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**LIMITATIONS OF AN ILLUSIONARY GIANT:
RUSSIAN RELATIONS WITH EGYPT AND TURKEY**

by

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RUSSIAN RELATIONS WITH EGYPT AND TURKEY**

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 2010s, Russia has become a more active and assertive player in the Middle East. Driven by political, economic, and military interests, it has established closer bilateral ties with most countries in the region. In doing so, Russia has benefited from the regional governments' growing interest in diversifying their relations with all great powers. Against this backdrop, this thesis analyzes Russia's engagement with the states of the Middle East between 2010 and 2022. Referencing the case studies of Egypt and Turkey, its research framework includes an in-depth evaluation of Russian engagement with both countries in the diplomatic, economic, military, and popular dimensions. How has Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish engagement evolved since 2010, and has it provided Moscow with influence in any or all the dimensions analyzed? The thesis finds that Russian engagement with Egypt and Turkey increased in all dimensions studied. More importantly, however, the thesis presents evidence that this greater engagement has not provided Russia with more influence.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
Bcm	billion cubic meters
b/d	barrels per day
BOO	built, owned, and operated
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CAATSA	Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions
ENI	Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi
EPDK	Turkish Energy Market Regulatory Authority
EU	European Union
G-20	Group of 20
HLCC	High-Level Cooperation Council
IEA	International Energy Agency
IGA	Intergovernmental Agreement
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JSF	Joint Strike Fighter
LNG	liquefied natural gas
MW	megawatt
NATO	Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPP	nuclear power plant
NSS	National Security Strategy
OPEC	Organization of Petrol Exporting Countries
OPEC+	Organization of Petrol Exporting Countries plus a group of non-OPEC member countries
Pew	Pew Research Center
RT	Russia Today
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SN	Sputnik News

SputnikTR	Sputnik Türkiye
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
TBIGC	Tony Blair Institute for Global Change
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly

I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Since the early 2010s, Russia has become a more active and assertive player in the Middle East. Driven by political, economic, and military interests, it has established closer bilateral ties with most countries in the region. In doing so, Russia has benefited from the regional governments' growing interest in diversifying their relations with all great powers. Against this backdrop, this thesis analyzes Russia's engagement with the states of the Middle East between 2010 and 2022. Referencing the case studies of Egypt and Turkey, its research framework includes an in-depth evaluation of Russian engagement with both countries in the diplomatic, economic, military, and popular dimension. The principal research questions ask, how has Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish engagement evolved since 2010, and has it provided Moscow with influence in any or all the dimensions analyzed?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The question of how Russia engages the Middle East in an era of great power competition is a relevant research topic for a variety of reasons. First, there is the actor itself. As Russian engagement in the region is studied in depth in the remainder of the thesis, it may suffice to argue at this early stage that Russian engagement follows the overall objective of reclaiming its prior status of a great power. Therefore, the Kremlin resorts to the whole spectrum of its instruments of power, some of which are perceived as disruptive from a Western point of view.¹ This Russian drive to regain its status as a great power also figures prominently in the Trump and the Biden administrations' National Security Strategies (NSS) of 2017 and 2022, respectively. In contrast to the dismissal of

¹ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities and Drivers," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016, 1, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf.

Russia as a “regional power” by then President Obama in 2014,² both documents list Russia—next to China—in the context of a “great power competition” as the Trump administration described it,³ and what the Biden NSS summarized as a “strategic competition.”⁴ Similar to the most recent NSS, the Strategic Compass of the European Union explicitly mentions Russia—next to China—as a threat and destabilizing factor in Europe, in particular, but also in the context of the Middle East.⁵ Finally, scholarly literature makes the case for Russia being a relevant object of study, in general, and regarding the Middle East, in particular. Following the argument of Angela Stent, “Russia’s return to the Middle East after the withdrawal that followed the Soviet collapse is one of Putin’s major foreign policy achievements.”⁶

The second reason for the relevance of the research topic is its focus on the Middle East. Located approximately halfway between Europe and Asia, the seas surrounding the Middle East in its west and south are of great importance not only for global trade but also for military purposes. The Suez Canal, which links the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, is a vital maritime choke point for trade between Europe and Asia, accounting for a total of 12 percent of global trade.⁷ Linking the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Hormuz is vital for the ship-bound transport of oil and refined products as well as liquified

² Scott Wilson, “Obama Dismisses Russia as ‘Regional Power’ Acting out of Weakness,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 2014, sec. National Security, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678c-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html.

³ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2017* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2017), 27, <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017.pdf>.

⁴ See the introductory letter of President Biden to the National Security Strategy, para. 2. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2022* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2022), 2, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

⁵ Council of the European Union, *The Strategic Compass* (Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2022), 7, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

⁶ Angela Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve, 2019), 259.

⁷ Robert Tuttle, “Why a Canal Built in 1869 Is More Important Than Ever,” *Bloomberg*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-26/what-is-the-suez-canal-and-why-is-it-so-important-quicktake>; United States Energy Information Administration (EIA), “The Suez Canal and SUMED Pipeline Are Critical Chokepoints for Oil and Natural Gas Trade,” accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=40152>.

natural gas from the region to Asia, where China is the largest consumer of Middle Eastern oil.⁸ The Turkish Straits connecting the Mediterranean with the Black Sea, while also relevant for trade, have a special significance for Russia and its ability to project naval power into the Mediterranean and hence to the Northern Alliance Treaty Organization's (NATO) southern flank.⁹ The same applies to Tartus in Syria, which is the only permanent Russian naval facility in the Mediterranean. Adding to the relevance of the waterways in the Middle East, its geography favors the region for becoming a central hub for pipeline transportation of oil and natural gas from the Caspian region to Europe.¹⁰ Only recently, Presidents Putin and Erdogan discussed the possible channeling of Russian natural gas to Europe, thereby using Turkish pipelines and potentially making Turkey an important hub for the respective supplies.¹¹

Next to geography, the Middle East's richness in energy resources makes it strategically relevant. The region is home to almost half of the global proven oil reserves (48 percent).¹² Combined, Middle Eastern countries are the top global producers of oil in barrels per day (b/d), providing about one third of global production.¹³ In addition to significant oil resources, the countries of the Middle East contain 40 percent of the proven reserves of natural gas.¹⁴ Following Northern America and the states constituting the Commonwealth of Independent States, Middle Eastern countries are the third largest

⁸ United States Energy Information Administration (EIA), "The Strait of Hormuz Is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint," accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932>.

⁹ Nicholas J. Myers, "The Significance of the Turkish Straits to the Russian Navy," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 3, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-significance-of-the-turkish-straits-to-the-russian-navy/>.

¹⁰ Mert Bilgin, "Geopolitics of European Natural Gas Demand: Supplies from Russia, Caspian and the Middle East," *Energy Policy* 37, no. 11 (November 1, 2009): 4482–92, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2009.05.070>.

¹¹ Valerie Hopkins, Safak Timur, and Stanley Reed, "Putin Offers to Make Turkey a Gas Hub to Preserve E.U. Energy Hold," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/world/europe/putin-russia-turkey-gas-eu-energy.html>.

¹² British Petroleum, *Statistical Review of World Energy 2021* (London: British Petroleum, July 2021), 17, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2021-full-report.pdf>.

¹³ British Petroleum, 18.

¹⁴ British Petroleum, 35.

producer of natural gas, contributing roughly 17 percent to global natural gas production.¹⁵ As Russia is itself rich in natural resources, it does not directly depend on Middle Eastern oil and gas. In order to regulate prices, however, it has a strong interest to coordinate with the oil and natural gas producing countries in the region.

An additional argument for the strategic significance of the Middle East is related to security. Adding to an already long history of interstate and intrastate war,¹⁶ the region today faces a variety of security challenges resulting from both state and non-state actors.¹⁷ The Russian perception of risks within the region or emanating from it differs significantly from that of the United States and its allies. To the Kremlin, violent extremist organizations inspired by Islamist ideas and their potential to conduct attacks against Russian interests in the region or at home pose the greatest threat. On the contrary, the United States and, to a lesser extent, its Western allies are primarily concerned with the hegemonic ambitions of Iran and the destabilizing effects of its proxies throughout the region, as these might evolve into a major confrontation or even full-scale war. Additionally, Iranian nuclear activities keep the danger of nuclear proliferation virulent.¹⁸ Violent extremist organizations like Al-Qaida or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), while not the primary focus of U.S. security concerns in the region, pose a persistent threat to the United States and its interests there and beyond.¹⁹

Finally, analyzing Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is significant because Moscow's engagement affects a variety of actors. First, there are the countries within the

¹⁵ British Petroleum, 36.

¹⁶ For a rough overview of the most relevant wars in the Middle East since the end of World War II (Arab-Israeli Wars (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973), Iraq-Iran (1980-1980), Iraq-Kuwait (1990/1991), USA-Iraq (2003), see Morris (Arab-Israeli), Bacevich and Freedman (wars with U.S. engagement).

¹⁷ For a brief and concise assessment of the security situation in the Middle East from a U.S. perspective, see United States Central Command, "Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. Commander, United States Central Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee 15 March 2022," March 15, 2022, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/USCENTCOM%20Written%20Posture%20Statement%20-%20SASC.pdf>.

¹⁸ Vali Nasr, "All Against All," *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 1 (February 2022), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2616233383/abstract/586D82D1CB1241B0PQ/1>.

¹⁹ "Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee 15 March 2022," 8–13.

Middle East. To them, Russia's return to the region provides an opportunity to diversify their diplomatic, economic, and military relations. This includes their ability to increase their leverage vis-à-vis the United States, which had been the dominant actor in the region since the end of the Cold War.²⁰ Second, increasing Russian activities in the Middle East affect other great powers in the region. While due to obviously diverging interests of the United States and Russia this relationship will be tense, it is difficult to anticipate Russo-Chinese relations in and regarding the Middle East. Recent literature suggests that "China and Russia are on a collision course in the Middle East," as China aims to enlarge its role from being a buyer of Middle Eastern energy resources to becoming a vendor of manufactured goods, including arms, and a provider of nuclear energy.²¹ Third, Russian engagement in the Middle East challenges the European Union's (EU) southeastern border and NATO's southeastern flank. The Kremlin's successful military intervention in Syria has allowed it to establish a limited but nevertheless significant forward military base in the Middle East, thereby building a credible defensive posture protecting Russia's southern flank.²² Scholars argue that the engagement in Syria may become a stepping stone for further projection of force into Northern Africa and the Mediterranean in general.²³ Adding to the deployment of Russian military to Syria, the deployment of advanced S-400 air-

²⁰ Holly Dagres, "The New Middle East Is Dismissing Great Power Competition—for Now," Atlantic Council, October 18, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-new-middle-east-is-dismissing-great-power-competition-for-now/>.

²¹ Danny Citrinowicz and Roie Yellinek, "The Middle East—a Conflict Zone between China and Russia?," Middle East Institute, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/middle-east-conflict-zone-between-china-and-russia>; Galia Lavi and Sarah Fainberg, "Russia and China in the Middle East: Rapprochement and Rivalry," *Strategic Assessment* 20, no. 4 (January 2018), <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/en/articles/russia-and-china-in-the-middle-east-rapprochement-and-rivalry/>.

²² Marc Pierini, "Russia's Posture in the Mediterranean: Implications for NATO and Europe," Carnegie Europe, June 8, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/06/08/russia-s-posture-in-mediterranean-implications-for-nato-and-europe-pub-84670>.

²³ Colin P. Clarke et al., "Russia Is Eyeing the Mediterranean. The U.S. and NATO Must Be Prepared," *The RAND Blog*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/06/russia-is-eyeing-the-mediterranean-the-us-and-nato.html>.

defense systems to Syria and Turkey's purchase of the system create additional risks to the EU and NATO.²⁴

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review proceeds in three steps. First, it analyzes what scholars have identified as the objectives of Russian engagement in the Middle East. This aspect is followed by an analysis of what observers of Russian foreign policy in the region assess to be the Kremlin's instruments at work to achieve these desired objectives. Finally, the literature review traces how scholarly publications evaluate the success of Moscow's approach to the Middle East.

1. Objectives of Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East

The analysis of Russian foreign policy objectives as identified by scholars of the subject indicate a broad consensus on three general objectives: the restoration of its status as a great power, the pursuit of its economic interests, and the stabilization of the region.²⁵

a. The Restoration of Great Power Status

The first objective scholars of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East identify is the restoration of Russia's great power status. Some publications make the case very explicitly. Dmitri Trenin, for example, stresses that "Russia's reappearance in the Middle East under President Vladimir Putin has the aim of restoring the country's position as a great power outside of the former USSR [Union of Socialist Soviet Republics]."²⁶ Similarly, Stephen Blank argues for Russia's constant desire to appear as "a vigilant,

²⁴ Pierini, "Russia's Posture in the Mediterranean"; Anna Borshevskaya, "Russia's Military Activity in the East Mediterranean Echoes Its Approach to Syria," The Washington Institute, June 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-military-activity-east-mediterranean-e-echoes-its-approach-syria>.

²⁵ From a Russian perspective, stabilization of the region primarily aims to keep in power those regimes the Kremlin perceives to be friendly and supportive in the pursuit of Russian foreign policy objectives. Hence, this objective is directed against external (military) interference into countries in the region (like the 2003 U.S. war against Iraq) and movements like the Arab Spring.

²⁶ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 5, 2016, para. 1, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2016/04/05/russia-in-middle-east-moscow-s-objectives-priorities-and-policy-drivers-pub-63244>.

strong, and global great power.”²⁷ Testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, Anna Borshchevskaya even goes so far as identifying the Kremlin’s objective to restore “Russia’s superpower status.”²⁸

Though their publications support this view less explicitly, other scholars clearly point toward Russian ambitions to (re-)gain great power status. James Sladden et al. identify Russian ambition to gain “prestige” as an objective, linking this objective to Moscow’s ambition to “play a role in the region [the Middle East] and have a seat at the table for key negotiations and decisions.”²⁹ Almost identically, Eugene Rumer and Andrew Weiss stress the Kremlin’s aspirations to be on “equal footing with the United States” in the Middle East and its belief to have “a say in what arguably is the most important region of the world.”³⁰

b. The Pursuit of Economic Interests

The pursuit of its economic interests in the Middle East is the second objective scholars of Russian foreign policy in the region point to. Authors like Sladden et al. describe this aspect as “one of the most consistent objectives of Moscow’s policy in the region.” Though they concede that the Middle East is “not a critical market for the Russian economy,” they emphasize that economic activities provide Moscow “presence and influence.”³¹

Trenin, echoing Brian Katulis’ testimony before the House subcommittee on the Middle East and Northern Africa, also highlights Moscow’s economic objectives and notes

²⁷ Stephen Blank, “Beyond Syria: Moscow’s Objectives in the Middle East,” April 17, 2018, 3, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/beyond-syria-moscow-s-objectives-in-the-middle-east/>.

²⁸ H.R., Russia’s Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa: Hearing before the Subcommittee on The Middle East and North Africa, House of Representatives, 115th Cong. 1 (2017), 15.

²⁹ James Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, RAND Perspectives, PE-2336 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 3, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE2336.html>.

³⁰ Andrew S. Weiss and Eugene Rumer, “A Brief Guide to Russia’s Return to the Middle East,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, paras. 2, 9, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/24/brief-guide-to-russia-s-return-to-middle-east-pub-80134>.

