed its fire primarily against the Syrian Kurds.

Ankara was furious that in the fight against IS, Washington collaborated closely with the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), the Syrian branch of the PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organisation and combatted by the military in Turkey. The emergence of a Kurdish state in Syria is not only considered a nightmare scenario by Erdogan and his AKP, but also by the main opposition Kemalist CHP and nationalist MHP.

Many Western commentators have therefore wondered with concern whether Erdogan's developing ties with Putin could mark Turkey's abandonment of NATO. "Could an Ankara-Moscow axis be emerging there, which could become a challenge or even a problem for the West? That is the question concerning many commentators in the EU and above all NATO," wrote Deutsche Welle.

The demonstrative confirmation that Turkish Stream is to be built points in this direction. The pipeline is vehemently opposed by the US and its European allies. In tandem with the Nord Stream pipeline in the Baltic Sea, it would enable Russia to supply large parts of Europe with gas while bypassing Ukraine, Poland and other transit countries.

Nonetheless, Deutsche Welle, and most experts and commentators, answer the question as to the prospect of Turkey leaving NATO with a decisive no. Erdogan is seeking to exploit the conflict between the US and Russia to give himself more room for manoeuvre

without calling NATO membership into question.

However, he increasingly finds himself backed into a corner. Economic growth in Turkey has declined sharply. The sanctions on Russia had a disastrous impact on the tourist and energy sectors. Rampant inflation hindered much-needed foreign investment and reduced the buying power of wide sections of the population. In addition, there are 2.5 million refugees in the country and the government is waging a brutal civil war against the Kurds in the east.

Despite the revival of relations, Moscow and Ankara remain on opposite sides in the Syrian conflict. The Turkish government continues to favour regime change in Damascus, while Russia militarily supports the Assad regime. In a brief appearance before the press, Erdogan and Putin went no further than issuing a few broad phrases about the need to end the bloodletting and the need for humanitarian aid.

However, according to Deutsche Welle, “they appear to have agreed over recent weeks to a certain degree of silent toleration: Ankara accepts Russia’s support for the Assad regime and the increased Russian military presence in Syria, Moscow is not protesting about the Turkish advance in the north of the country.”

It is also revealing that Erdogan, who previously portrayed himself as a protector of the rebel-held sections of the city of Aleppo, now no longer protests against the retaking of the city by the Syrian government and its allies. Instead, he has sought to secure Russian backing for a “no-fly” zone. Unlike the “no-fly” zone proposed by the US and its allies, this would not cover all of the cities in which fighting is taking place but only the border area between Syria and Turkey, where hundreds of thousands of refugees would then be settled.

In many ways, the situation in Syria recalls that in the Balkans prior to World War I. There, various regional powers, supported and manipulated by the competing great powers, fought out two bloody Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913 between shifting alliances until the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 provided the spark that triggered a conflict between the great powers that produced the worst slaughter in human history to that point.

The manoeuvring by Putin and Erdogan only increases the tensions and the danger of war in the Middle East. However, the main responsibility for the

catastrophe in Syria and the threat of a world war lies with the US and its European allies, which have waged war throughout the region over recent decades and systematically provoked ethnic and religious differences in pursuit of their imperialist interests.



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