



Will Russia and Türkiye Escape Thucydides' Trap?

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WILL RUSSIA AND TÜRKIYE ESCAPE THUCYDIDES' TRAP?

Centuries ago, it was Imperial Russia that threatened Ottoman hegemony in the wider Black Sea region. Now it's the Turkic cooperation that jeopardizes Russian hegemony in Central Eurasia. The rise of the Turkic World, or a Great Turan, in what for long has been viewed as Russia's near abroad, or the Russian World, is fueling a great power competition that could potentially lead to a clash of civilizations, the reemergence of the Eastern Question. Can Russia and Türkiye escape Thucydides' trap? In terms of short- and medium-term pragmatic solutions, economic codependency, and the relationship of trust between Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could prevent confrontation, but in the long run, two competing grand foreign strategies in overlapping geopolitical landscapes are destined to collide.

THUCYDIDES' TRAP AND THE EASTERN QUESTION 2.0

The concept of “Thucydides' Trap” was introduced by the American political scientist Graham Allison in the context of U.S.–China great power competition. Allison argues that a direct military confrontation between the United States and China, while not inevitable, is historically plausible. Drawing on recurring historical patterns, he contends that established hegemonic powers tend to perceive the rise of an emerging power—particularly one advancing toward great power status within their strategic sphere of interest—as an existential threat. This perception often prompts a preemptive confrontation in an effort to preserve the existing balance of power.¹

To substantiate his argument, Allison offers several historical analogies. The most prominent example is the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BCE, which was driven largely by Sparta's fear of Athens' growing power: “The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which

1 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable,” wrote Thucydides. Allison further extended this comparative framework to great-power rivalries from the fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries, including those between Spain and Portugal, the Habsburg Empire and France, Sweden and the Ottoman Empire, the United States and the Great Britain, and the Soviet Union and the United States. Based on this analysis, Allison concludes that in twelve out of sixteen such cases, structural competition between a rising and a ruling power culminated in large-scale war.

Allison did not study another textbook example of preemptive great power confrontations, the Eastern Question. The competition between Imperial Russia and Ottoman Türkiye stemmed from Turkish fears of Russia’s growing power and eventual dominance in the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus and the Balkans. That frustration led not only to one, but a dozen wars between the two empires from the sixteen until the twentieth centuries. There is another good reason to analyze the historic patterns of the Eastern Question today, as the Turkish–Russian competition seems to resurface world politics—amidst significantly different settings and structures, but following consistent patterns. The Eastern Question was a systemic struggle over trade routes and their strategic chokepoints, like the Straits, and resources. It ravaged in a region torn by imperial decline and intersected with the nationalist emergence, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of post-Ottoman states from Egypt to Romania, with the active participation of great powers like Great Britain, France, and the United States. A similar pattern seems to emerge in the post-Soviet space: After the decline of the USSR, Türkiye seems to reclaim her centuries-old position as a regional power in the South Caucasus and to gain influence among the Turkic states of Central Asia. As Russia attempts to reinstate its imperial power in the post-Soviet space, Turkish–Russian competition might dominate regional dynamics once again—although mutual dependencies and pragmatism might pave the way this time to escape Thucydides’ Trap.

OVERLAPPING WORLDS AND THE REDISCOVERY OF SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

Some say that spheres of influence returned to international affairs due to the implementation of the Trump Doctrine by the White House, the reassertion of U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere by toppling the president of Venezu-

ela, threats made to Colombia and Cuba of a similar fate, and measures to annex Greenland and Canada. In reality, however, spheres of influence never ceased to exist in human history, not even after the end of the Cold War; it just took some time for emerging powers to reach each other's new boundaries. The limits of global U.S. hegemony and unipolarity were unambiguously established by the time of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and hence spheres of influence were rediscovered. The recent revitalization of the Monroe Doctrine was therefore not a unilateral action. It was the United States' reaction to the changing dynamics of the world order. China also has long been working on creating its own sphere of influence through financial and economic means, while it was Russia that unmasked modern-day spheres of influence in 2022 when it invaded Ukraine.

Russia's claim to a sphere of influence is also nothing new—first Imperial Russia, then later the Soviet Union maintained an extensive sphere of influence. Soon after its creation, the Russian Federation too established its claim for a zone of foreign influence, or at least a sphere of security, through the Primakov Doctrine, which intends to assert Russian interests in the post-Soviet space and counter NATO's expansion to the east. The doctrine still guides Russian foreign affairs.² There are a number of denominations for this region—the post-Soviet geopolitical space, the near abroad, the area of Pax Russica, or the Russian World. The Russian World is the area where Russian speaking people and members of the Russian Orthodox Church reside; however, subsumption may have other, historic, cultural or canonical grounds, such as the Russian Orthodox Church's claim for canonical territories from Ukraine through Azerbaijan to Mongolia. These countries and their residents are subjected to the special attention of the Russian government. Their cohesion and unity—viewed as an utmost objective of Russian national interests and security—is being put forth by means of soft and hard power, from cultural diplomacy to even military means.

