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How Turkey challenges Russia in the Caucasus

If Moscow has recently been punching above its real diplomatic and military weight, Ankara now poses a serious challenge

It has been weeks now since a full-scale war rages in Nagorno-Karabakh. With the ongoing pandemic, crisis in the Mediterranean and the EU's internal woes, South Caucasus has been on the outer periphery of the European observers' attention. But as Azerbaijan's army advances and Moscow struggles to find its footing of the top negotiator, the results of the failing international order become ever more apparent.

Ever since President Vladimir Putin has announced Russia 'raising from its knees', its geopolitical assertiveness was aimed as a global challenge to the established international order, epitomised by the erstwhile Cold War enemy, the United States and, by extension, the European Union. But the unravelling of that international order has also undone the restraints that kept the regional rivalries in check. Russia finds itself forced to acknowledge, that Turkey has 'changed the facts on the grounds' to the advantage of its regional ally, leaving the Kremlin increasingly short of palatable options.

Many observers have noted that the Kremlin 'returned to global politics' mostly as a spoiler. This low-cost/high-rewards affair was based on the assumption that most of its rivals – in Syria, Ukraine or, say, Venezuela – would consider themselves bound by the restrictions and the conventions characteristic to the same international order that Russia sought to undo.

From the 19th century until now

Russia needed and used its newly sought status of the 'great power' to lay a claim on its neighbourhood. By the rules of the 19th-century 'concert' diplomacy, which the Kremlin seems to use as its mental blueprint for international affairs, any great power worth its salt must act as a hegemon in its own region and fight the attempts of encroachment by the others. The Kremlin paranoia about so-called 'colour revolutions' and the fears

of 'encirclement' draw as much on this 19th-century colonial logic as on the Kennan's famous 'long telegram,' that set the principles of containment against the USSR.

If Moscow has been punching above its real economic, diplomatic, and military weight, it was mostly to secure this regional privilege. But at least one challenger, Turkey, apparently saw Russia for what it really is – a middling regional power. Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Turkey is as prone as Russia to see the clock set back to the pre-WWI times. Just as back then, Russia and Turkey may be situational allies but are constantly angling for advantage against each other in their border hinterlands.

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Ankara accepts and shares Moscow's formula of the Western duplicity in applying the standards they preach. Just like Putin, President Erdoğan is prone to reach back to the imperial past and traditional, religiously tinted values, as a counterweight to the liberal and democratic principles. Yet this very convergence of ideas inevitably sets the two capitals apart as traditional competitors.

Less troubled by the fantom of the global domination than Moscow, Ankara has calibrated its targets closer to home and in so doing seems to have caught Russia off guard. Turkey has now called Russia out, daring it to show its great-power mettle in an extremely sensitive region.

Russia's and Turkey's Nagorno-Karabakh policy

These days it is often said that Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the oldest simmering conflicts. It is indeed the first inter-state conflict that Russia has dealt with in post-Soviet space. The fragile balance it brought has cemented the geopolitical configuration, where Armenia became Russia's primary regional ally. It has also aligned Azerbaijan economically with Turkey. Until recently, Azerbaijan and Turkey – as a NATO member and Western ally – were anchoring the region into wider Europe – an important variable that brought Georgia along as a willing collaborator.

While Turkey was taking on the role of the key US ally and the NATO partner in the region, its involvement in South Caucasus conflicts was constrained by this status. Ankara's rhetoric of support to the territorial integrity of both Georgia and Azerbaijan has been mostly diplomatic.

Military cooperation with Azerbaijan – although significant – was business-like: Ankara sold arms to Baku, awash with petrodollars, just as Moscow did the same.

But the conflict in Syria and the refugee crisis have distanced Ankara both from Washington and the Brussels. Now unshackled from these alliances, Turkey is setting a much more belligerent tone and seems to be playing the military role above and beyond what seemed imaginable only three years ago.

Russia's Nagorno-Karabakh policy has been based on keeping the forces balanced and the conflict frozen. Azerbaijan's willingness to go through with the military operation and Turkey's vocal and unconditional support to this military adventure leave Moscow crucially short of options. It can and most likely will protect Armenia proper from an Azerbaijani attack. But it will be loth to deploy its own troops to oppose Azerbaijani (and, potentially, Turkish) forces on the ground. If it did choose that course of action, it would wreck the profitable relationship with Baku and also alienate the Central Asian states.

The security question

This brings us to a second, security conundrum. In opposing the Western institutions, Russia still sought to mirror them with its own. CSTO copies many of NATO's tenets, just like the Eurasian Economic Union is structured around EU blueprint. Ironically, CSTO is now finding itself facing the NATO's 'Article 5 dilemma' – if Armenia calls on CSTO for protection in vain, the value of the alliance and the credibility of its leading power, Russia, will be greatly diminished. Yet, it is clear, that the Central Asian states will not engage in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while Belarus has other preoccupations at this point than sending its troops to fight in the Caucasus.

With every new day of combat, Moscow's stock as the neighbourhood bully is falling.

The Kremlin thus finds itself at a strategic, even philosophical junction. It can uphold its status of international power and enter an alliance with the Western actors in seeking peace in Nagorno-Karabakh. This would dovetail with, for example, French President Emmanuel Macron's notion of 'security dialogue' with Russia and give Moscow a chance to act as a constructive actor, for once.

Yet, regionally, such a decision will run counter Moscow's doctrine of keeping the Western actors and international organizations off the

ground in its own neighbourhood. Indeed, following the 2008 war in Georgia, Russia has succeeded to keep South Caucasus free of any international presence, by stamping out the engagement of the UN in Abkhazia, OSCE in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and acquiescing to (although not initiating) the closure of OSCE offices in Baku (2015) and Yerevan (2017).

Moreover, engaging as a Western partner would probably mean accepting the very tenets of the multilateral international order that Russia so consistently tried to unravel during these past years. Its commitments are likely to come at the price of following the rules also in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere.

All these considerations seem to be leading the Kremlin into a near paralysis as the combat in Nagorno-Karabakh continues. Moscow's best hope is that Azerbaijan's offensive drive will peter out soon, opening the door to negotiation. But the degree of rhetorical engagement both from Baku and Ankara makes the climb down without a major military success highly unlikely.

With every new day of combat, Moscow's stock as the neighbourhood bully is falling. The void in regional security architecture opens up, bringing about the prospect of lasting regional instability, characterised by 'hot' proxy conflict and reconfiguration of alliances.

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