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Trapped in Putin's Embrace: Erdogan's Russian Dilemma

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The catastrophic earthquake that hit Turkey earlier this month has put mounting pressure on embattled Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ahead of key presidential and parliamentary elections due to be held on May 14. It has also served to spotlight Erdogan's problematically close ties with Moscow.

As Erdogan is one of the few world leaders in frequent contact with the Kremlin and Kyiv, enjoying equally friendly relations with both, the outcome of Turkey's election has the potential to disrupt not only relations within NATO as Erdogan continues to leverage Turkish approval of Sweden's membership bid but also the course of the year-old war in Ukraine itself.

Yet the fact that a president of Turkey has forged such a close relationship with Moscow remains an anomaly. The historic rivalry between Turkey and Russia dates from their

centuries as neighboring empires, but as in many other aspects of Turkey's mercurial foreign policy under Erdogan, tradition has been upended and the Turkish president's instincts have guided Ankara's diplomatic endeavors.

It wasn't always so. Russia barely registered on Erdogan's political radar during the first decade of his now 20-year rule. In his hunger for recognition as the leader of a major global power, Erdogan initially appeared to look down on Vladimir Putin. With time, however, their competing geopolitical agendas in the wake of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War made the pair rivals, with each supporting opposing sides in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The already tense relations between the two men reached a nadir in November 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet that had illegally entered its airspace. Moscow responded to the incident with sanctions, stemming the flow of Russian tourists to Turkey, as well as the import of Turkish goods to Russia. Meanwhile, Ankara's Western allies were lulled into a false sense of security, believing that Turkey represented a powerful check on Russian influence in the Middle East.

All that changed on July 15, 2016, when an attempted coup against Erdogan's increasingly autocratic rule ultimately failed. Putin had been quick to react to the news, immediately offering his support to the Turkish president, in stark contrast to the sluggish reaction of Turkey's supposed allies in the U.S. and EU.

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Never one to differentiate between his personal agenda and that of the Turkish state, Erdogan was so flattered by the lavish reception he received from Putin on a visit to St. Petersburg a month later that he went on to perform a foreign policy U-turn.

Clearly fascinated by Putin's recent string of foreign policy successes — including the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine — and noting the lack of any meaningful reaction to his landgrab from the West, Erdogan made the decision not only to trust Putin but to hitch his wagon to Putin's horse as well.

Believing himself to be the Russian president's equal despite most observers seeing him as the relationship's junior partner, Erdogan has found himself locked in Putin's suffocating embrace ever since.

The following year, after being rebuffed by the U.S. in his attempts to obtain the Patriot missile system, Erdogan opted to buy the Russian S-400 rocket launching system instead. Still smarting from Washington's belated support during the 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan sought to leverage the purchase of the Russian missile system with Washington — only to have his bluff backfire spectacularly.

If the U.S. had already been viewing his partnership with Putin suspiciously, Erdogan's missile system miscalculation had the effect of distancing him from the U.S. once and for all while simultaneously bringing him uncomfortably close to the Kremlin.

Instead of being recognized as a key U.S. partner as he'd hoped, Erdogan was sanctioned by

Washington, and rather than being seen as Putin's equal he found himself being a useful tool in Russia's attempts to undermine NATO unity.

Neither position allowed Erdogan the degree of prestige he desired, not least as his policies received only rare support even from Moscow — and even that was mostly in the form of permission being given for Turkey to intervene directly against Kurdish forces in Syria.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine seemingly brought a new opportunity to the Turkish president, whose personal relations with Putin only seemed to grow stronger despite Turkey voting at the UN to condemn the Russian invasion.

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While he was able to position himself as a key mediator between Moscow and Kyiv in the Ukraine grain deal last summer, Erdogan nevertheless failed to win U.S. or Russian support for any of his other key proposals. Both the U.S. and EU rejected his plan to build a huge gas storage facility near the Turkish-Greek border, for example.

While officially protesting Turkey's continued sale of Bayraktar drones to the Ukrainian military, Putin's widely anticipated recognition of North Cyprus failed to materialize — dealing another blow to Erdogan, who had wanted to bolster his reputation as a nation-builder in the mold of Atatürk.

In the same way, the Kremlin put an end to Erdogan's proposal to build a gas pipeline connecting Turkmenistan to Turkey, jealously eyeing Ankara's increasing interest in, and influence on the predominantly Turkic former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

With Putin's reputation as a brilliant political strategist in tatters a year after his decision to invade Ukraine, Erdogan finds himself in an unenviable position. Unable to rid himself of the Russian president's now toxic grip, he desires nothing more than to crush his political opponents at home through repressive legislation, as Putin did, while remaining a key U.S. partner and Washington's preferred candidate in the upcoming presidential elections.

Already not viewed fondly in Washington, Erdogan's friendly relations with Putin make U.S. support for his upcoming re-election campaign even less likely. Former National Security Adviser John Bolton recently wrote in The Wall Street Journal that with Erdogan at the helm, Turkey was once again "the sick man of Europe."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Ankara last week, during which he pledged $100 million in aid to help Turkey recover from the earthquake, may herald Erdogan's return to Washington's fold, but only if he stops leveraging Sweden's NATO membership bid to extract political concessions from his nominal allies.

If Washington is prepared to offer Erdogan an escape route from Putin's stifling embrace, they may find the mercurial politician surprisingly keen to switch allegiance once again.

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