The Russian World, however, is not a unified, homogenous region, it is home to dozens of linguistic and religious groups, including some of the most ancient civilizations like the Armenian or the Georgian ones. Moreover, it overlaps with another cultural-linguistic area, a contesting geopolitical project: the Turkic World.

2 Alexander Dinkin, “Горбачев и Ельцин, когда становилось «жарко», звали Примакова” [When Things Got “Heated,” Gorbachev and Yeltsin Would Call on Primakov], Russian International Affairs Council, October 29, 2024, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytcs-and-comments/comments/gorbachev-i-eltsin-kogda-stanovilos-zhar-ko-zvali-primakova/>.

The Turkic World, or the Great Turan, is a vast landmass from the Balkans through the South Caucasus to Central Asia, home to different Turkic-speaking peoples. One of the proclaimed goals of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), an international group of which all members, except for Türkiye, are post-Soviet countries, is the cultural, and eventually a certain level of economic and political unity of these lands. Turkic countries, Türkiye in particular, therefore make claim for the unification of the majority of what political thinkers and decision makers in Russia consider its near abroad, part of the Russian World, post-Soviet South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The Turkic World could hence emerge as not Türkiye's sphere of influence per se, but a geopolitical entity with its own gravity in multipolarity.³

Moreover, the Turkic World does not end at the state borders of Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan. It penetrates the territory of the Russian Federation and China, too. Several federal republics of Russia, some found in geostrategic locations from the Caucasus to the Altai Mountains, are in fact populated mostly by Turks, including Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chuvashia, Yakutia, Tuva, Altai, and Karachay-Cherkessia. Pan-Turkic solidarity offers an ideological basis for Türkiye to challenge Russia's Ukrainian conquests too—Ankara condemns the Russian occupation of the Crimea, historically populated by Turkic-speaking Tatars, and remembers the mass deportations of Crimean Tatars on the anniversary each year. China's largest and westernmost region, Xinjiang, also has a majority population of Turkic-speaking Uyghurs. Turkic cooperation offers an alternative to the absolute integration into Russian and Chinese cultural and social structures through initiatives like a unified Turkic alphabet, international cultural initiatives, and educational programs, which many in Russia consider a threat to domestic integrity, with some even suggesting that countering the Pan-Turkic threat should be asserted by the State National Policy Strategy in Russia.⁴

This antagonism might be identified in a number of dimensions from the realms of ideological struggle, through opposing geoeconomic strategies, to conflicting visions of regional geopolitical and defense architectures.

3 László Vasa et al., "Connectivity in the Turkic Way – A New Cooperation Format in the Multipolar World?" Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, November 6, 2024, <https://hii.hu/en/connectivity-in-the-turkic-way-a-new-cooperation-format-in-the-multipolar-world/>.

4 M. A. Mayorova and A. I. Sbitneva, "Идеологическое влияние Турции в регионах России: тюркский фактор" [Turkish Ideological Influence in Russian Regions: The Turkic Factor], *RUDN Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (2023): 139–149, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2023-25-1-134-149>.

THE GREAT TURAN AND THE THIRD ROME: A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

In September 2023, the Azerbaijani army killed five Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh and forced out altogether some 5,000 armed Russian peacekeepers from its internationally recognized territory. That marked the end of the Russian military presence in Azerbaijan, which lasted, with certain interruptions, for more than two centuries. The Azerbaijani army did not achieve this on its own. It enjoyed a substantial diplomatic, military, and intelligence support from Israel and Türkiye. Turkish weaponry, the most advanced military drones and their operators, advisors, and commanders helped Azerbaijan break away from its previous dependency on Russian technology, while Türkiye's transport infrastructures paved the way for Azerbaijan to achieve economic independency, thus, breaking out of Russia's sphere of influence.⁵

The Turkish–Azerbaijani relationship is more than a strategic partnership. It is a comprehensive alliance of two brotherly peoples, or even a unified nation, as President Erdoğan and President Aliyev often claim: They are “one nation, two states.” What they are referring to is their shared Turkic roots, a cultural and linguistic kinship that provides the ideological and rhetoric foundations for a deep economic and political partnership and even joint geoeconomic strategies: Azerbaijan strives to expand its fossil exports to more European markets, while Türkiye positions itself as an intercontinental transport and energy hub. However, their shared vision does not stop at the western shores of the Caspian Sea. They intend deepen their partnership with the Turkic states of Central Asia. In fact, Azerbaijan even joined the regional format of Central Asian countries despite its location outside of the region—in November the C5 format became the C6 group. Azerbaijan too strives to serve as a transit hub for the rich natural resources of its fellow Turkic countries across the Caspian, and a chokepoint of the China–Europe transport route called the Middle Corridor: The construction of ten new tanker ships is underway in Azerbaijan.