³¹ Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 7.

several economic activities (trade, investments) as well as different markets (energy, food, arms) in which Russia and the countries of the Middle East interact with each other. However, neither of these scholars elaborates on this topic.³² This gap is at least partly filled by Sladden et al., who stress Russian attempts to attract investment from wealthy countries of the Gulf in order to develop the Russian economy. They additionally point to Russian interests in the arms market and Russia's goal to establish itself as the preferred provider of weaponry for Middle Eastern countries.³³

Mark Katz, while also broadly identifying economic cooperation as a major Russian objective in the Middle East, simultaneously points to competing interests between Russia and the oil and natural gas producing countries in the region.³⁴ Here, again, Sladden et al. amplify the argument by pointing to the Russian interest in keeping prices for oil and natural gas high.³⁵ Related to this aspect, Rumer stresses the need for coordination between Russia and the region's oil and natural gas producers, as the latter have a "direct bearing on Russian economic well-being and political stability."³⁶

Blank adds that Russian economic engagement provides a tool to circumvent the sanctions imposed by the United States and like-minded Western countries.³⁷ Sladden et al. endorse this argument, describing Russian economic cooperation with the countries in the Middle East as a means to build an economy that is more resilient to Western sanctions.³⁸

³² Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East," para. 2; H.R., 27.

³³ Sladden et al., Russian Strategy in the Middle East, 7–8.

³⁴ Mark N. Katz, "Same Ends but Different Means: Change, Continuity and Moscow's Middle East Policy," in *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, ed. Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (Milano: Ledizioni, 2019), 39.

³⁵ Sladden et al., Russian Strategy in the Middle East, 8.

³⁶ Eugene B. Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019), 3.

³⁷ Blank, "Beyond Syria: Moscow's Objectives in the Middle East," para. 10.

³⁸ Sladden et al., Russian Strategy in the Middle East, 7.

c. The Stabilization of the Middle East

The third Russian objective is the stabilization of the Middle East. According to the scholarly literature, this objective has two dimensions: first, the suppression of the terrorist threat in the region, the Russian periphery, and in its heartland, and second, the support of—from a Russian perspective—friendly governments against both external intervention and internal uprising. The counterterrorism objective is most visible in the works of Katz and Trenin. Katz stresses the Kremlin’s goal of “preventing Islamist forces in the region from becoming strong enough to support the rise of the Muslim opposition in Russia, other former Soviet republics, or other countries elsewhere closely aligned with Russia.”³⁹ Likewise, Trenin stresses “containing and diminishing Islamist extremism and radicalism” as Moscow’s aim,⁴⁰ but also points toward the second dimension of the stabilization objective: “reversing the dynamics of the Arab Spring.”⁴¹

According to Sladden et al., the stabilization objective has to be considered in an even larger context: “Russia equates status quo preservation in the Middle East with reduced terrorist threats, increased transactional opportunities with autocratic states, and reduced U.S. sociocultural influence across the region.”⁴² Seen through this lens, Russia’s aspiration for stability in the Middle East also has a geopolitical dimension, as, according to Trenin, the cementing of the status quo allows the Kremlin to build “lasting geopolitical alliances.”⁴³ Picking up on Trenin’s arguments, Borshchevskaya in her testimony before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and Northern Africa argues that Russian support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria serves the purpose of maintaining access to the military facilities of Tartus (navy) and Hmeimin (air force) as well as the buildup of anti-access/area denial bubbles along Russia’s periphery.⁴⁴

³⁹ Katz, “Same Ends but Different Means: Change, Continuity and Moscow’s Middle East Policy,” 39.

⁴⁰ Trenin, “Russia in the Middle East,” para. 2.

⁴¹ Dmitri Trenin, “What Drives Russia’s Policy in the Middle East?,” in *Russia’s Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles*, ed. Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secriery, Chaillot Papers No.146 (Brussels: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2018), 21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21138.6>.

⁴² Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 4.

⁴³ Trenin, “Russia in the Middle East,” para. 2.

⁴⁴ *Russia’s Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa*, 18, 20.

2. Instruments of Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East

In addition to analyzing Russia's foreign policy objectives in the Middle East, scholars also consider the various instruments applied by the Kremlin to achieve desired outcomes. Overall, they concur that Moscow relies on diplomatic, economic, and military instruments. Analysis of the scholarly literature indicates that there is no preferred Russian instrument in pursuit of its objectives in the Middle East; at least, none of the scholars makes an explicit argument in this regard. Notwithstanding, it appears as if energy policy as part of the economic instrument and arms sales as part of the military instruments have a special significance for the Kremlin, as they affect almost all of the countries of the region.

a. Diplomacy

Analyzing Russia's diplomatic tools, scholars emphasize not only its ability to engage the countries of the region bilaterally, but also stress Moscow's activities in diverse diplomatic formats. Regarding bilateral activities, scholars like Becca Wasser et al. empirically evaluate the Kremlin's bilateral engagement with the governments of the Middle East on the senior level and overall identify "a high tempo of [Russian] diplomatic activity, across a wide variety of state leaders and topic areas."⁴⁵ Adding to their observations of frequent consultations, they also stress the Kremlin's meticulous efforts to balance the frequency of meetings with opposing countries. Concurring with Wasser et al., other scholars point to the Kremlin's unique capacity to engage all countries of the region, notwithstanding their tense bilateral relations.⁴⁶ Going beyond the aforementioned group

⁴⁵ Becca Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition: China, Russia, and the United States in the Middle East*, RAND Research Report, RR-A325-1 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 51, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR-A325-1.html.

⁴⁶ Sergey V. Kostelyanets, "Russia's Peace Initiatives in the MENA Region: Evaluation and Prospects," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 554, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2019.1682302>; Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2018), 24, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-02-21-russian-policy-middle-east-kozhanov.pdf>; Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, ii; Kathryn Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 89; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 51.

of scholars, Angela Stent argues that Russia's diplomatic efforts also include non-state (terrorist) actors like Hamas and Hezbollah.⁴⁷

Focusing on Russia's engagement in broader diplomatic fora, Zvygalskaya and Surkov point to Moscow's involvement in the Astana process and the Syrian National Dialogue, Russia's role in the Middle East Quartet, and its involvement in the search for a diplomatic solution to cease hostilities in the Libyan Civil War. They claim that the Kremlin's involvement in diplomatic attempts of conflict settlement in the Middle East are "a means of advancing its influence."⁴⁸ Adding to the examples of Irina Zvygalskaya and Nikolay Surkov, other scholars highlight Russia's role in the negotiations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran.⁴⁹

b. Economy

When discussing the Kremlin's foreign policy toolbox, scholars frequently stress the economic instrument. Within this broad field, they identify three particular domains of Russian activity: trade, investment, and energy. Analyzing Russian trade relations with the Middle East, scholars widely concur that overall trade levels are moderate and that the Middle East is not a crucial trade partner to Russia.⁵⁰ For example, Wasser et al. find that Russian imports from the Middle East did not exceed 2.8 percent from 2009 to 2018, and exports to the region were not higher than 6.8 percent during the same period. Adding to this analysis, they also emphasize the importance of Turkey, Israel, and Egypt as Russia's top trading partners.⁵¹ Focusing on Turkey, Rumer stresses that economic relations

⁴⁷ Stent, *Putin's World*, 259.

⁴⁸ Irina D. Zvyagelskaya and Nikolay Y. Surkov, "Russian Policy in the Middle East: Dividends and Costs of the Big Game," Russian International Affairs Council Working Paper, no. 51 (2019): 15, <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-MiddleEast-WP51En.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 41; Stent, *Putin's World*, 289; Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 91.

⁵⁰ Kozhanov, *Russian Policy Across the Middle East . Motivations and Methods*, 14; Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 1; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 7; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 54; Zvyagelskaya and Surkov, "Russian Policy in the Middle East: Dividends and Costs of the Big Game," 13.

⁵¹ Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 54–56.

between the two countries “blossomed,” leading to an increase of the bilateral trade volume from less than United States Dollar (USD) 2 billion in 1992 to USD 25 billion in 2018.⁵²

Next to trade, scholars point to investment as an important field of cooperation. In their analysis, Wasser et al. note the difficulty of allocating and quantifying investments thoroughly, as they are often channeled through third countries and thus ultimate sources are shielded. Notwithstanding, they note assiduous Russian attempts to strengthen investment relations, based on Russian investments in the Middle East and vice versa. While they identify Russia’s investment agreements with Turkey and Egypt, they stress that most respective agreements and partnerships have been developed with the wealthy Gulf states.⁵³ Sladden et al. concur with that assessment. Additionally, they specify that concluded investments cover commercial enterprises, agriculture, and infrastructure and were agreed upon after the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Thus, they assert, the agreements emphasize Gulf states’ unwillingness “to be politically constrained by sanctions against Russia.”⁵⁴

Third, scholars stress energy as an essential instrument in the Kremlin’s arsenal. In their assessment of Moscow’s energy diplomacy, analysts broadly agree on strong Russian activities in the oil, gas, and nuclear energy sectors.⁵⁵ Several authors highlight the dependence of Moscow’s federal budget on revenues of the energy sector.⁵⁶ Consequently, they point to Russian interests to coordinate with OPEC and, in particular, Saudi Arabia

⁵² Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 21.

⁵³ Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 57–58.

⁵⁴ Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 7.

⁵⁵ Kozhanov, *Russian Policy Across the Middle East . Motivations and Methods*, 16–23; Carole Nakhle, “Russia’s Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East,” in *Russia’s Return to the Middle East. Building Sandcastles?*, ed. Nicu Popescu, Stanislav Secieru, and Timofey Borisov, Chaillot Papers 146 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018), 29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21138.7>; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 59.

⁵⁶ Kozhanov, *Russian Policy Across the Middle East . Motivations and Methods*, 20; Nakhle, “Russia’s Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East,” 30; Becca Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition: China, Russia, and the United States in the Middle East*, RAND Research Report, RR-A325-1 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 59, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR-A325-1.html.

(in the so-called OPEC+ framework) to stabilize oil prices.⁵⁷ Additionally, they emphasize activities of Russian state-owned companies in oil and gas exploration in countries like Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.⁵⁸ Finally, they highlight cooperation between Russian enterprises and Middle Eastern countries in the civilian use of nuclear power, referencing such examples as Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and Turkey.⁵⁹

c. Military

The military is the third instrument scholars refer to. The deployment of the Russian military to Syria in 2015 is widely assessed as a decisive point in Russia's return to the Middle East. Scholars like Stent and Lavrov stress the relevance by highlighting that it was the first Russian military engagement in the region since 1979.⁶⁰

In their analysis of the military instrument, scholars also broadly refer to Russia's role as a provider of weaponry to countries in the Middle East. Overall, they concur that Russia's relevance as a provider of arms to Middle Eastern countries has increased since the beginning of the 2000s and that arms sales are—next to direct military action—a means to project power.⁶¹ Borisov notes that, in 2017, the countries of the Middle East and North Africa accounted for almost 50 percent of Russia's global arms sales.⁶² Looking into the

⁵⁷ Nakhle, "Russia's Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East," 32; Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 102; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 58–59; Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 35.

⁵⁸ Nakhle, "Russia's Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East," 33; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 59.

⁵⁹ Nakhle, "Russia's Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East," 34; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 7; Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 100.

⁶⁰ Stent, *Putin's World*, 269; Anton Lavrov, "Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis," in *Russia Rising. Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, and Stanislav Secieru (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 31; See also: Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, i; Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 92; Stoner, 92; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 60.

⁶¹ Timofey Borisov, "Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East," in *Russia's Return to the Middle East. Building Sandcastles?*, ed. Nicu Popescu, Stanislav Secieru, and Timofey Borisov, Chaillot Papers 146 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018), 42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21138.8>; Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 117; Frederic Wehrey and Andrew S. Weiss, *Reassessing Russian Capabilities in the Levant and North Africa* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), 1, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/31/reassessing-russian-capabilities-in-levant-and-north-africa-pub-85222>; Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 61–63.

⁶² Borisov, "Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East," 38–39.

Middle East more specifically from 2009 to 2018, Wasser et al. identify Egypt (35 percent), Iraq (22 percent), and Syria (22 percent) as the leading regional buyers of Russian weapons systems.⁶³ Several authors additionally point to potential motivations of Middle Eastern clients: good price-performance ratio of weapons systems,⁶⁴ quick and unconditional delivery of weapons systems,⁶⁵ continuous maintenance and provision of spare parts,⁶⁶ Russian willingness to allow localized production,⁶⁷ and diversification to avoid dependency.⁶⁸ From a Russian perspective, Zvyagelskaya and Surkov stress that Russian arms sales to the Middle East, particularly aircraft and air-defense systems, “can be viewed as a guarantee of long-term partnership.”⁶⁹

3. Russian Foreign Policy Effectiveness in the Middle East

A final aspect that attracts the attention of the scholars of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is the Kremlin’s success or lack thereof. While there are few who identify overall success, practically no analyst argues that Russian foreign policy in the region has failed.⁷⁰ The majority of scholars provide nuanced assessments, conceding successes in Moscow’s drive to achieve the objectives outlined previously but also pointing to important restrictions and limitations in the Kremlin’s arsenal.⁷¹

⁶³ Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 62.

⁶⁴ Kozhanov, *Russian Policy Across the Middle East . Motivations and Methods*, 15; Zvyagelskaya and Surkov, “Russian Policy in the Middle East: Dividends and Costs of the Big Game,” 13.

⁶⁵ Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 8.

⁶⁶ Sladden et al., 8.

⁶⁷ Zvyagelskaya and Surkov, “Russian Policy in the Middle East: Dividends and Costs of the Big Game,” 13.

⁶⁸ Zvyagelskaya and Surkov, 10.

⁶⁹ Zvyagelskaya and Surkov, 13.

⁷⁰ Stent, *Putin’s World*, 259–60 and Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 88, make a strong case for overall Russian foreign policy success in the Middle East.

⁷¹ Becca Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19914>; Nicu Popescu, Stanislav Secieru, and Stanislav Secieru, “Conclusion: Russia in the Middle East—from Surge to Quagmire?,” in *Russia’s Return to the Middle East. Building Sandcastles?*, ed. Nicu Popescu, Chaillot Paper No 146 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018), 109–14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21138>. These are among the most comprehensive and nuanced accounts of the successes and limitations of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East.

a. Russian Successes in the Middle East

Analysts of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East broadly concur that, after its absence from the region for roughly a quarter century after the end of the Cold War, Russia today has regained an influential role in the Middle East.⁷² According to the scholarly literature on the subject, Moscow has achieved successes in the diplomatic, economic, and military realms alike.

Considering Russia's diplomatic efforts, analysts agree on the Kremlin's successful means of dealing with Middle Eastern governments. Though scholars use different terms to describe the Russian approach—"pragmatic and nonideological,"⁷³ "transactional,"⁷⁴ "low-key, patient and respectful"⁷⁵—they agree that it appeals to the target audiences. In particular, some analysts argue, Middle Eastern regimes appreciate Russian disinterest in democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.⁷⁶ As a result, the Kremlin is able to engage all countries within the region, notwithstanding those partner countries' sometimes tense bilateral relations (for example, Iran vs. Israel, Iran vs. Saudi Arabia, and Turkey vs.

