Russian-Turkish talks raise concerns in Western capitals amid NATO war on Russia

Ula? Ate?çi
8 August 2022

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin held talks in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi Friday. The summit, only 17 days after a trilateral meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran in July, was closely followed by the NATO powers, which are waging war on Russia in Ukraine and imposing sanctions in Moscow.

The meeting lasted more than four hours and focused on the Ukraine war, related difficulties with grain exports from Ukraine and Russia, the deepening economic, energy and tourism ties between Russia and Turkey, and ongoing wars in Syria and Libya.

Before the bilateral meeting, which was not followed by a press conference, Putin emphasized the growing trade between Turkey and Russia, despite US-European economic and financial sanctions targeting Russia. He said, "last year our trade grew 57 percent, and it doubled in the first few months of this year, from January to May."

Putin also pointed to ongoing Russia gas deliveries to Europe via Turkey: "TurkStream, the construction of which we completed some time ago, is today one of the most important routes for supplying Europe with Russian gas. TurkStream, unlike all other directions of our hydrocarbon supplies to Europe, is operating well, smoothly, and without failure."

He thanked Erdo?an for the "grain corridor" agreement reached in Istanbul late July. "The problem of Ukrainian grain exports through Black Sea ports has been settled thanks to your personal involvement and the UN Secretariat's mediation," he said.

The first grain vessel under the agreement left Odessa last week and, after being checked in Istanbul, sailed to Lebanon. Three vessels loaded with about 60,000 tons of grain bound for Ireland and Britain are reportedly preparing to depart from Ukrainian ports.

Erdo?an said: "We will open a new page in our bilateral relations. This concerns energy, and especially the 'grain corridor' via the Black Sea where we have taken steps… From Turkey's point of view, I want to note that Russia plays a special role on the world stage."

Aware of NATO allies' concern on Russia-Turkey ties and the possibility of sanctions being circumvented, Erdo?an said, "Today the world fixed all eyes on Sochi: What will they do in Sochi, what will they address in Sochi, what will they discuss? Perhaps the world is watching our meeting in Sochi closely. And, perhaps the best answers to these questions will be given after our meeting."

Supplying Kiev with Bayraktar drones, Ankara has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, it did not participate in Western sanctions and has tried to mediate a ceasefire since the war in Ukraine began, as it has also close economic and military ties with Moscow. This is unacceptable for the United States and other NATO imperialist powers, which seek to prolong the war, imposed regime change in Kremlin and subordinate Russia to their dictates.

Erdo?an said, "I reminded Putin that we could have his meeting with Zelensky" in Istanbul. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavu?o?lu also wrote on Twitter that Ankara hopes the grain agreements will serve as a basis "to ensure a cease-fire and stable peace" in Ukraine.

However, the joint press statement issued after the meeting made no mention of these issues; nor did it mention Ankara's potential assault on US-backed Kurdish nationalist forces in Syria.

It announced that they agreed "to boost collaboration about issues that have been pending on the agenda of both countries for a long time, concerning sectors such as transportation, commerce, agriculture, industry, finance, tourism and construction." The joint statement also called for "the full implementation of the Istanbul agreement, including the unimpeded export of Russia's grain, fertilizer and raw materials stocks needed for its production."

Though Turkey illegally keeps troops on Syrian soil, Russian and Turkish leaders committed to "the preservation of Syria's political unity and territorial integrity," and "to act in coordination and solidarity in the fight against all terrorist organizations."

© World Socialist Web Site

Since May, Erdo?an has been threatening a new military operation against the Kurdish nationalist People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, to create a 30-kilometer-deep zone in which Ankara could resettle around 1 million Syrian refugees. However, the joint statement indicates that Russia, one of the main backers of the Damascus regime together with Iran, still opposes this plan. Moreover, Moscow, unlike Ankara, does not consider the YPG a terrorist organization and maintains significant relations with it.

After Erdogan's invasion threats, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), of which the YPG is the backbone, appealed for support not only to the "international community," i.e., Washington and the other imperialist powers, but also to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

According to recent reports, the Syrian military is building up forces in YPG-held territory against Turkey. *Kommersant* reported, "the Syrian army conducted large-scale exercises with the participation of the Russian military. In addition, there are rumors in social networks that for the first time SDF fighters joined the Syrian army. Officially, this report is not confirmed by either the Russian or the Syrian side, but it was picked up by highly respected Arab media, including the Al-Jazeera TV channel and the Al-Sharq Al-Awsat newspaper."

One of the most significant consequences of the summit was announced by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak after talks between the two leaders. He said, "Deliveries of gas to the Republic of Turkey were discussed, which is supplied in a fairly huge volume—26 bln cubic meters per year. The Presidents agreed during talks that we will start partial gas deliveries and payment in rubles."

"Supplies will be partly paid in Russian rubles then at the first stage. This is indeed the new stage, new opportunities, including for development of our monetary and financial relations," Novak added.

After the meeting, Erdogan said there are efforts to let Russian tourists use Russia's MIR card for shopping and accommodation in Turkey, a move to avoid Western financial sanctions.

Despite Turkey's lifting of its veto on Sweden and Finland's NATO membership after various negotiations, the recent Erdo?an-Putin meeting and potential agreements blunting Western sanctions raised serious concerns in the US and European political and media establishment.

On Friday, the *Washington Post* wrote, "Concerns are increasing in both the West and Ukraine that Moscow is seeking Erdogan's assistance to bypass restrictions on its banking, energy and industrial sectors, which are biting deeper into its economy."

The *Post* claimed, "A Russian proposal intercepted ahead of the meeting and shared with The Washington Post by Ukrainian intelligence" called for Erdo?an to "permit Russia to buy stakes in Turkish oil refineries, terminals and reservoirs—a move that economists say could help disguise the origin of its exports after the European Union's oil embargo kicks in fully next year."

According to the report, "Russia also requested that several state-owned Turkish banks allow correspondent accounts for Russia's biggest banks—which economists and sanctions experts say would be a flagrant breach of Western sanctions—and that Russian industrial producers be allowed to operate out of free economic zones in Turkey."

The *Post* acknowledged, "There was no indication after the talks that Turkey had agreed to such arrangements," but threatened that this leaves Turkey's "own banks and companies at risk of secondary sanctions [cutting] off their access to Western markets."

"Alarm mounts in western capitals over Turkey's deepening ties with Russia," the *Financial Times* (FT) wrote, citing six Western officials "concerned about the pledge made on Friday by the Turkish and Russian leaders to expand their co-operation on trade and energy after a four-hour meeting in Sochi."

It cited an EU official's concern that Turkey is "increasingly" a platform for trade with Russia. Another senior Western official "suggested that countries could call on their companies and banks to pull out of Turkey." The official added that he would "not rule out any negative actions [if] Turkey gets too close to Russia."

Major NATO powers' anger at Ankara's deepening ties with Moscow previously led them to back a failed military coup attempt in 2016 to overthrow Erdo?an.

On Thursday, Turkey's main financial daily, *Dünya*, reported: "Cargoes from different countries around the world are unloaded at various ports in Turkey after embargo screening, and the goods are transferred to ships destined for Russia through a reexport process." It cited Russian Economic Development Minister Maxim Reshetnikov's claim that the total volume of products brought into Russia from Turkey "approached USD 4 billion."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site