The Organization of Turkic States provides not only a platform for cultural, scientific, and educational exchange and economic and financial coordination, but for selective political alignment and a gradually growing defense cooperation. At the latest summit of Turkic states in Gabala, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev announced that member states will start conducting annual joint

5 Ana Jović-Lazić, “The Role of Turkey in the Second Armenian–Azerbaijani Armed Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a Reflection of Continuity and Change in Its Foreign Policy,” *International Problems* 74, no. 1 (2022): 29–49, <https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2201029J>.

military exercises, starting in 2026. Uzbekistan, one Central Asian Turkic state that cherishes strong military coordination with Russia but not a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) also turned towards Türkiye recently for the diversification of its defense policies.⁶ Some even argue that the Turkic states have the potential to become a singular geopolitical pole of multipolarity, a center of power in the middle of Eurasia. That would mean the implementation of a centuries-old geopolitical tradition of Pan-Turkism, the creation of the Great Turan, the unity of Turkic peoples.

This geopolitical struggle is embedded in an ideological battle and rhetorical campaign. The Turanist offer is a pan-nationalist, anti-imperialistic, and pro-Islamic alternative to the traditional Russia-dominated regional relations and balance of power. Pan-Turkism plays on the nationalist sentiments of once oppressed post-Soviet Turkic societies, encouraging them to join forces against re-emerging hegemonic forces, while positioning Türkiye as a culturally proximate, non-Western and non-hegemonic yet powerful partner for all throughout the Turkic World.⁷ The Russian language website of the Turkish national broadcaster (TPT на русском) is a key forum for such discourse. The discourse is symbolized by Pan-Turkic conceptions—like the TURAN Special Economic Zone in Kazakhstan, or the concept of the “Turkic Century,” as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan regularly refers to the twenty-first century.

Pan-Turkism and Turanism are therefore challenges to traditional Russian conceptions of regional and Eurasian power relations: to Russian imperialism, the messianic and civilizational mission of Russia in Eurasia and all its forms and later conceptions. New Eurasianism is propagated by Russian decision-makers from Vladimir Putin to Sergei Lavrov and government-affiliated political thinkers such as Aleksandr Dugin or Veniamin Popov. This New Eurasianism, unlike the one rooted in nineteenth century Russian imperialism, claims that Russia, a unique civilization between the West and the East, the Third Rome, is the heir to both Orthodox Byzantium and the Turanian–Mongolian empires, destined to

6 “Russia and Uzbekistan Sign Military Strategic Partnership Plan,” *The Moscow Times*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/01/22/russia-and-uzbekistan-sign-military-strategic-partnership-plan-a87693>; “Uzbekistan, Turkey Sign Agreement on Military cooperation,” *The Tashkent Times*, November 25, 2022, <https://tashkenttimes.uz/national/10064-uzbekistan-tur-key-sign-agreement-on-military-cooperation>; “Uzbekistan and Türkiye Sign Military Cooperation Agreement for 2026,” *Uz Daily*, January 21, 2026, <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/uzbekistan-and-turkiye-sign-military-cooperation-agreement-for-2026/>.

7 Abzal Dosbolov and Göktuğ Sönmez, “The Organization of Turkic States and Postcolonialism in Central Asia: Possible Contributions, Prospects, and Limitations,” *Insight Turkey* 25, no. 4 (2023): 93–113, <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2023254.7>; Hayriye Kahveci and Işık Kuşçu Bonnenfant, “Turkish Foreign Policy Towards Central Asia: An Unfolding of Regionalism and Soft Power,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 12, no. 2 (2023): 195–218, <https://doi.org/10.20991/allazimuth.1310530>.

unite much of Eurasia.⁸ This conception, central to Russian foreign policy thinking, is challenged by Pan-Turkism.

A full political alignment between Turkic states and the establishment of a Pax Turkica in the Turkic World, however, is very unlikely. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are active and committed members of the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union, an integrated single market with countries like Russia and Belarus, and all Central Asian Turkic countries are full partners of both Russia and China within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Türkiye, on the other hand, is a well-integrated member of NATO, while the bids of Ankara and Baku to join BRICS and the SCO were unsuccessful due to geopolitical tensions with India and Russia. While all Central Asian Turkic states are committed to diversifying their foreign affairs and trade and to strong cultural and educational cooperation with Türkiye, it is not in their interest to confront their top economic and military partners to the north and east. Moreover, even neighboring Türkiye and Azerbaijan differ on the most pressing regional matter, handling the imminent reescalation of the Israel–Iran war.

