
TURKEY'S PRESIDENT HEADS TO RUSSIA AMID IMPROVING TIES

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan heads to Russia this week as part of efforts to rebuild ties shattered by Turkey's downing of a Russian warplane last year □ just as Turkey's relations with traditional allies the United States and Europe show increasing strain amid Ankara's crackdown following a failed coup.

Tuesday's visit to St. Petersburg for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin will be Erdogan's first foreign trip since the abortive July 15 putsch, in which a group of renegade Turkish military officers attempted to seize power using fighter jets, helicopters and tanks in a night of violence that left more than 270 people dead.

Both Turkey and Russia, which once described themselves as strategic partners, have been hurt by their roughly seven-month rupture in relations: Russia's ban on the sale of package tours to Turkey and an agricultural import embargo dealt a painful blow to the Mediterranean country, while Moscow also paid a price as the spat shelved a much-touted Russian natural gas pipeline to Turkey and other lucrative projects.

So both Erdogan and Putin are interested in mending the rift and reviving economic and trade ties, a process that began in June following Ankara's apology for shooting down the Russian plane, which had been running bombing sorties in neighboring Syria.

"This will be a historic visit, a new beginning. In the talks with my friend Vladimir, I believe, a new page in our relations will be turned. Our countries have much to do together," Erdogan said in an interview with the Russian state news agency Tass.

However, some fundamental differences remain.

The Russian bomber's downing in November, which Putin described as a "treacherous stab in the back," came amid boiling tension over Syria, where Moscow and Ankara backed opposing sides in the conflict. Neither country has fundamentally altered its stance on Syria, and the issue could still prove a sticking point.

"This is an alliance of convenience, not a strategic relationship. It is more of a transactional relationship driven by converging interests and challenging circumstances," said Fadi Hakura, associate fellow at the Chatham House international affairs think tank in London.

"I would compare it to someone having a viral infection who immediately takes paracetamol to lower the temperature, which rapidly declines but precipitously starts fighting back up again," Hakura said. "What we have seen with Turkey in this rapid change, rapid swings in its relationship with Russia from breakdown to reconciliation, indicates that the relationship is still not healthy, despite appearances."

The government says Gulen, a former Erdogan ally living in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, orchestrated the coup, and has demanded his extradition. Washington has asked for evidence of the cleric's involvement and says the extradition process must be allowed to take its course. Gulen himself denies any involvement.

The issue has soured relations, with members of the government implying the U.S. could have been behind the coup — leading American officials have publicly denied that.

Turkey has also blasted its European allies for expressing alarm over the scope of its crackdown. Ankara has complained the West has shown a lack of support for a democratically elected government which survived a violent attempt to overthrow it, and Turkish officials have publicly traded barbs with Germany, Austria and Italy as well as the European Union.

In contrast, the Kremlin was quick to voice support to Erdogan immediately after the failed coup and, unlike the EU, didn't voice concern about the ensuing crackdown — the stance reflecting Putin's intention to mend bilateral ties.

Ankara has also hinted its deal with the EU to stem the flow of Syrian refugees into Europe could break down unless the EU quickly implements part of the deal allowing visa-free travel for Turkish citizens.

Yet despite the rhetoric, Turkey's political leadership knows its interests lie more with the West than with Moscow, Hakura said.

"Russia cannot replace the United States and NATO and European Union or European partners in relation to Turkey's strategic interests," Hakura said. He noted three quarters of Turkey's direct foreign investment comes from Europe and its military is firmly rooted in NATO, whereas it has a limited economic and trade relationship with Russia focused primarily on natural gas and agriculture, as well as construction and low-tech manufacturing.

Turkey restored access to Russian news website Sputnik in an apparent goodwill gesture a day before Erdogan's visit. Turkey had barred access to the website in April following the deterioration of relations.

Putin's foreign affairs adviser, Yuri Ushakov, said Friday that Putin and Erdogan's discussions would include the revival of projects such as the natural gas pipeline and Russia's contract to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant.

Ushakov told reporters the two weren't expected to sign any agreements, but he underlined the importance of the talks.

"This is the first meeting amid the long-term pause in all contacts, political, trade and economic and others, which is why it is important to hold a detailed conversation now, to see where we stand and plan the possible prospects of further cooperation," he said.

He noted the issue of compensation for the downed plane could also be discussed. Turkish officials have been skittish on the issue.

One lesson to take away from the improving ties, Hakura said, was that Turkey reacted better to tough responses.

"Erdogan reacts more positively to robust and muscular diplomacy rather than to diplomatic niceties," Hakura said. "And that is I think the abiding lesson to Europe and the United States."

Kaynak/Source: