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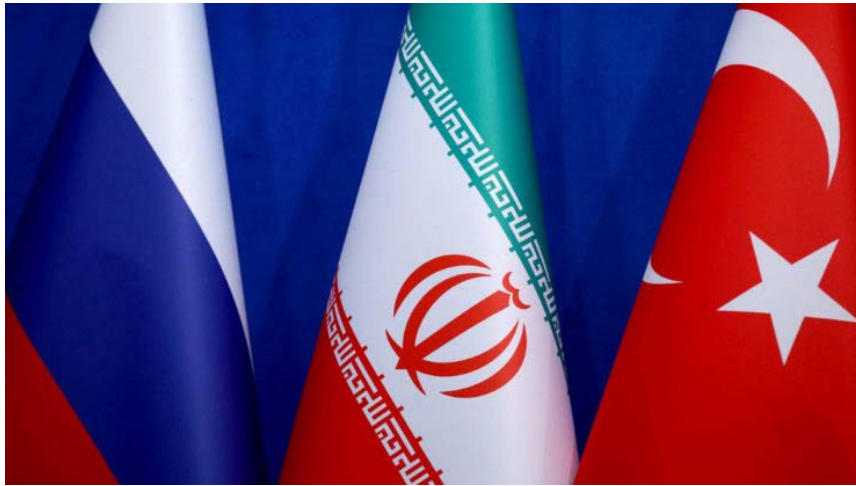
European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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14.07.2024

Russia, Turkey, Iran – regional partnership or rivalry?



Usually, geographical neighbours must find ‘common ground’. However, history shows that geography does not always bring neighbours closer together, so the capacity for both mutually beneficial partnership and rivalry remains between Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Our history is not the same

The political history of Russia’s relations with Turkey and Iran is full of contradictions, conflicts and periods of beneficial interaction. Since the strengthening of the Russian state at the turn of the 18th century, Persia and Ottoman Turkey began to view their northern neighbour as an enemy, with whom their geopolitical and geo-economic interests were clashing.

From the 18th to the 19th century, the military confrontation between our countries led to impressive success and considerable geopolitical gains for Russia. Thanks to the brilliant victories of the Russian army and navy, Russia entered the Black and Caspian Seas,

expanded its land borders in the Caucasus and liberated part of the peoples subject to the Persians and Ottomans. All of this allowed Russia to establish itself in the Muslim Northern Caucasus, as well as in Western Turkestan.

Unfortunately, our relations (mainly with Turkey) in the past century have been wrought by serious conflicts and contradictions – considering the two world wars and the confrontation during the Cold War. Turkey was yet again drifting towards the ‘strong West’ (first to Germany, then to England and the USA) against Russia (USSR).

Iran tried to refrain from aggravating relations with Russia. According to a treaty from 1921, during the Great Patriotic War Moscow temporarily (1941-1946) introduced its troops onto Iranian territory for the safe transit of goods under Lend-Lease. Turkey, which had been defeated in the First World War (mainly by the Russian army on the Caucasian front), was able to take advantage of the revolutionary upheavals in Russia and establish a ‘seasonal partnership’ with the government of V. I. Lenin. But in July 1923, in Lausanne, Turkey again allied with Britain and returned to the anti-Russian camp.

Iran under the Shah and republican Turkey continued to be predominantly anti-Soviet countries in the second half of the 20th century. The West actively exploited Iran’s energy resources and included Tehran in its regional CENTO bloc. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has withdrawn from the regional alliance with the West, but has not become a ‘great friend’ of the North. Thanks to England and the United States, Ankara managed to avoid another territorial loss to the USSR, which were officially put forward by the government of Joseph Stalin following the Second World War in line with the policy of ‘hostile neutrality’. This allowed Turkey to become a member of NATO in February 1952.

What about recent times?

At the turn of the 21st century, Iran and Turkey demonstrated a different position vis-à-vis Russia. Iran does not benefit from the consolidation of NATO (including Turkey) in the post-Soviet South (Transcaucasia and Central Asia), using local energy resources and alternative transit communications (bypassing Russia) for the export of oil and gas from the Caspian basin. Tehran did not support the separatist movement initiated by the West and Turkey and the armed conflict in Chechnya, which eventually blocked the transit of Azeri oil through the Soviet Baku-Grozny-Novorossiysk pipeline. Russia also helped Iran build the Bushehr nuclear power plant.