There is another set of contesting geopolitical projects in overlapping regions that has long fueled geopolitical competition between Ankara and Moscow: their foreign interventions in the post-Ottoman space. Through what many misleadingly call neo-Ottomanism, Türkiye is attempting to regain political influence in regions historically under Ottoman Turkish rule, from the Balkans through Syria to Libya. Southeastern Europe, a central stage of the Eastern Question, has long been a focal area of Russia’s expansive foreign policies, while Syria and Libya are two main theaters of Russia’s Middle East and North Africa policies. Türkiye and Russia have thus found themselves on opposing sides of all local and regional conflicts, from the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo to the one between the Assad regime and its Islamic opposition and the conflict between the Libyan National Army and the Government of National Accord. Although there have been serious escalations, like the 2015 Su-24 shootdown, the two neighboring powers managed to keep their relations within the framework of pragmatism.

Although the clash of the Turkic and Russian civilizations is not inevitable, the two have not yet escaped Thucydides’ trap. One might even say, paraphrasing the History of the Peloponnesian War, that the alarm that the growing power

8 Kristina Semenova, “Евразийство Александра Дугина” [Alexander Dugin’s Eurasianism], Russian International Affairs Council, July 3, 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/laiamp/evraziystvo-aleksandra-dugina/>.

of Turkic cooperation in the post-Soviet space inspires in Moscow makes a Turkish–Russian political confrontation inevitable. It is reasonable to presume that Azerbaijan’s recent and successful secession from Russia’s sphere of influence upset the Kremlin as much as Ukraine’s attempted Euro-Atlantic integration, and even more than Georgia’s challenging European trajectory. Once the all-out war in Ukraine is put on halt, Russia will attempt to restabilize its sphere of security and influence, and it will turn to the Black Sea region, to the South Caucasus, and, with limited coordination with China, to Central Asia. It is a mistake to write off the Russian presence in its near abroad—all the more because, contrary to the mistaken claims about Russia’s weakening military power in Ukraine, the Russian military will come out of the war stronger, more modern and experienced than it entered in 2022.

ESCAPING THUCYDIDES’ TRAP THROUGH PRAGMATISM

Despite these structural tensions, Russia and Türkiye have repeatedly demonstrated an ability to manage their relationship and geopolitical competition pragmatically. Their foreign interventions in the Middle East and North Africa illustrate a pattern of controlled rivalry rather than direct confrontation. Their exchanges on the Black Sea and concerning the war in Ukraine are possibly the best examples of this strategic coordination—as middle and great powers both attempting to emerge stronger from a period of geopolitical transformation, they are forced to cooperate on establishing non-Western frameworks for the redistribution of power, most notably value chains in Eurasia. This coordination is most striking in the field of energy, where Russia’s export needs and Türkiye’s own vision of becoming an energy hub have created a strong interdependency. What is possibly even more important with regards to the political coordination between Ankara and Moscow is the relationship between the two presidents, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The two strongmen have been leaders of their countries since the early years of this millennium and established a relationship of trust, which is the foundation of pragmatic solutions to potential geopolitical conflict.

However, this pragmatism has clear limits. Chemistry between leaders, while important, is contingent and temporary. Energy cooperation is vulnerable to external shocks, including international sanctions, as evidenced by declining

Turkish fossil fuel imports following U.S. measures against Russia in late 2025.⁹ Structural forces, rather than personal relationships, ultimately shape long-term trajectories, and those forces are moving in opposing directions, doomed to collide. Although the Turkish and Russian visions of the post-unipolar world order overlap to a certain extent—as evidenced by Ankara’s desire to join BRICS and the SCO—their shared claim for dominion in overlapping regions, from the Balkans through the South Caucasus and Central Asia to the Middle East and North Africa, will inevitably make the coexistence of their grand foreign strategies unsustainable in the long run.

A clash between Russia and Türkiye is not inevitable. Yet the convergence of post-imperial legacies, overlapping civilizational projects, military competition, and contested strategic spaces makes such a clash increasingly probable over the long term. The historical lesson of the original Eastern Question is not that conflict must occur, but that unmanaged structural rivalry rarely resolves itself peacefully. Whether Russia and Türkiye can escape this logic remains one of the central geopolitical questions of our times.

9 “Turkey Cuts Russian Urals Oil Imports in November, Diversifies with Kazakh, Iraqi Supply,” *Reuters*, December 1, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/turkey-cuts-russian-urals-oil-imports-november-diversifies-with-kazakh-iraqi-2025-12-01/>.



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