⁷² H.R., *Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa*, 16; Gawdat Baghat, "Russia and the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges," in *Russia's Global Reach. A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021), 72, <http://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-books/russias-global-reach-security-and-statecraft-assessment/chapter-9-russia-and-middle-east-opportunities-and>; Eugene B. Rumer, "Russia, the Indispensable Nation in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, para. 2, accessed October 31, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1125066>; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 11; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 47.

⁷³ Stent, *Putin's World*, 259. Sladden et. al also use the term non-ideological and refer to RUS pragmatism (p. 3); Trenin, para. 21.

⁷⁴ Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 89; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 3; Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 2. Sladden et.al (p. 5).

⁷⁵ Popescu and Secieru, "Conclusion," 110.

⁷⁶ Steven A. Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), 3; Hayman and Yoel Guzansky, "The Arab World amidst Great Power Competition," *The Institute for National Security*, June 3, 2022, 6, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/arab-states/>; Popescu and Secieru, "Conclusion," 111; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 9; Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 2.

Iraq).⁷⁷ Rumer in this context goes so far as describing Russia's ability to address all governments in the region as "indispensable."⁷⁸

Analysts also concur on Russia's achievements in the economic realm. Though they point to the overall moderate level of Russian trade with the countries of the Middle East, scholars stress Moscow's success in concluding trade deals with and attracting investment from Middle Eastern governments.⁷⁹ Additionally, several authors note Russia's successes in the energy sector, as coordination within the framework of OPEC+ has improved and Russia has concluded contracts for the building of nuclear power plants (NPP) in Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey.⁸⁰

Finally, scholars recognize Russian military successes. In this context, some analysts cite the example of Syria as proof of Russia's will and ability to project forces beyond its periphery.⁸¹ Others stress that the Kremlin has avoided any overextension, thus keeping expenses and losses acceptable.⁸² Still others refer to the Syrian intervention as evidence for the Kremlin's support to its regional partners, which, they argue, contributes to Moscow's positive perception among Middle Eastern rulers.⁸³

b. The Limits of Russian Success

When pointing to the limits of Russian engagement in the Middle East, some analysts agree that current Russian successes are less the result of its strength than they are

⁷⁷ Philipp Casula and Mark N. Katz, "The Middle East," in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Andrei Tsygankov (London: Routledge, 2018), 308, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315536934>; Katz, "Same Ends but Different Means: Change, Continuity and Moscow's Middle East Policy," 48; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 6.

⁷⁸ Rumer, "Russia, the Indispensable Nation in the Middle East," para. 11.

⁷⁹ Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, 6–7; Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 3–4; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 54–58.

⁸⁰ Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 28, 33; Popescu and Secieru, "Conclusion," 111; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 7; Wasser et al., *Crossroads of Competition*, 2022, 58–60.

⁸¹ Jakub Grygiel, "Russia's Return to the Middle East," Hoover Institution, para. 6, accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.hoover.org/research/russias-return-middle-east>; Eray Alim, "Russia's Power Projection into Syria and Its Interactions with Local States," *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (July 5, 2022): 1391–96, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia110>.

⁸² Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 40.

⁸³ Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, 4.

the consequence of a vacuum left by a withdrawing United States.⁸⁴ A variant of this argument explains Russia's re-entry to the Middle East with "U.S. missteps" and increasing "doubts" about the overall reliability of the United States and its determination to provide and guarantee security and stability in the Middle East.⁸⁵

Scholars also broadly question to what extent the Kremlin can influence its regional partners. Picking up on doubts about Russia's strength in the aforementioned argument, proponents of this perspective stress that, while Russia had become a widely appreciated partner in the region, it did so only because the rulers in the Middle East allowed it.⁸⁶ In the words of Frederic Wehrey and Andrew Weiss: "regional actors hardly behave as Russia's docile clients" but instead have demonstrated their "uncanny ability to frustrate its [Russia's] ambitions."⁸⁷ In the eyes of some analysts, rulers of Middle Eastern countries perceive their relations with Moscow as instrumental, in the sense that they have created leverage for their relations with Washington.⁸⁸

Though the Kremlin's ability to engage with and talk to governments throughout the Middle East is widely perceived as positive, to some this aspect also has flip sides. One argument stresses that although Russia's relationships in the region are broad, they lack depth. As a result, Moscow remains a "secondary partner" for many governments in the region.⁸⁹ Additionally, the Kremlin's pragmatic and transactional approach to the region and its governments "imbued many of Russia's relationships in the Middle East with

⁸⁴ Grygiel, "Russia's Return to the Middle East," para. 2; Popescu and Secieru, "Conclusion," 111; Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 40, 42; Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 2.

⁸⁵ Frederic Wehrey and Andrew S. Weiss, "Russia Is No Mideast Superpower," *Foreign Affairs*, October 27, 2021, para. 3, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-10-18/russia-no-mideast-superpower>; Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, 4; Popescu and Secieru, "Conclusion," 111; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 17; Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 12.

⁸⁶ Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 11; Popescu and Secieru, "Conclusion," 114; Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 2.

⁸⁷ Wehrey and Weiss, "Russia Is No Mideast Superpower," para. 6.

⁸⁸ Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, 6; Hayman and Guzansky, "The Arab World amidst Great Power Competition," para. 1; Popescu and Secieru, "Conclusion," 111; Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, ii; Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 12.

⁸⁹ Wasser, "The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East," 8. See also: Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 39.

mistrust.”⁹⁰ Finally, given the tense bilateral relations between many countries in the region, Russia could easily be drawn into conflict and forced to choose sides.⁹¹

Some scholars explain these limited successes by arguing that the Kremlin lacks important means to shape the Middle East in Russia’s favor. According to Rumer, Moscow’s “toolkit—military, diplomatic, and economic for projecting and sustaining its power and influence in the region is quite modest.”⁹² Looking at the instruments in more detail, scholars particularly emphasize Russia’s economic weaknesses.⁹³ Wasser makes this argument the most strongly, identifying a link between a stagnant economy and the Kremlin’s failure to establish a sustainable presence in the Middle East.⁹⁴

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Using the presented literature as a baseline, this thesis tests whether Russia’s return to the Middle East has been successful in the sense that the Kremlin has not only increased its engagement with the regional capitals, but also has been successful in raising their support for its objectives. Hence, my guiding hypothesis for further research is:

H1: The employment of Russian instruments of power vis-à-vis the countries of the Middle East has resulted in their support for Russian objectives in the Middle East.

If this hypothesis is accurate, analysis would find evidence of Middle Eastern countries acting in accordance with and supporting Moscow’s objectives. Conversely, if the hypothesis is wrong, there would be no indications of Middle Eastern governments acting congruently with Russian interests. In this case, the null hypothesis to H1 would be

⁹⁰ Wasser, “The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East,” 8. See also: Casula and Katz, “The Middle East,” 309; Katz, “Same Ends but Different Means: Change, Continuity and Moscow’s Middle East Policy,” 49.

⁹¹ Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 39; Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 9.

⁹² Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, 39; Wherey and Weiss add to this, assessing the Kremlin’s toolkit as “ill-suited to address the daunting problems facing the region.” Wherey and Weiss, “Russia Is No Mideast Superpower,” para. 10.

⁹³ Popescu and Secieru, “Conclusion,” 112–13; Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 10.

⁹⁴ Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 7.

that the employment of Russian instruments of power vis-à-vis the countries of the Middle East has *not* resulted in their support for Russian objectives in the region.

To test the hypothesis presented, the thesis proceeds in two principal steps. First, it describes Russian engagement with the Middle Eastern countries in the diplomatic, economic, military, and popular dimension. This part can rely on ample empirical data for each of the four dimensions. A discussion of Russia's diplomatic relations with the Middle East can include a description of the Kremlin's diplomatic ties with regional governments and relevant non-state actors (e.g., Hamas, Hizballah), the frequency of bilateral meetings of the senior leadership (e.g., heads of state, foreign ministers), or Russia's engagement in multilateral diplomatic formats like the Astana process. In the economic dimension, relations can be measured in terms of trade volumes and investment relations or cooperations in the energy sector, including oil, natural gas, and nuclear energy. Regarding the military dimension, the catalogue of engagement comprises elements like direct military intervention, the operation and maintenance of military bases, the conduct of combined exercises, or arms sales. Finally, in the popular dimension, engagement can be measured with reference to cultural exchange facilitated through Russian Centers for Science and Culture, cooperation in the media sector, or the presence of Russian tourists.

The second step in the test of my hypothesis is to assess whether Russian engagement with Middle Eastern countries resulted in their support for Moscow's objectives. This step is challenging for at least two reasons. First, without deeper insight into the decision-making process of Middle Eastern governments, it is impossible to determine if—and to what extent—their policy decisions either reflect Russian influence or the national interests, or both.⁹⁵ Adding to this aspect, as Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman observe, policymakers as well as scholars of the subject struggle to explain how states obtain and sustain influence. In particular, they argue, the difficulty to measure

⁹⁵ Methodologically, this challenge can be overcome by conducting qualitative interviews with actors involved in the decision-making process of Middle Eastern countries. For the purpose of this thesis, however, the conduct of such research is not feasible.

influence has “led researchers to elide between the activities that states undertake to cultivate influence and the successful development and exertion of influence.”⁹⁶

Against this backdrop, the thesis attempts to measure Russian influence vis-à-vis the countries of the Middle East in each of the aforementioned dimensions. Analyzing the diplomatic dimension, the thesis refers to voting patterns of Middle Eastern countries in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The criterion of Russian influence on Middle Eastern countries would be met if Middle Eastern countries vote in accordance with Russian objectives. Evaluating Russian influence in the economic dimension, the thesis focuses on the compliance of Middle Eastern countries with the sanctions imposed against Russia following its attack on Ukraine. Russian influence here requires that Middle Eastern countries disregard sanctions and maintain, if not enlarge, their economic relations with Russia. In the military dimension, the thesis assesses Russian arms sales to Middle Eastern countries. Russian influence in this dimension would require the identification of a shift in the purchase of advanced and durable weapons systems (e.g., aircraft, ships, air-defense systems) by Middle Eastern countries toward Russia. Finally, focusing on the popular dimension, the thesis studies the perception of Russia among Middle Eastern populations. An increased Russian influence is assumed, if the perception of Russia among populations in the Middle East has changed positively and relative to other countries (e.g., the United States and China).

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis uses the comparative case study method to analyze Russian engagement with Egypt and Turkey, as part of its overall engagement with the countries in the Middle East from the beginning of the 2010s to the present. This timeline considers that after the end of the Cold War, Russia was largely absent from the region, but gradually returned and

⁹⁶ Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman, “Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 1, 2021): 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab011>. In their article, Meierding and Sigman provide what they call “the influence development process,” distinguishing between a state’s power resources, its influence activities, and the power mechanisms at work. The latter are defined as reward, punishment, expertise, attractiveness, and recognition (see Fig. 1, p. 5.) While my research cannot apply the framework in total, it refers to it when applicable and feasible.

expressed its intention to reemerge as an influential external actor starting around the turn of the new millennium. Early examples of Russian ambitions in this context include its engagement in the Middle East Quartet, formed in 2002, and its diplomatic efforts in the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003. Though not directly linked to the Middle East but to Russia's overall ambitions as a great power, President Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, denouncing what he perceived as U.S. preeminence, is another important milestone in this context.

The thesis selects Egypt and Turkey as case studies for a variety of reasons. The states are similar in several ways. First, their geographic location in the Eastern Mediterranean makes both countries not only strategically important for Russia, but also for the United States and European countries, as well as the EU and NATO. Second, Egypt and Turkey are among Russia's most important economic partners in the Middle East. Both countries have agreed to cooperate with Russia in the construction of their NPP. In the case of Turkey, there also is a strong dependency on Russian natural gas. The thesis can therefore assess whether Russia behaves consistently toward countries with which it has similar strategic interests and economic relations.

Egypt and Turkey also differ in significant ways. Most importantly, Egypt has historically been an important partner for the Soviet Union and Russia, whereas Turkey, as a member of NATO, has traditionally been in the opposing camp. Relatedly, while both countries currently purchase Russian weaponry, Egypt has historically been a major recipient, whereas Turkey only very recently purchased advanced S-400 air-defense systems. The thesis can therefore assess how targeted Middle Eastern countries' political alignment affects Russian engagement, including weapons sales.

In terms of its overall structure and the composition of its case studies, this thesis applies the analytical framework developed by Meierding et al. in their unpublished study "U.S. vs. Competitor Influence in African Countries," prepared for the U.S. Africa Command.⁹⁷ Following this example, Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish relations are

⁹⁷ Emily Meierding et al., "United States vs. Competitor Influence in African Countries" (unpublished report for U.S. Africa Command, April 2020).

analyzed in six steps. First, the thesis provides a brief background on the analyzed country, including a brief history of its relationship with Russia. Then, a discussion of diplomatic relations between the countries follows the background section. In the third step, the focus shifts to bilateral economic ties, before turning to military relations. The fifth section covers the popular dimension of the bilateral relations. Each of the sections includes a discussion of several indicators of Russian engagement with the country in the diplomatic, economic, military, and popular dimensions, followed by an evaluation of whether the engagement has increased the country's support for Russian objectives. At the end of each case study, a short conclusion summarizes whether the analyzed case supports the guiding hypothesis. The application of the outlined analytical framework and the consideration of the previously mentioned indicators as a means to measure increasing Russian influence in the Middle East distinguishes this analysis from existing literature and hence adds to the scholarly debate on the subject.

The case studies presented in this thesis predominantly rely on scholarly literature in the form of books and academic journal articles. Think tank reports and articles are an additional and essential source. The sections on the economic and military dimensions incorporate quantitative data from organizations including the Observatory of Economic Complexity, United Nations International Trade Statistics Database, and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). To a lesser extent and with the aim of filling remaining information gaps, this thesis also includes information from newspapers, news agencies, and websites providing specialized content of value for the research question and the guiding hypothesis.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis contains four chapters. This chapter has established the overall framework of the thesis, outlining its research question, the guiding hypothesis, and the current state of the scholarly analysis of the subject. Chapters II and III present the case studies of Egypt and Turkey, respectively. As outlined earlier, the case studies follow a coherent framework, analyzing the employment of the Kremlin's diplomatic, economic, military, and popular instruments of power. Each case study concludes with a brief

reflection on the guiding hypothesis. The principal purpose of Chapter IV is to summarize the study's key findings and to present suggestions for further study.

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II. RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND EGYPT

A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RUSSO-EGYPTIAN RELATIONS

Russo-Egyptian relations were weak before the mid-1950s. According to Alexey Khlebnikov, tsarist and later Soviet Russia engaged Egypt only “occasionally.”⁹⁸ Still toward the beginning of the 20th century, he noted, Moscow maintained a “disinterest” for Egypt and other countries in the Middle East because there were only a few communist movements it could approach and because it assessed the potential for a respective movement to grow influential as very limited.⁹⁹ The 1952 military coup in Egypt which ousted King Faruq and made the so-called Free Officers led by Mohammed Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser the rulers of Egypt altered the momentum and laid the foundation for a Russo-Egyptian rapprochement under the Nasser presidency.

During the reign of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1953–1970) Soviet-Egyptian relations grew quickly and significantly. For Nasser, intensifying relations with Moscow provided first a means to oppose Western interventions into Egyptian politics; and second, a leverage in his effort to achieve favorable deals with Western countries to strengthen his military and the Egyptian economy.¹⁰⁰ Nasser’s interests merged with those of Nikita Khrushchev, who aimed at reinforcing Soviet military and economic ties with neutral or non-aligned states on a global scale and thus countering the influence of the United States in an increasingly confrontational global environment.¹⁰¹ In the regional context of the Middle East at the time, Egypt was an attractive partner to the Kremlin because it was the strongest political, military, and economic player of the Arab world. Against this backdrop, three

⁹⁸ Alexey Khlebnikov, “Russia and Egypt: A Precarious Honeymoon,” in *Russia Rising. Putin’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East and Northern Africa*, ed. Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, and Stanislav Secieru (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2021), 107.

⁹⁹ Khlebnikov, 107.

¹⁰⁰ Karen Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy towards Egypt* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 9–12; Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 110–11.

¹⁰¹ Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy towards Egypt*, 9–11; Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 110–11.

major developments shaped and deepened Russo-Egyptian ties.¹⁰² First, in 1955, Egypt concluded a major weapons deal with Czechoslovakia, which, of course, had the Kremlin's backing. Bilateral relations received a further push, when Moscow intervened diplomatically to bring the October War of 1956 to an end, thus helping Nasser to turn a military defeat into a political victory. Finally, the Soviet Union in 1958 agreed to provide financing as well as technical assistance for the construction of the Aswan (or: High) Dam, a mega infrastructure project of the time. In sum, these three events laid the foundation for close relations between Cairo and Moscow. However, as William Cleveland and Martin Bunton observe, this relationship never developed into a love affair. Rather, "Nasser and his Soviet counterparts were pragmatic men who recognized that they needed one another: Nasser received from the Soviets the weapons that gave credibility to Egypt's leadership role, and the Soviets obtained in Egypt a center of influence in the Middle East from which they contested U.S. efforts to contain them."¹⁰³

Under the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat (1970–1982), Soviet-Egyptian relations soured almost at the same speed as they had developed.¹⁰⁴ While under his predecessor Egypt and the Soviet Union shared and followed mutual interests, by the time al-Sadat took over the presidency he concluded that Egypt had leaned too far toward the Soviet Union. This conclusion resonated with Egyptian's popular discontent about the presence of Russians in the country. Consequently, al-Sadat changed Egypt's foreign policy track toward reinforcing bilateral ties with Washington.¹⁰⁵ As a first step in the pursuit of the new policies, he unilaterally ceased military-to-military cooperation with the Soviet Union by expelling most of its 20,000 military advisors in 1972. As Cleveland and Bunton stress, this marked the "the first step toward a major realignment of Egypt's relations with the

¹⁰² William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 6th edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westview Press, 2016), 294–97, 299–300; Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt a Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 195–200, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400839827>; Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Egypt: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991), 56–65, <https://www.loc.gov/item/91029876/>.

¹⁰³ Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 299.

¹⁰⁴ Cleveland and Bunton, 379–85; Tignor, *Egypt a Short History*, 204–6; Metz, *Egypt: A Country Study*, 76–77, 82–85.

¹⁰⁵ Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy towards Egypt*, 54–56; Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 113–15.

superpowers.”¹⁰⁶ Following this measure, Sadat in 1976 renounced the Soviet-Egyptian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation which he himself had signed only five years earlier. In 1977 he reached out to Israel, declaring his willingness to resolve the ongoing hostilities between Egypt and the Arabs on the one hand and Israel on the other. Following his November 1977 trip to Jerusalem and his address to the Knesset, under the mediation of U.S. President Carter, Egypt, Israel, and the United States signed the Camp David Accords in September 1978. The conditions agreed on in this accord became foundational for the March 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Though agreeing on a peace settlement with Israel isolated Egypt in the Arab world and separated it from the Soviet Union, it turned into the basis for decade-long U.S. support to Egypt.

During the last years of al-Sadat’s reign and throughout the presidency of his successor, Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), Soviet and later Russo-Egyptian relations remained limited and secondary to U.S.-Egyptian ties. As Jeremy Sharp observes, in the aftermath of the Camp David Accords Egypt became an “important country for U.S. national security” due to its geography, its demographics, and its almost unique stance toward Israel.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, Washington significantly ramped up its support for Cairo. Between 1978 and 2022, Egypt became one of the greatest recipients of U.S. military (USD 50 billion) and economic assistance (USD 30 billion) in the Middle East, second only to Israel.¹⁰⁸ Measured in terms of diplomatic exchange on the highest diplomatic levels, the difference between Russia and the United States is most striking. During his presidency, Hosni Mubarak traveled to the United States 23 times.¹⁰⁹ Inversely, U.S. presidents from the elder to the younger Bush between 1990 and 2003 met Mubarak on six occasions in

¹⁰⁶ Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 379.

¹⁰⁷ Jeremy M. Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL 33003 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022), Summary, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33003/120>.

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Relations With Egypt,” Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, April 29, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-egypt/>.

¹⁰⁹ Department of State, “Egypt—Visits by Foreign Leaders,” Office of the Historian, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/departments/history/visits/egypt>.

Egypt.¹¹⁰ Exchange between Mubarak and his Russian counterparts, in comparison, included only two visits of by Mubarak to Russia in 1997 and 2001, respectively. The first visit of a Russian president to Egypt did not occur earlier than 2005. It was the first in 40 years.¹¹¹

Under Mubarak’s successors, Morsi (2012/2013) and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (since 2014), Egypt has avoided establishing exclusive relations with any of the great powers. How its relations with Russia have developed in the diplomatic, economic, military, and popular dimension especially since the 2010s, and whether the Kremlin can exert influence over Egypt, is the subject of analysis for the remainder of this case study.

B. DIPLOMACY

Russian diplomatic engagement with Egypt increased significantly following the takeover of the presidency by al-Sisi in August 2014. Frequent meetings of the presidents as well as the introduction of the regular “2+2-format” between the foreign and defense ministers are clear indicators. However, Egypt’s voting behavior in the UNGA—long-term as well as in the context of Russia’s current aggression against Ukraine—does not indicate increased Russian influence in the diplomatic dimension under the current Egyptian presidency.

1. High-Level Meetings

Since the beginning of the 2000s, Russia and Egypt have re-established close and frequent diplomatic relationships on the highest political levels. Diplomatic engagement at the presidential level kicked off with President Putin’s visit to Cairo in 2005. Following this first visit of a Russian president to Egypt in four decades, diplomatic relations remained active. Reciprocal visits between the leaders of the two countries occurred on an almost annual basis between 2006 and 2013.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Department of State, “Egypt—Travels of the President,” Office of the Historian, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://history.state.gov/departments/history/travels/president/egypt>.

¹¹¹ Egypt State Information Service, “Mutual Visits,” December 10, 2017, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/121782/Mutual-Visits?lang=en-us>.

¹¹² Egypt State Information Service.

With al-Sisi taking over the Egyptian presidency in 2014, Russo-Egyptian diplomatic ties experienced an additional push. For one, this development reflected Egyptian discontent with its longstanding U.S. ally, which in the context of the Arab Spring in 2011 had dropped Mubarak, and, in 2013, had suspended its annual \$1.3 billion financial support as a reaction to the military coup by then Colonel al-Sisi. Additionally, the U.S. decision to distance itself from the new leadership in Cairo allowed Russia to fill a vacuum, providing the new strong man in Cairo with the opportunity to gain diplomatic recognition, purchase weapons systems notwithstanding a poor human rights record, and to realize prestigious infrastructure projects like the Al-Dabaa NPP.¹¹³

Against this backdrop, al-Sisi reached out to Russia and was welcomed to the Kremlin even before formally assuming the presidency.¹¹⁴ After his inauguration, he chose Moscow as the destination for his first official foreign visit as Egypt's head of state in August 2014.¹¹⁵ The following year, Presidents Putin and al-Sisi met each other three times, with President Putin traveling to Egypt in February and welcoming al-Sisi to Moscow in May and August, respectively.¹¹⁶ In 2016 and 2017, both leaders had conversations on the sidelines of the Group of 20 (G-20) summit in Hangzhou and the BRICS summit in Xiamen.¹¹⁷ Additionally, in December 2017, the two leaders met in Cairo where they attended the signing ceremony of the agreement to build Egypt's Al-

¹¹³ Khlebnikov, "Russia and Egypt: A Precarious Honeymoon," 109–10.

¹¹⁴ Oren Dorell, "Russia Offers Egypt No-Strings-Attached Arms Deal," *USA TODAY*, February 13, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/02/13/russia-egypt-arms-deal/5459563/>.

¹¹⁵ Vitaly Naumkin, "Russia, Egypt Draw Closer," *Al-Monitor*, August 13, 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/08/russia-egypt-putin-sisi-visit-ukraine-palestine.html>.

¹¹⁶ BBC News, "Russia's Putin in Cairo for Talks with Egypt's Sisi," BBC News, February 10, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31310348>; "Egypt's Sisi in Moscow for V-Day Celebrations," *Al Arabiya English*, May 9, 2015, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2015/05/09/Sisi-heads-to-Moscow-for-V-Day-parade>; "Egypt's President Sisi Meets Russia's Putin for Fourth Time," *Egyptian Streets*, August 28, 2015, <https://egyptianstreets.com/2015/08/28/egypts-president-sisi-meets-russias-putin-for-fourth-time/>.

¹¹⁷ Ahram Online, "Sisi, Putin Agree on Sending Russian Delegation to Inspect Egyptian Airports," accessed March 22, 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentMulti/242451/Multimedia.aspx>; Ahram Online, "Sisi Holds Talks with Putin on Sidelines of BRICS Summit in China," Ahram Online, September 4, 2017, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/276479/Egypt/Politics-/Sisi-holds-talks-with-Putin-on-sidelines-of-BRICS-.aspx>.

Dabaa NPP.¹¹⁸ Highlighting both the close Russo-Egyptian relations as well as the cordial relations of the two leaders, in 2018 President Putin invited his Egyptian counterpart for a three-day visit to Moscow and Sochi. During the visit, both leaders signed a bilateral agreement on a comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation. Tweeting about the meeting, President al-Sisi praised Vladimir Putin as “my friend.”¹¹⁹ On the occasion of the first Russian-African summit in 2019, co-hosted by Egypt, both presidents again met again Sochi.¹²⁰ That same year, they held talks on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Osaka and the Belt and Road Summit in Beijing.¹²¹

Since their last in-person meeting in the context of the October 2019 Russian-African summit, Putin and al-Sisi have replaced their face-to-face meetings with telephone and video conferences. Notwithstanding the intention of both leaders to hold at least annual meetings and an open invitation issued by President al-Sisi to his counterpart during their talks in Sochi, both leaders have not met in person since the end of 2019.¹²² However, the change of communication patterns does not indicate worsening relations between the two countries or their presidents. It is more likely, instead, that they are first a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21 and second a result of the Russian aggression against Ukraine since February 2022.

Adding to the visits on the head of state-level, Russia and Egypt have established the so-called “2+2 format.” Bringing together the foreign and defense ministers of both countries, the first meeting in this framework took place in November 2013 and was hosted

¹¹⁸ Deutsche Welle, “Russia, Egypt Sign Deal for Nuclear Power Plant,” December 11, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-egypt-sign-deal-to-construct-nuclear-power-plant/a-41745535>.

¹¹⁹ Egypt Today, “Sisi Stresses Strength of Egyptian-Russian Strategic Relations,” October 17, 2018, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/59102/Sisi-stresses-strength-of-Egyptian-Russian-strategic-relations>.

¹²⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Putin Hosts Sochi Summit As Russia Races For Influence In Africa,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 23, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-hosts-sochi-summit-as-russia-races-for-influence-in-africa/30231905.html>.

¹²¹ Egypt Today, “Sisi Thanks Russian Counterpart for Africa-Russian Summit,” accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/76169/Sisi-thanks-Russian-counterpart-for-Africa-Russian-summit>.

¹²² Egypt Today, “Putin to Visit Egypt next Year: Russian Envoy,” November 18, 2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/77902/Putin-to-visit-Egypt-next-year-Russian-envoy>.

by Egypt's then Secretary of Defense, al-Sisi. Since 2013, meetings have occurred alternately between Moscow and Cairo in 2014, 2017, 2018, and 2019.¹²³ Following the meeting in 2019, foreign ministers Lavrov and Shoukry praised the format as an “inseparable part of our relations, which have advanced to the level of comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation.”¹²⁴ The 2019 meeting is so far the last held between the two parties. As in the case of the meeting on the presidential level, the suspension of the format is likely not due to deteriorating relations between Moscow and Cairo. Rather it is a consequence of the pandemic and the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

2. Comparison to Other Great Powers

The frequency of high-level meetings between the presidents of Russia and Egypt exceeds respective meetings with the heads of state of the other great powers. Between 2014 and 2022, Presidents Putin and al-Sisi met 12 times. During the same period, meetings between al-Sisi and U.S. Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden remained limited to eight, whereas al-Sisi and Chinese President Xi came together nine times. Strikingly, the last U.S. president who visited Egypt was Barack Obama in June 2014.¹²⁵ The last official visits of an Egyptian president to the White House occurred during the Trump presidency in April 2017 and 2019, respectively.¹²⁶ All other meetings took place on the sidelines of other events. While this indicates a reluctance of U.S. presidents to visit Cairo and rather sour bilateral relations, quite the opposite is true for China. During his first visit to China soon after assuming the presidency, al-Sisi and Xi signed a “comprehensive strategic partnership” between their countries.¹²⁷ Following al-Sisi's second official visit to China

¹²³ Egypt State Information Service, “Mutual Visits.”

¹²⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Replies to Media Questions at the Joint News Conference with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt Sameh Shoukry Following Two-plus-Two Format Russian-Egyptian Talks with the Foreign and Defence Ministers,” June 24, 2019, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1464538/.

¹²⁵ Department of State, “Travels of the President.”

¹²⁶ Department of State, “Visits by Foreign Leaders.”

¹²⁷ Shannon Tiezzi, “China's Egypt Opportunity,” *The Diplomat*, December 24, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/chinas-egypt-opportunity/>.

a year later,¹²⁸ the Egyptian president in 2016 provided a great reception to the Chinese leader, including a fighter escort and personal reception at the airport.¹²⁹ Figure 1 provides an overview of meetings between President al-Sisi and the heads of state of the other great powers since 2014. Likely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 and 2021 no in-person meetings between al-Sisi and the heads of state of the great powers took place.

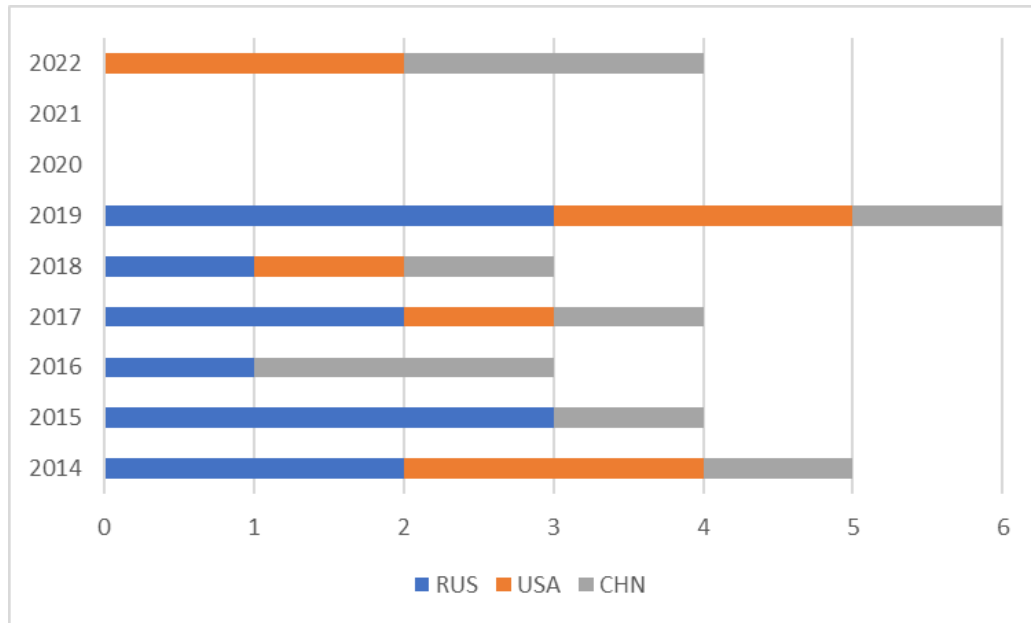


Figure 1. Meetings of Egyptian President al-Sisi with Heads of State of Other Great Powers¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Meets with President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi of Egypt," September 2, 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2015zt/jnkzsl70zn/201509/t20150907_705182.html.

¹²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Arrives in Cairo, Starting His State Visit to Egypt," January 21, 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2016zt/xjpdstajyljxgsfw/201601/t20160122_704473.html.

¹³⁰ Adapted from: Egypt State Information Service, "Home-SIS," accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/?lang=en-us>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/; Department of State, "Office of the Historian," accessed March 21, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/departments/history>; The Kremlin, "President of Russia-Events," accessed March 30, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news>.

3. Russian Leverage in the Diplomatic Dimension

Presenting evidence for Russian influence on Egypt is a difficult endeavor. However, this thesis aims to examine Russian influence on Egypt with reference to both countries' voting behavior in the UNGA. While the thesis's approach generally concurs with the argument about the correlation between growing diplomatic ties and increasing influence, this study goes one step further by arguing that, if it exists, this influence must be identifiable in Russian and Egyptian voting patterns in the UNGA.

Why focus on the UNGA? The UNGA is one of the principal fora of international politics with universal membership. Its resolutions are not legally binding, but countries' voting behaviors in the UNGA allow us to identify their positions on important issues of international politics. Though achieving support in the UNGA is not as important as in the United Nations Security Council, great powers like Russia have no interest in becoming politically isolated in the UNGA as well. This is especially true if they themselves or their actions become the subjects of resolutions. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Russia would call for the support of its partners in the UNGA and, if necessary, would exert pressure to achieve its desired outcomes. This assumption leads to the following expectations: if Russia had influence on Egypt, this would be visible in either *overall high* or *increasingly high* alignments in Russo-Egyptian voting patterns.

Data on Egyptian and Russian voting patterns, however, does not present evidence for either expectation. First, if one was to create a table to rank members of the UNGA along the percentage of voting alignment with Russia, Egypt would come in only 52 out of 193. This does not qualify as *overall high* alignment in voting pattern. Adding to and reinforcing this argument, the overall voting alignment between Russia and Egypt as depicted in Figure 2 does not indicate Russian influence on Egypt. Based on a total of 825 votes, the average alignment of Russo-Egyptian voting patterns between 2010 and 2019 was at 64.8 percent.¹³¹ Russia's highest alignment during the period was with Uzbekistan at 75.8 percent, based on 714 votes; the lowest with Israel at 25.2 percent, based on 807

¹³¹ "UN View: United Nations General Assembly Voting Patterns (1946–2019)," accessed March 23, 2023, <https://dataviz.yiqinfu.com/unview/>. The presented data is reproducible if country selection is "Russia" and tab selection is "Full Datatable."

votes. Alignments in Russo-Egyptian voting patterns even fall short in comparison to those of Sino-Egyptian voting patterns, which at the time were on average at 74.8 percent, based on 817 votes. Despite these unimpressive numbers, Russo-Egyptian alignment in voting patterns still considerably exceeds that between Egypt and the United States.

Second, there is also no proof of *increasingly high* alignment in Russo-Egyptian voting patterns following the takeover of the Egyptian presidency by al-Sisi in 2014. On the contrary, as Figure 2 depicts, alignments had a slightly declining tendency between 2010 and 2015, dropping from 72 percent to 68 percent. By 2016 they had even dipped to 59 percent, before slightly recovering to 62 percent in 2019. Thus, the intensification of Russo-Egyptian diplomatic ties had no positive effect on the alignment of Russo-Egyptian voting patterns and hence do not indicate Russian influence, too.

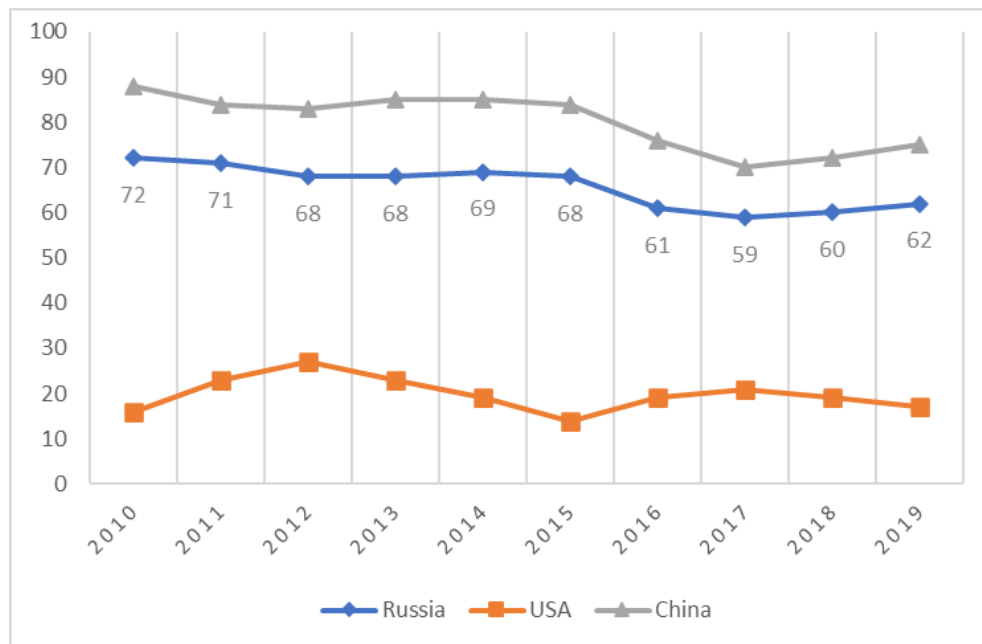


Figure 2. Alignment of Egypt's Voting Pattern in the UNGA with Great Powers¹³²

¹³² Adapted from: "UN View: United Nations General Assembly Voting Patterns (1946–2019)," accessed March 23, 2023, <https://dataviz.yiqinfu.com/unview/>. Data is reproducible if country selection is "Egypt" and tab selection is "Timeseries." In this case, the presented chart allows for the extraction of the exact percentages of voting coincidences in a selected year.

Adding to Egypt's long-term voting patterns in the UNGA, its voting patterns in the context of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine do not provide evidence for Russian influence. Since Russia attacked Ukraine on February 22, 2022, the UNGA has passed several resolutions on the issue. On March 2, 2022, Egypt joined the majority of states in the UNGA and voted in favor of resolution A/ES-11/1, demanding Russia to "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders."¹³³ Only three weeks later, Egypt also supported UNGA resolution A/ES-11/2, which reiterated previous demands for Russian withdrawal from occupied Ukrainian territory and expressed concerns about ongoing Russian attacks against civilians and infrastructure.¹³⁴ On October 12, 2022, Egypt voted in favor of UNGA resolution A/ES-11/4, calling its member states not to recognize the referendum about the secession of the four eastern Ukrainian oblasts Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia.¹³⁵ As recently as February 23, 2023, Egypt confirmed its previous voting patterns by supporting UNGA resolution A/ES-11/6 and its demands for immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of all Russian military forces from Ukrainian territory.¹³⁶

On two additional resolutions related to the conflict, Egypt voted to abstain. On April 7, it abstained from UNGA A/ES-11/3, requesting the suspension of Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council.¹³⁷ About half a year later, on November 14, it also

¹³³ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 2 March 2022 - - Aggression against Ukraine*, vol. A/RES/ES-11/1, 11th Emergency Session, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039>.

¹³⁴ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 24 March 2022 -- Humanitarian Consequences of the Aggression against Ukraine*, 11th Emergency Session, A/RES/ES-11/L.2, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965954>.

¹³⁵ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 12 October 2022 -- Territorial Integrity of Ukraine: Defending the Principles of the Charter of the United Nations*, 11th Emergency Session, A/RES/ES-11/L.4, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3990400>.

¹³⁶ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 23 February 2023 -- Principles of the Charter of the United Nations Underlying a Comprehensive, Just and Lasting Peace in Ukraine*, 11th Emergency Session, A/RES/ES-11/6, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4003921>.

¹³⁷ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 7 April 2022 - - Suspension of the Rights of Membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council*, vol. A/RES/ES-11/3, 11th Emergency Session, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3967778>.

abstained from the vote on UNGA A/ES-11/5, calling for Russia to pay war reparations.¹³⁸ In both cases, there were significantly fewer favorable votes in the UNGA than for the resolutions presented in the previous paragraph. Egypt's changing voting patterns on resolutions A/ES-11/3 and A/ES-11/5 thus reflect a broader trend among UN member states. In both cases, its abstention did not prevent the resolution from passing. Summarizing Egyptian voting patterns in the context of the Ukrainian war, there is no evidence of Russian influence. It either lacks the necessary means to create leverage or has not brought them to bear to influence Egypt's UNGA votes.

C. ECONOMY

Since the 2010s, Russo-Egyptian ties have also intensified in the economic dimension. This includes the engagement of the Russian energy company Rosneft in Egypt's Zohr natural gas field and Moscow's commitment to support the construction of the Al-Dabaa NPP by granting Cairo a USD 25 billion loan. Overall trade volumes between Egypt and Russia doubled between 2010 and 2021. To simplify financial transactions between the two countries, Russia also lobbied Egypt to join its MIR payment system.¹³⁹ However, while Russo-Egyptian economic ties have undoubtedly increased, they still fall significantly short if compared to Egypt's relations with the other great powers. Even more strikingly, the circumstances under which Egypt decided to stay away from MIR indicate that while Russia might create leverage from the Al-Dabaa deal and its trade relations, its overall influence in the economic dimension remains limited.

1. Relations in the Energy Sector

The latest Russo-Egyptian relations have a strong energy component. Reportedly with the consent of the Egyptian government, in late 2016, Russia's Rosneft acquired a 30

¹³⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 14 November 2022 -- Furtherance of Remedy and Reparation for Aggression against Ukraine, 11th Emergency Session, A7RES/ES-11/5, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3994052>.

¹³⁹ For further explanation of the MIR payment system, see Chapter II, Sec. C, of this thesis.

percent share in the Zohr natural gas field from Italy's energy company ENI.¹⁴⁰ Located in Egypt's exclusive economic zone about 170 miles north of the Egyptian shores, Zohr is the biggest natural gas field discovered in the Mediterranean to date. Estimates suggest that it stores 850 billion cubic meters (Bcm) of natural gas. Since it started production in 2017, Zohr has primarily served Egypt's expanding domestic needs. But it has also reconstituted Egypt's independence from Russian liquified natural gas (LNG) and has enabled Egypt to become an exporter of LNG.¹⁴¹ By the time of Rosneft's investment, Zohr was part of the bigger Shorouk concession, for which Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI) held a lease issued by Egypt's state-owned Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company. Under this lease, ENI was eligible to develop Zohr as the most promising part of the Shorouk concession.¹⁴²

But acquiring a 30 percent share of the Zohr natural gas field does not seem to have provided Rosneft (or Russia) with leverage, neither regarding ENI nor regarding Egypt. First and foremost, Rosneft remains a minority shareholder with few options to influence decision making. Second, as of now, Rosneft is only invested in the upstream production of Zohr natural gas. Once it has been produced, Zohr natural gas travels south through pipelines to the Egyptian mainland, where it is further channeled for either domestic use or export as LNG.¹⁴³ Consequently, Rosneft has only marginal influence—if any—over the distribution of Zohr natural gas. This may only change, if, as was reported by Russian

¹⁴⁰ Energy Egypt, "ENI Received Government Approval Prior to Selling Zohr Stake to Rosneft," December 14, 2016, <https://energyegypt.net/eni-received-government-approval-prior-to-selling-zohr-stake-to-rosneft/>.

¹⁴¹ Ahmad Kotb, "A Helping Hand for the EU," *Ahram Online*, June 22, 2022, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/470401.aspx>; Egypt Oil & Gas, "Dreams and Realities: Zohr Moves Toward Production," October 12, 2017, <https://egyptoil-gas.com/features/dreams-and-realities-zohr-moves-toward-production/>; Marc Espanol, "Egypt Breaks LNG Export Records with Eye on Europe," *Al Monitor*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/02/egypt-breaks-lng-export-records-eye-europe>.

¹⁴² ENI, "ENI Completes the Authorization Process for the Development of Zohr Gas Field," February 21, 2016, <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/press-release/2016/02/eni-completes-the-authorization-process-for-the-development-of-zohr-gas-field.html>.

¹⁴³ "Zohr Gas Field," *Offshore Technology* (blog), February 26, 2021, <https://www.offshore-technology.com/projects/zohr-gas-field/>.

media, Rosneft were to build a pipeline linking the eastern Mediterranean to Europe.¹⁴⁴ Given the current sanctions against major Russian companies, the presumably high costs for the realization of such a underwater pipeline and European countries' reluctance to expose themselves to Russian natural gas infrastructure, the implementation of such a major infrastructure project seems doubtful.

Russia and Egypt also collaborate in the civilian use of nuclear energy, thereby resuming a cooperation which dates to the Nasser presidency and includes the construction of a 2 megawatt (MW) research reactor.¹⁴⁵ Preceded by a memorandum of understanding dating to 2015, in December 2017, Egypt's minister for electricity and renewables, Shaker, and the CEO of Russia's Rosatom, Likhachev, signed the contract for the construction of Egypt's Al Dabaa NPP. Highlighting the significance of the event, the signing took place in the presence of both presidents.¹⁴⁶ In the contract, Rosatom agreed to the construction of four nuclear reactors of the VVER-1200 type, each with a capacity of 1,200 MW. To finance the project, Russia granted Egypt a loan of USD 25 billion. This debt is repayable at an interest rate of 3 percent over 22 years, beginning after the commissioning of the nuclear power plant. Adding to the construction of the NPP, Russia committed itself to provide fuel elements for the operating life span of Al Dabaa, to develop human resources and to support operations of the NPP for 10 years, and to build facilities to store spent fuel

¹⁴⁴ Energy Egypt, "Is Rosneft Looking to Build a Pipeline to Export Gas from Zohr to Europe?," Energy Egypt, December 16, 2016, <https://energyegypt.net/is-rosneft-looking-to-build-a-pipeline-to-export-gas-from-zohr-to-europe/>.

¹⁴⁵ Shaul Shay, "The Egypt- Russia Nuclear Deal," IPS Publications, November 2015, 2, <http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2021/ph241/bolodeoku2/docs/shay-2015.pdf>.