Turkey’s destructive position towards Russia at the end of the 20th century allowed it to gain the following: access to the Caspian energy region through Georgia and Azerbaijan;

become an important link in the transit of oil and gas to the European market; improve its economic situation; use new opportunities to conduct active regional diplomacy within the framework of neo-pan-Turanism and neo-Ottomanism.

In trying to maintain the assumed partnership of the West with Russia, Moscow was forced to join the anti-Iranian sanctions on the nuclear programme. In other words, Russia practically gifted them peaceful nuclear energy in Iran by building the Bushehr nuclear power plant. In terms of uranium enrichment and nuclear weapons, Moscow was forced to adhere to accepted international norms.

Considering the shortage of Turkey's energy resources and the desire to localise the conflict nature of bilateral relations, Russia built the Blue Stream gas pipeline to Turkey and began to increase tourism. Naturally, Moscow cannot ignore Ankara's active diplomacy towards the Turkic countries of the CIS. With the change of leadership in Russia and Turkey (since 2004), V. Putin and R. Erdoğan have laid the foundations for progressive and mutually beneficial partnership relations between our countries.

It is obvious that the leaders of the two Turkic CIS countries, namely Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, have considerably aided the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. The latter factor has had special importance in overcoming the crisis in Russo-Turkish relations after the Turkish Air Force and the 'Gray Wolves' militants shot down the Su-24 bomber and pilot O. Peshkov above Syria.

This policy made it possible to bring closer the positions of Moscow and Ankara on a number of important regional security issues (including Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh), raise the level of trade and economic ties, let Turkish business into the Russian construction market, build the second Turkish Stream gas pipeline and the first Akkuyu nuclear power plant. By the beginning of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine, the trade turnover between our countries exceeded \$30 billion and in 2022 it amounted to \$59 billion.

In the context of the SMO, Turkey has not formally joined the anti-Russian sanctions of the West. It is proposing mediation initiatives for a political settlement, has received new economic benefits from the re-export of goods to the Russian Federation and the grain deal, discounts for gas and deferred payments, new key business projects in the Russian market, an ambitious 'gas hub' project, Russian non-interference in the active Turkish military-political and economic advancement in the Southern Caucasus and in Central Asia under the Turan project.

Prospects for an alliance between Russia, Turkey and Iran

Russia is demonstrating a constructive policy towards Turkey and Iran. At the same time, the strategy of forming a multipolar world as opposed to the aggressive and artificial construction of a unipolar world order led by the United States, which modern Russia consistently adheres to, is objectively of interest to Turkey and Iran.

This trio of states has established a format of successful political cooperation within the frameworks of the Astana negotiating platform on Syria and the 3+3 regional dialogue on the Southern Caucasus. New multimodal transit routes in Eurasia (including the Middle Corridor under the Chinese BRI and the Russian North-South route) can become very promising for economic partnership, not to mention the gas hub projects in Eastern Thrace and the Persian Gulf.

However, Russia still has a number of issues that require a clarification of Ankara's position. Turkey, being a member of NATO and formally acting as a mediator in the Ukrainian crisis, provides political and military-technical assistance to the Kiev regime. Expanding economic ties with Russia while simultaneously claiming to be under 'serious Western pressure' creates problems for Russian companies with bank payments and transfers, which reduces trade turnover. Ankara is also trying to use temporary difficulties in Russia to force its way into Central Asia.

Iran, on the other hand, is interested in building up multi-vector ties with Russia, including a gas hub project on the Persian Gulf, increasing the level of trade turnover and military-technical cooperation, switching to payments in national currencies, implementing transit communications projects to preserve regional security, opposing NATO expansion into the post-Soviet East, the lifting of sanctions and so forth.

Russia has ratified the agreement on Iran's inclusion into the EAEU free trade zone. Moscow and Tehran are members of new international organisations, i.e. SCO and BRICS, which lay the foundations for a multipolar world. It is obvious that the level of trade turnover between our countries (amounting to \$5 billion) does not correspond to the overall potential and will be increased to achieve a reasonable balance with Turkey.

It may confidently be concluded that Russia is interested in maintaining a stable and long-term partnership with both Turkey and Iran, but a lot depends on the partners themselves and their choices.

12.07.2024

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