¹⁴⁶ Deutsche Welle, "Cairo and Kremlin Agree on Building a Nuclear Power Plant," October 2, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/cairo-and-kremlin-agree-on-building-a-nuclear-power-plant/a-18248404>; Deutsche Welle, "Russia, Egypt Sign Deal for Nuclear Power Plant," December 11, 2017.

elements.¹⁴⁷ Construction of Al Dabaa NPP began in 2022 and is supposed to be completed in 2029.¹⁴⁸

The Al-Dabaa project creates several principal vulnerabilities for Egypt. First, Egypt's decision to cooperate with Rosatom on the construction and the operation of Al Dabaa is a decades-long commitment. The operational lifetime of Al Dabaa will be 60 years. Even if Egypt succeeds in training a capable workforce, it will likely require Rosatom's support for maintaining and servicing safety-sensitive components (e.g., the reactor vessel or components of the nuclear primary system), until the decommissioning of Al Dabaa.¹⁴⁹ Given the volatility of international politics, it is possible that during this period relations between Russia and Egypt could cool down and possibly even deteriorate to the extent that Rosatom refuses to ensure services, thus creating leverage for Russia.

A significant part of operations and the second factor that deserves attention is the provision of nuclear fuel elements. Rosatom's NPPs and its reactors have special designs. In general, its reactors run on customized fuel assemblies, which are difficult to replace with fuel assemblies from other manufacturers.¹⁵⁰ Consequently, Egypt will depend on the

¹⁴⁷ Shaul Shay, "Egypt and the El—Dabaa Nuclear Plant," IPS Publications, January 2018, https://www.runi.ac.il/media/iqrltbii/shaul_shay11_01_18.pdf; Samuel M. Hickey, Salaheddin Malkawi, and Ayman Khalil, "Nuclear Power in the Middle East: Financing and Geopolitics in the State Nuclear Power Programs of Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates," *Energy Research & Social Science* 74 (April 1, 2021): 5–6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.101961>.

¹⁴⁸ Rasha Mahmoud, "Russian Company Begins Construction at Egypt's First Nuclear Power Plant," *Al Monitor*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/07/russian-company-begins-construction-egypts-first-nuclear-power-plant>; World Nuclear News, "Construction Begins for El Dabaa Unit 2," November 21, 2022, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/Construction-begins-for-El-Dabaa-unit-2>; World Nuclear News, "Applications Made to Build El Dabaa Units 3 and 4," January 12, 2022, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/Applications-made-to-build-El-Dabaa-units-3-and-4>.

¹⁴⁹ Matt Bowen and Paul Dabbar, "Reducing Russian Involvement in Western Nuclear Power Markets," *Columbia—SIPA Center on Global Energy Policy*, Commentary, May 23, 2022, 7, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/publications/reducing-russian-involvement-western-nuclear-power-markets/>.

¹⁵⁰ World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Fuel Fabrication," October 2021, <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/nuclear-fuel-cycle/conversion-enrichment-and-fabrication/fuel-fabrication.aspx>; Bowen and Dabbar, "Reducing Russian Involvement in Western Nuclear Power Markets." The latter, in their account, point to the example of Ukraine. To reduce Ukraine's dependence on the delivery of Russian rods, there have been successful attempts by Western companies to build rods which are compatible with Russian reactors. Bowen and Dabbar stress, however, that at least as of now capacities to build Western rods for Russian reactors remain modest (pp. 4, 11).

uninterrupted delivery of the required fuel assemblies by Rosatom, and fuel assemblies may turn into a lever to influence Egypt's political behavior.

Another aspect of potential leverage is the treatment of spent fuel rods. Media reports and scholarly writing that have scrutinized the agreement between Rosatom and Egypt point to the construction of a storage facility for spent fuel elements at the NPP site.¹⁵¹ It remains unclear, however, if this storage is intended to store these fuel elements indefinitely or temporarily. If the latter is the case, then a further point of leverage for Russia may be the delayed or refused removal of nuclear fuel elements for either permanent storage or reprocessing in Russia.

2. Russo-Egyptian Trade Relations

Between 2010 and 2021, Russo-Egyptian trade volume rose significantly. But while the overall increase in trade over the last decade is remarkable, Figure 3 demonstrates that after exceptional growth rates between 2016 and 2018, trade relations have cooled down again and have fallen under the general trend line. Taking off at a volume of USD 2.03 billion, combined exports and imports had more than doubled by 2014, rose sharply from 2016, and in 2018 peaked at USD 7.66 billion. Since then, however, the volumes decreased again, dipped to USD 4.53 billion in 2020, and by 2021 only slightly recovered to USD 4.77 billion.¹⁵² Given that the 2019–20 decrease is related to the pandemic and shrinking trade volumes on a global scale, the 2021 recovery indicates that overall Russo-Egyptian trade relations remain intact. However, given the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, it is far from certain that the extraordinary growth rates of 2016 to 2019 will return. And if they were not to return, one would have to question whether Egypt is economically part of the Russian orbit.

¹⁵¹ Shay, "Egypt and the El—Dabaa Nuclear Plant"; Shay, "The Egypt- Russia Nuclear Deal"; Mahmoud, "Russian Company Begins Construction at Egypt's First Nuclear Power Plant."

¹⁵² Trade Map, "Bilateral Trade between Russian Federation and Egypt," accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c643%7c%7c818%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

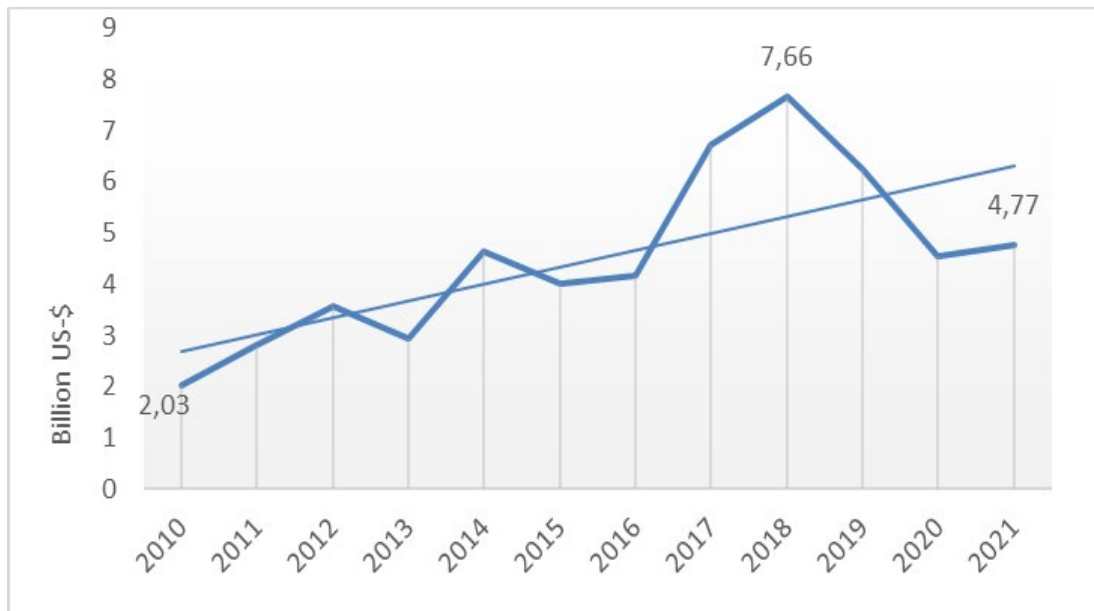


Figure 3. Russo-Egyptian Trade Volume¹⁵³

Trade relations between Russia and Egypt are highly unequal. From Russia’s perspective, Egypt is not an important trade partner. Between 2010 and 2021, Russian trade with Egypt on average accounted for less than 1 percent of its global trade.¹⁵⁴ In 2021, Egypt only ranked 25th among Russia’s export destinations and 54th in the list of originators of its imports. Inversely, Russia is an important trade partner for Egypt. Its share in Egypt’s global trade relations between 2010 and 2021 amounted to 3 to 4 percent on average. While it is less important as an export destination for Egyptian products, Russia persistently ranked among the top ten originators of Egyptian imports. The only exception to this rule was 2013 when Russia ranked only 12th. A further indicator of the asymmetry in Russo-Egyptian trade relations is their trade imbalance. Throughout the period analyzed,

¹⁵³ Adapted from: Trade Map, “Bilateral Trade between Russian Federation and Egypt,” accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c643%7c%7c818%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

¹⁵⁴ Data presented and examined in this paragraph is based on: Trade Map, “Bilateral Trade between Russian Federation and Egypt,” accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c643%7c%7c818%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

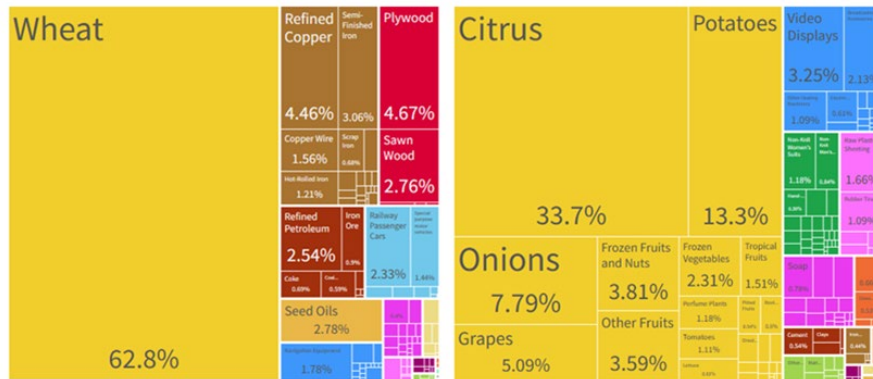
Russia achieved significant trade surpluses. Between 2010 and 2021, they never dropped below USD 1.5 billion and even climbed to more than USD 6.6 billion in 2018.

Trade relations with Russia entail potential vulnerabilities for Egypt. A first aspect to consider is Egypt's trade deficit. As trade between the two countries has historically been transacted predominantly in United States dollars, Egypt's unbalanced trade volume results in a continuous drain of USD to Russia.¹⁵⁵ While this has no direct impact on Russo-Egyptian relations, it generally weakens the resilience of Egypt's finances and potentially creates second order effects such as increasing foreign debt. A second factor is the relative importance of the partners for each other. As from a Russian perspective trade volumes with Egypt have been marginal; hence, Moscow is much less vulnerable to either accidental or intentional trade interruptions. Third, the commodities both countries trade with each other are of fundamentally different relevance for each party. On the forefront, as Figure 4 depicts, Egypt and Russia primarily trade agricultural goods. A closer look reveals, however, that the fruits Russia imports from Egypt fall primarily in the category of luxury goods. Egypt's wheat imports from Russia, inversely, have been crucial for meeting the basic needs of its populace. Russian wheat has literally fed the Egyptian people.¹⁵⁶ To the extent that wheat imports from Russia to Egypt have been crucial for Egyptians and the government in Cairo, Moscow has significant leverage. If it were to shorten or interrupt its wheat exports, this would likely result in massive price increases, which could possibly trigger protests and unrest with negative implications for system stability in Egypt.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Al Monitor, "Egypt to Adopt Russian Mir Payment System to Encourage Tourism, Trade Exchange," September 8, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/egypt-adopt-russian-mir-payment-system-encourage-tourism-trade-exchange>.

¹⁵⁶ Al Monitor, "Egypt Looks Further Afield for Wheat," August 29, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/egypt-looks-further-afeld-wheat>.

¹⁵⁷ Michael Tanchum, "The Russia-Ukraine War Has Turned Egypt's Food Crisis into an Existential Threat to the Economy," Middle East Institute Policy Center, March 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-ukraine-war-has-turned-egypts-food-crisis-existential-threat-economy>.



3. Comparison to Other Great Powers

In comparison to its rival great powers, Russia's trade relations with Egypt fall significantly short. Figure 5 shows that in 2021, the U.S.-Egyptian and Sino-Egyptian trade volumes surpassed Russia's by a factor of two and more than four, respectively. U.S.-Egyptian trade relations stagnated in the decade spanning from 2010 to 2021, starting at USD 9.19 billion and finishing at USD 9.29 billion. So, while Russia succeeded in narrowing the gap with the United States, the latter has still significantly larger trade volumes with Egypt than Russia. Sino-Egyptian trade volumes were very dynamic between 2010 and 2021. Starting at USD 6.96 billion in 2010, volumes had doubled by 2015, and since then rose further to USD 19.97 billion in 2021. Hence, while in the analyzed period Russia doubled its trade volume with Egypt, Sino-Egyptian trade almost tripled.

¹⁵⁸ Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Russia (RUS) and Egypt (EGY) Trade,” accessed March 21, 2023, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/egy>.

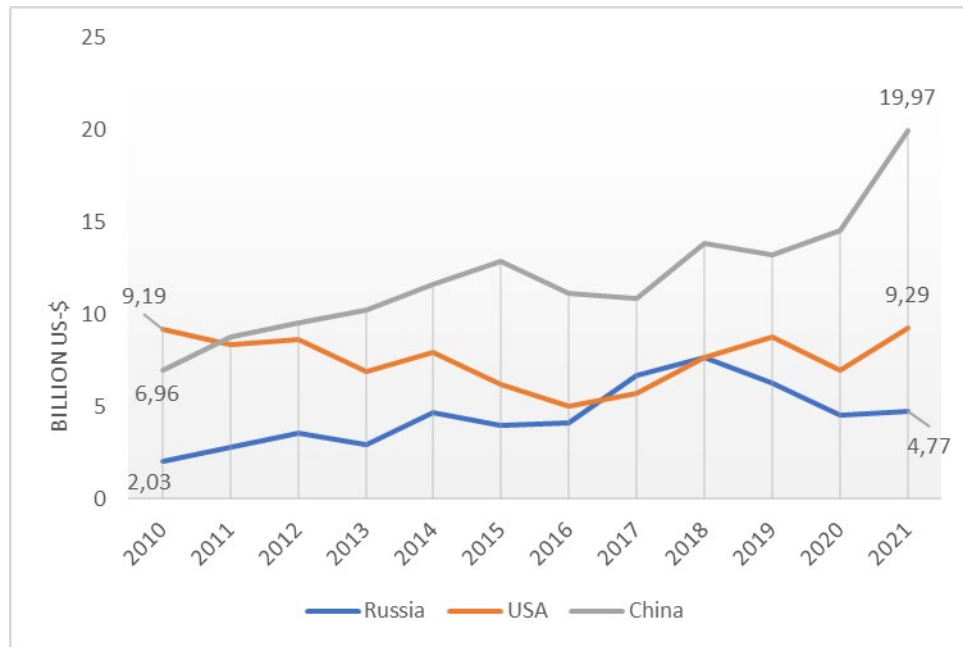


Figure 5. Egyptian Trade Volumes with the Great Powers¹⁵⁹

Assessing Russia's trade relations in comparison with the other great powers and drawing conclusions for their importance to Egypt and potential influence on it, several features deserve attention. First, of the great powers, Russia remains the country with the lowest overall trade volumes with Egypt. Second, while the United States maintains larger trade volumes with Egypt than Russia, it is the only great power whose trade relations with Egypt lack dynamism. Third, Sino-Egyptian trade at the same time accounts for the highest volumes among the great powers and demonstrates the highest dynamism. Consequently, while Russia and the United States possibly fight for the status of Egypt's second most preferred trade partner, neither of them seems able to challenge China's status as Egypt's primary trade partner. It is thus China that has the greatest potential to use its trade relations with Egypt as leverage.

¹⁵⁹ Adapted from: Trade Map, "Trade Statistics for International Business Development," accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>.

4. Introduction of Russia's MIR Payment System

Toward the end of 2022, Russia and Egypt examined options to enable financial transactions in rubles and through the Russian MIR payment system. Implementing both measures would have primarily helped Russia to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions, which included blocking Russian banks from the dollar-clearing system and the financial messaging system provided by the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT).¹⁶⁰ From a Russian perspective, integrating Egypt into MIR would not only have bolstered economic relations through simplified financial transactions, but the prospect of bringing Egypt into Russia's financial orbit was promising politically. First, Russia could have demonstrated to the West that its MIR payment system, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, was fully functional and attractive to its partners. It would have, thus, been proof of Russian capacity to evade sanctions in the financial sector. And second, convincing Egypt to disregard the sanctions would have sent a clear message that the sanctions did not discourage Russia's partners from maintaining close relationships in the economic sector—and possibly even beyond.

From an Egyptian perspective, the motivations for integrating into MIR and processing transactions in rubles were primarily economic. Entering Russia's financial orbit entailed the opportunity for Egypt to become a more important economic partner, possibly allowing the country to secure more favorable trade deals in the future. Additionally, Egypt would have become more attractive for Russian tourists, as withdrawing cash from Egyptian automated teller machines and the use of Russian credit cards would have become easier. Finally, paying in rubles would have alleviated the necessity to use Egypt's limited foreign exchange reserves to pay its imports from Russia.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Mohamed Sabry, "Egypt Plans to Use Ruble in Trade with Russia," June 25, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/egypt-plans-use-ruble-trade-russia>.

¹⁶¹ Al Monitor, "Egypt to Adopt Russian Mir Payment System to Encourage Tourism, Trade Exchange"; Middle East Observer, "Egypt to Use Ruble in Trade and Tourism with Russia," September 10, 2022, <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2022/09/10/egypt-to-use-ruble-in-trade-and-tourism-with-russia/>.

Whatever expectations and hopes toward closer cooperation existed when it became public in September 2022, they remained short lived. Amid strong and more frequent warnings from U.S. officials about the possible banning of banks applying MIR from the use of United States dollars, Egyptian (as well as other Middle Eastern) banks backed down. According to unnamed sources within Egypt's National Bank, "sanctions imposed on Russia by the U.S. and European allies have forced the Egyptian decision makers to scrap their support for the MIR system."¹⁶² Additionally, representatives of the National Bank suggested that abandoning MIR was linked to fears that joining it would have had a negative impact on negotiations for a loan from the International Monetary Fund which were ongoing at the time.¹⁶³

Viewing the economic dimension of Russo-Egyptian ties through the prism of Russian leverage and influence, we note the following key-takeaways. First, notwithstanding the doubling of trade volumes between Russia and Egypt, Russian trade with Egypt falls significantly short if compared to Egypt's trade relations with the other great powers. Hence, Russia's ability to create leverage from trade relations remains limited. Second, among the goods traded between the two countries, wheat is a strategic commodity for Egypt, and its dependency on wheat imports from Russian provides the latter with a significant leverage. Likewise, Russo-Egyptian cooperation in the nuclear energy creates vulnerabilities for Egypt. However, Egypt's decision to stay away from the MIR payment under the threat of U.S. secondary sanctions demonstrates Russia's inability to transform its leverage in noticeable influence. Moreover, it appears as if the United States is still more influential in Egypt than Russia.

D. MILITARY

Beyond the recent expansion of diplomatic and economic relations, Russo-Egyptian relations also grew in the military dimension. Two aspects deserve special attention. First, Russia became a major supplier of modern weaponry, including aircraft

¹⁶² Mohamed Sabry, "Egypt Freezes Russian MIR Payments to Avoid U.S. Sanctions," October 8, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/egypt-freezes-russian-mir-payments-avoid-us-sanctions>.

¹⁶³ Sabry.

and air defense systems, as it had been during the Cold War. Second, Russia and Egypt established exercises involving their respective navies, airborne and air defense forces. At the same time, however, Egyptian military engagement with other partners reveals Egypt's unwillingness to rely on its relations with Russia exclusively. Instead, it has diversified its arms purchases and its military cooperation alike. Thus, Russian influence in this dimension remains limited as well.

1. Russian Arms Deliveries

Overall, Russian arms deliveries to Egypt increased from 2010 to 2021. As the trendline in Figure 5 illustrates, the value of Russian arms exports to Egypt during this period more than doubled, from approximately USD 200 million to more than USD 400 million. Russian deliveries peaked in 2017 at a value of USD 1.1 billion and remained significantly higher than the general trend in 2018 and 2019.¹⁶⁴ According to SIPRI, during this period, Russia emerged as one of the principal suppliers of weaponry to Egypt.¹⁶⁵ As data provided by SIPRI illustrates, most weapons deliveries resulting in the peak between 2017 and 2019 fulfilled orders issued in 2015. They were preponderately scheduled to be delivered and paid for between 2017 and 2019 and included several major weapons systems. Worth mentioning are three S-300 VM/SA-23 air defense systems including 190 missiles, 46 Ka-52/ Hokum-B attack helicopters plus 2,000 anti-tank missiles AT-16 and AT-9, and 50 MiG-29 fighter/ground attack aircraft, including 300 short range air-to-air and 300 beyond-visual-range-air-to-air-missiles.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "TIV of Arms Exports to Egypt, 2010–2022," accessed March 21, 2023, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

¹⁶⁵ Alexandra Kuimova, "Understanding Egyptian Military Expenditure," SIPRI Background Paper, October 2020, 13, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-background-papers/understanding-egyptian-military-expenditure>.

¹⁶⁶ Kuimova, 20–23.

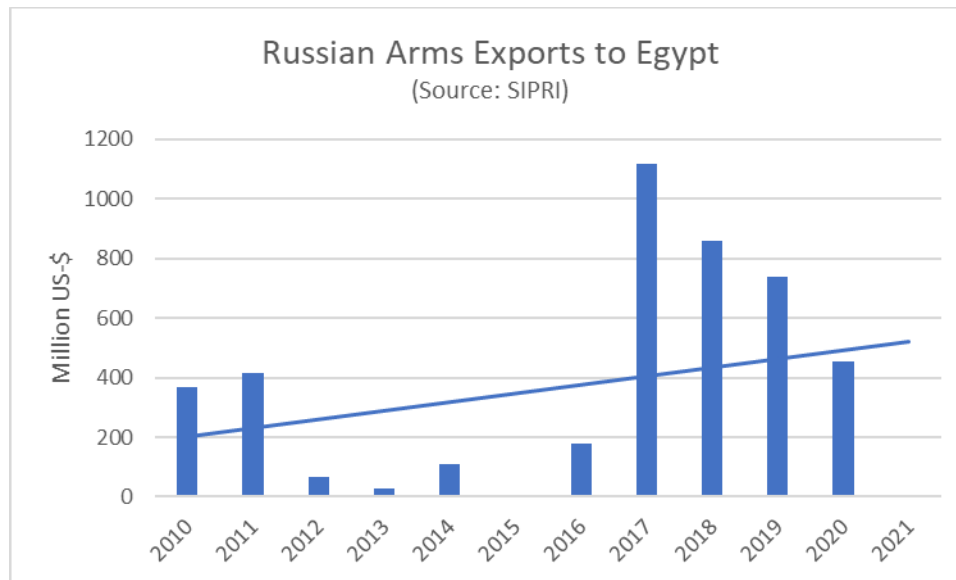


Figure 6. Egypt's Arms Purchases from Russia¹⁶⁷

Adding to the major arms procurements, Moscow and Cairo in 2019 also concluded a deal on 24 Su-35 multi-role aircraft, worth approximately USD 2 billion and scheduled for delivery to Egypt by 2023. It is, however, unclear, if the deal still stands.¹⁶⁸ As the Su-35 is an advanced fourth-generation aircraft, the 2019 deal raised the attention and criticism of the United States. Already in November 2018, then Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs R. Clarke Cooper addressed the Egyptian government, warning that finalizing the deal “puts them at risk of sanctions, and puts them at risk of loss of future acquisition.”¹⁶⁹ Only a few months later in April 2019, then Secretary of State Pompeo testified on the issue before Congress and stressed: “We’ve made clear that if those systems were to be purchased, the CAATSA [Countering America’s Adversaries Through

¹⁶⁷ Adapted from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “TIV of Arms Exports to Egypt, 2010–2022,” accessed March 21, 2023, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

¹⁶⁸ Dizboni and Karim El-Baz, “Understanding the Egyptian Military’s Perspective on the Su-35 Deal,” The Washington Institute, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-egyptian-militarys-perspective-su-35-deal>; Paul McLeary and Arie Egozi, “U.S. Threatens Egypt with Sanctions for Russian Arms Deals,” November 19, 2019, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/11/us-threatens-egypt-with-sanctions-for-russian-arms-deals/>.

¹⁶⁹ McLeary and Egozi, “U.S. Threatens Egypt with Sanctions for Russian Arms Deals.”

Sanctions] statute would require sanctions on the regime.”¹⁷⁰ Reportedly, Secretary Blinken also referred to the issue in a phone call with his Egyptian counterpart in February 2023, stressing his “concerns about [Egypt’s] potential purchase of Su-35 fighters.”¹⁷¹

As of the beginning of February 2023, the status of the Su-35 deal remains confusing if not contradictory. In May 2020, TASS news agency reported that production of the Egyptian Su-35 had started.¹⁷² Beginning mid-2021, reporting suggested that Egypt had received its first aircraft.¹⁷³ In May 2022, reports indicated that the construction of Egypt’s Su-35 was “almost complete” and that Egyptian pilots were conducting training with the aircraft.¹⁷⁴ Toward the end of the year and the beginning of 2023, the Su-35 deal took its latest turn, with reports pointing toward the possibility that Egypt and other buyers had canceled the agreement and that Iran had stepped in to buy the aircraft intended for Egypt.¹⁷⁵ From a U.S. perspective, the latest Congressional Research Report on Egypt points out that as of June 2022 there is no indication that the Russo-Egyptian Su-35 deal is “moving ahead.”¹⁷⁶

2. Russian Arms Deliveries in Comparison

Though Russia became increasingly important as a provider for modern weaponry, the Egyptian leadership has shown no appetite to make itself dependent on Russia alone.

¹⁷⁰ Umar Farooq, “Pompeo: Egypt Would Face Sanctions over Russian Su-35s,” Anadolu Ajansi (AA), April 10, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/pompeo-egypt-would-face-sanctions-over-russian-su-35s/1447386>.

¹⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry,” United States Department of State, February 23, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-egyptian-foreign-minister-shoukry/>; MENA Affairs, “Secretary Blinken Holds Phone Call with Egyptian FM,” February 23, 2021, <https://menaaffairs.com/secretary-blinken-holds-phone-call-with-egyptian-fm/>.

¹⁷² TASS, “Russia Launches Production of Su-35 Fighter Jets for Egypt,” May 15, 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/1157115>.

¹⁷³ Dan Arkin, “Egyptian Air Force Starts to Receive Su-35 Fighters,” *Israel Defense* (blog), July 5, 2021, <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/node/50719>.

¹⁷⁴ Ekene Lionel, “Production of Egypt’s Su-35s Almost Complete,” *Military Africa* (blog), May 31, 2022, <https://www.military.africa/2022/05/production-of-egypts-su-35s-almost-complete/>.

¹⁷⁵ Kirill Semenov, “Moscow Struggles to Sell Fighter Jets in the Mideast,” *Al Monitor*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/moscow-struggles-sell-fighter-jets-mideast>.

¹⁷⁶ Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, 8.

Instead, it has pursued a strategy of diversification, which has included the great powers the United States and China, on the one hand, and mid-size—and predominantly European—sellers like France and Germany on the other. Based on data provided by SIPRI, Figure 7 shows the share of Egyptian weapons purchases from selected countries from 2010 to 2021.¹⁷⁷ Interestingly and notwithstanding a significant drop of U.S. weapons deliveries in the years following 2015, the share of U.S. weaponry among Egypt’s overall weapons imports still accounted for about one-third and hence remained almost on par with Russia.

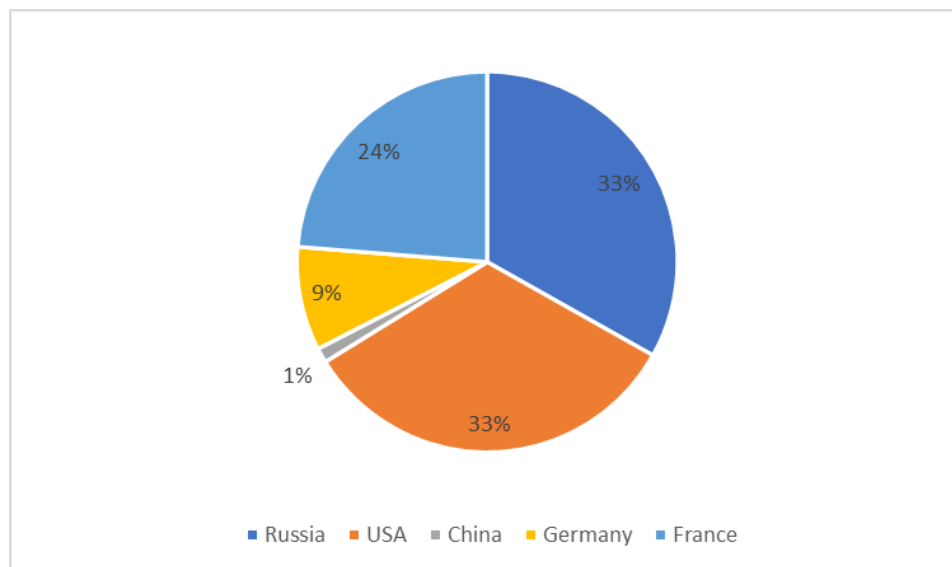


Figure 7. Share of Egyptian Weapons Purchases from Selected Countries between 2010 and 2021¹⁷⁸

Additional data provided by SIPRI and summarized in Figure 8 depicts the share of Egyptian weapons purchases from selected countries on a yearly basis between 2010 and 2021. Analyzed under the prism of Russian—U.S. rivalry, Figure 8 indicates that

¹⁷⁷ The reason for selecting the countries was either their status as a Great Power or a significant total value of weapons purchases (> USD 500 billion) between 2010 and 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Adapted from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “TIV of Arms Exports to Egypt, 2010–2022,” accessed March 21, 2023, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

Moscow at least temporarily gained an upper-hand in the latter half of the 2010s. Whereas the share of U.S. weapons exports to Egypt dropped massively from more than 80 percent in 2013 to less than 10 percent in 2017, Russia could increase its share from little more than 10 percent in 2016 to more than 70 percent in 2019. While this development is likely perceived as a success by the Kremlin, there is no reason for euphoria or hope that Moscow could become the dominant provider of weaponry for Cairo. Instead, Egyptian weapons purchases from European countries like France and Germany at the beginning of the 2020s affirms the previous assessment, according to which Egypt follows a strategy of diversification in the military dimension.

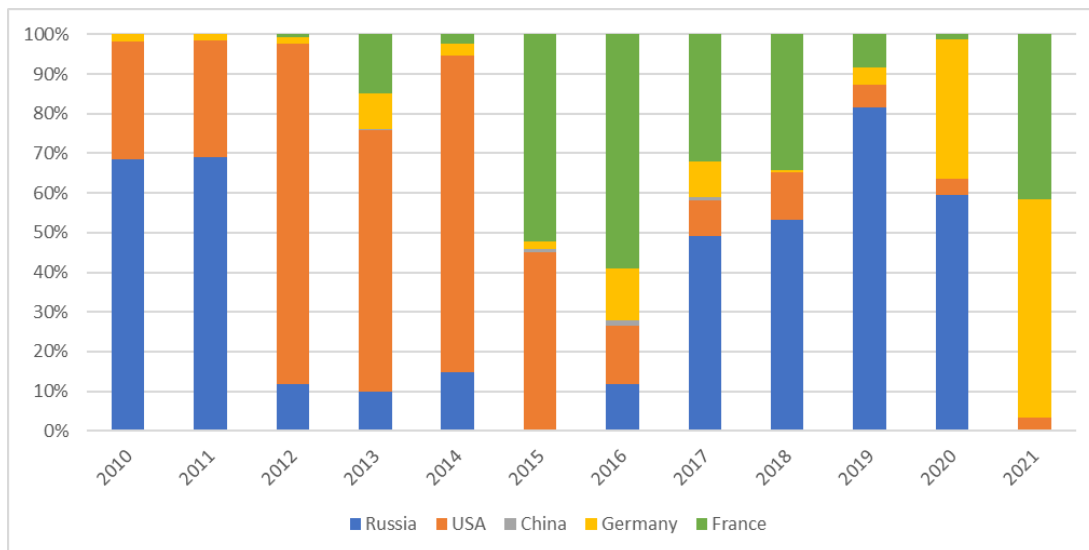


Figure 8. Share of Egypt's Arms Purchases from Selected Countries¹⁷⁹

3. Russo-Egyptian Exercises

Russia and Egypt have also strengthened their military ties through exercises. As of 2023, these have comprised common drills of Russian and Egyptian naval, airborne, and air-defense forces. *Bridge of Friendship*, which provides the umbrella for common drills of the Russian and Egyptian navies, dates to 2015 and thus has the longest history. Joint

¹⁷⁹ Adapted from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "TIV of Arms Exports to Egypt, 2010–2022," accessed March 21, 2023, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

Russo-Egyptian drills in this framework have brought together roughly a dozen warships including frigates, corvettes, patrol boats, landing craft, and support ships in 2015 and between 2019 and 2021. Underlining their appreciation for the exercises, both partners have not only dispatched flagships (i.e., Russia’s missile cruiser *Moskva* [2015] or Egypt’s helicopter carrier *Gamal Abdel Nasser* [2021]), but also joined the drills with their naval special forces.¹⁸⁰

The first *Defenders of Friendship* exercise occurred in 2016 and since then has provided the context for the common training of Russian and Egyptian airborne forces. The focus of these drills is on anti-terrorism. Highlighting the value of this series of exercises, Russian contingents in Egypt as well as Egyptian delegations to Russia have been led by flag officers. This deserves attention, as the number of participating troops has been modest, not exceeding a total of 500 and including not more than 200 soldiers from the respective guest country. The only exception to that rule was the 2019 drill, which consisted of a total of 1,000 troops from Russia, Egypt, and Belarus.¹⁸¹

Established in 2019, *Arrow of Friendship* has become the framework for the conduct of field exercises by the countries’ respective air defense units. The still only exercise included the deployment of several Russian air defense assets like the Buk-M2E and Tor-M2E surface-to-air missile systems and the Shilka-M4 self-propelled anti-aircraft gun. Media reporting about the event highlighted the presence of the Egyptian Air Force chief as well as the Commander of the Russian air defense forces. Official Egyptian

¹⁸⁰ Egypt Independent, “Egypt, Russia Conclude Joint Naval Drill ‘Friendship Bridge 2019,’” December 8, 2019, <https://egyptindependent.com/egypt-russia-conclude-joint-naval-drill-friendship-bridge-2019/>; Ahmad Eleiba, “Egyptian, Russian Navies Conclude Bridge of Friendship 3 Drill in Black Sea,” Ahram Online, November 26, 2020, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/395657.aspx>; Ahmad Eleiba, “Egypt, Russia Navies Conclude Bridge of Friendship 4 Drill in Mediterranean,” Ahram Online, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/1237/446210/Egypt/Defence/Egypt,-Russia-navies-conclude-Bridge-of-Friendship.aspx>.

¹⁸¹ Jörgen Elfving, “Egyptian Paratroopers on Russian Soil: ‘Defenders of Friendship 2019,’” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 133 (September 30, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/egyptian-paratroopers-on-russian-soil-defenders-of-friendship-2019/>.

government coverage of the drill praised the exercise as an indicator of the “deepness of Egyptian and Russian friendship.”¹⁸²

While military cooperation between Russia and Egypt has remarkably increased since 2015, to Cairo, Moscow is only one partner among others. According to the spokesperson of the Egyptian military, Egypt in 2021 hosted or participated in 41 international military drills. Of these, only two included Russia. In comparison, the year witnessed five field exercises between Egyptian and U.S. armed forces, and even ten drills bringing together Egyptian and French soldiers. Other European as well as Asian partners who held joint exercises with Egypt that year included Greece, Italy, Spain, India, and Pakistan.¹⁸³

E. POPULAR DIMENSION

Adding to Russia’s increased engagement with the Egyptian government in the diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions, Moscow is also attempting to win over the hearts and minds of ordinary Egyptians. In its attempt to favorably shape public opinion, the Kremlin heavily relies on the broadcasting outlets Russia Today (RT) Arabic and Sputnik Arabic. However, even though Egyptians receive the narratives disseminated by the Kremlin’s mouthpieces, surveys indicate that they do not catch on. Polls also allow us to gain an inside view on how favorable and how important Russia is in the eyes of the Egyptian populace. In sum, the analysis of the popular dimension of Russo-Egyptian relations indicates that Russian influence remains limited.

¹⁸² Egypt State Information Service, “Egyptian-Russian Military Exercise ‘Arrow of Friendship-1,’” March 9, 2022, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/164808/Egyptian-Russian-military-exercise-%E2%80%98Arrow-of-Friendship-1%E2%80%99?lang=en-us>; Hassan Abdel Zaher, “Egypt, Russia Bolster Military Cooperation with First Joint Air Defence Exercise,” *The Arab Weekly*, November 3, 2019, <https://the arabweekly.com/egypt-russia-bolster-military-cooperation-first-joint-air-defence-exercise>.

¹⁸³ Egypt State Information Service, “Egypt Hosted 29 Joint Military Drills in 2021,” State Information Service, January 2, 2022, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/161783?lang=en-us>.

1. Shaping Perceptions through RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic

RT and Sputnik Arabic are the Kremlin's two principal media outlets in the Middle East. Headquartered in Moscow, the Arabic broadcasting offshoot of the RT family is its second oldest, preceded only by the English-speaking branch. Since May 2007, RT Arabic has been disseminating its programming in the Middle East via open-access satellite television and the internet, including strong activities on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Thematically, it covers Russian politics, economics, culture, and other aspects, as well as developments in the Middle East. RT Arabic makes use of a variety of journalistic formats and runs a dense network of Arabic speaking correspondents throughout the Middle East including Egypt.¹⁸⁴ Sputnik Arabic went on air in November 2014 and since then has been spreading its narratives as broadcasts via its website and through its newswire services. According to its own proclamations, it employs more than 80 Arabic speaking authors, working in more than 50 countries and producing journalistic formats spanning from breaking news to analysis. One of Sputnik Arabic's newswires is based in Cairo.¹⁸⁵

RT and Sputnik Arabic have a significant reach throughout the Middle East. The latest available data as reported by RT indicates that its news channel in 2015 had attracted about 6.7 million viewers in six Arab countries (Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq). In these countries, RT Arabic outperforms Arabic speaking broadcasts of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Sky News (both sponsored by the United Kingdom), Al Hurra (sponsored by the United States), and China Global Television Network (previously known as China Central Television).¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Donald N. Nelsen, "Russia in the Middle East: A New Front in the Information War?," in *Russia in the Middle East*, ed. Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 270–71, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-middle-east-new-front-information/>; Anna Borshchevskaya and Catherine Cleveland, "Russia's Arabic Propaganda: What It Is, Why It Matters," Policy Notes, no. 57 (2018): 2, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-arabic-propaganda-what-it-why-it-matters>.

¹⁸⁵ Nelsen, "Russia in the Middle East," 271; Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, "Russia's Arabic Propaganda," 2.

¹⁸⁶ Nelsen, "Russia in the Middle East," 274–75; Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, "Russia's Arabic Propaganda," 5–6.

Looking more closely into the activities of Russian-controlled media in Egypt, it is important to recognize Sputnik's successful attempts to cooperate with local media and to establish itself as a credible media outlet. Correlating with increasing political ties, Sputnik Arabic in 2015 signed a memorandum of cooperation with Egypt's *Al-Ahram* newspaper and in 2016 expanded its cooperation by concluding an agreement with *Akhbar al-Yaum* newspaper. Both agreements include information exchange and content sharing.¹⁸⁷ Consequently, *Al-Ahram's* English speaking website publishes RT and Sputnik stories directly alongside the reporting of international news agencies like Reuters, thereby blurring the boundaries and differences between journalistically researched news and state-spread propaganda. According to the mentioned study published by RT in 2015, 30 percent of the Egyptians perceived it to publish "relevant and reliable news reports."¹⁸⁸

2. Info Operations in the Context of Russia's Aggression in Ukraine

As soon as Russia's war against Ukraine unfolded in February 2022, RT and Sputnik Arabic ramped up their campaign to frame the events to the Kremlin's advantage and to counter information provided by Ukrainian and Western media. In the first weeks, RT and Sputnik Arabic dominated the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war on Arabic-speaking websites in terms of speed and number of articles posted. Figure 9 highlights that RT and Sputnik Arabic websites each posted more war-related content than broadcasters like Al Jazeera, Al Arabia, and Sky News Arabia combined. Additionally, RT and Sputnik Arabic also published more war-related content on Facebook than did the Arabic-speaking Western news broadcasters.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Nataliya Bugayova and George Barros, "Institute for the Study of War," January 15, 2020, <http://dev-isw.bivings.com/>.

¹⁸⁸ The study is cited in: Nelsen, "Russia in the Middle East," 275.

¹⁸⁹ Ahmad Nour, "Analysis: Behaviour of Russia's Arabic Media during the Ukraine War," BBC Monitoring, June 9, 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203j4hs>.

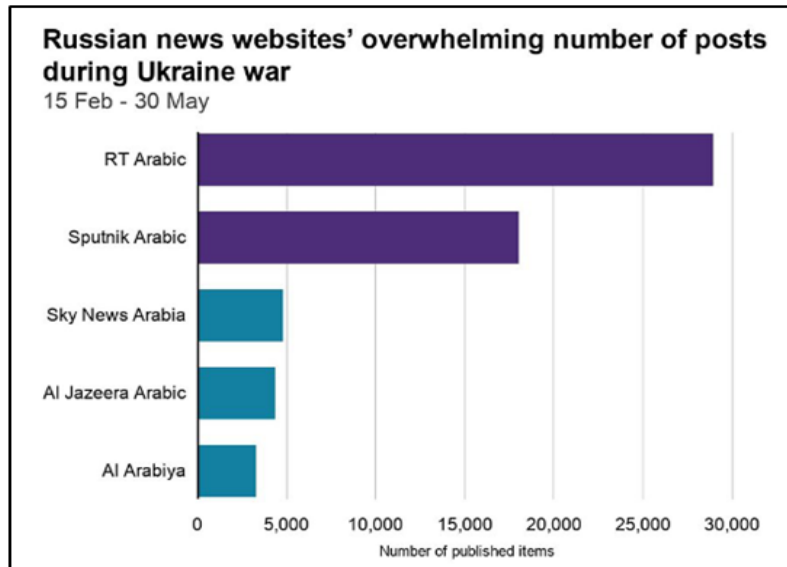


Figure 9. Russian News websites' Overwhelming Number of Posts between February and May 2022, at the start of the Ukraine War¹⁹⁰

In terms of content, RT and Sputnik Arabic followed a dual strategy, aiming simultaneously at legitimizing Russian actions and discrediting Ukraine's defenses, including the support provided by the West. According to BBC media monitoring, both agencies denounced Ukrainians as Nazis who committed atrocities in the eastern regions of Ukraine and abused locals as human shields. States supporting Ukraine in general and members of NATO, in particular, were disparaged as warmongers who had not only forced Russia into a war of self-defense but were also prolonging the war through weapons deliveries to Ukraine.¹⁹¹ On the other hand, according to the same source, RT and Sputnik adopted the Kremlin's official line, including reports on the successes of the Russian armed forces. Postings praised the efficiency and precision of Russian weaponry and portrayed Russian soldiers as protectors and caring providers of humanitarian aid to the (primarily Russian) populace in Ukraine's eastern oblasts.¹⁹² In sum, RT and Sputnik Arabic aimed to flip the story of the Ukraine war.

¹⁹⁰ Source: Nour.

¹⁹¹ Nour.

¹⁹² Nour.

Notwithstanding the obvious efforts of the Russia-affiliated broadcasters, there are reasons to doubt that they have shaped the perceptions of the Egyptian populace in the Kremlin's favor and in this regard exercised influence. One month into the war, in March 2022, the Washington Institute conducted a representative survey among Egyptians, asking: *What is your view of the Russian military actions in Ukraine?*¹⁹³ The answer to the question was unequivocal. A striking 74 percent of the respondents answered that they viewed Russian actions as either very negative (43 percent) or somewhat negative (31 percent). Those expressing a positive view accounted for little more than one-fifth, split between 17 percent explaining that they had a somewhat positive view of Russian military actions and 5 percent revealing a very positive view. Since March, the survey has been repeated in August and November. As Figure 10 illustrates, the attitude of Egypt's public toward Russian military actions in Ukraine has changed at best marginally during this period. As of November, there is still a very strong majority of Egyptians (73 percent) expressing a negative view of Russia's military actions in Ukraine, while only 23 percent have revealed a positive attitude.

3. Assessing Russia's Reputation and Importance

Adding to the previous snapshot, other surveys have studied the appreciation for Russia among the Egyptian public. Covering annual surveys between 2009 and 2014, the Pew Research Center (Pew) found that during this period Russia's reputation had steadily declined. Within only six years, the percentage of Egyptians having a favorable opinion about Russia dropped from 48 to 24 percent.¹⁹⁴ In sharp contrast to this development, a survey by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBIGC) in 2022 suggested that Russian reputation had recovered. At the time the survey was conducted, 58 percent of Egyptians expressed a favorable opinion of Russia.¹⁹⁵ While this is a desirable outcome

¹⁹³ The Washington Institute, "TWI Interactive Polling Platform," June 30, 2022, (Question: What is your view on the Russian military actions in Ukraine?), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptians-oppose-russias-move-ukraine-yet-half-still-value-ties-moscow>.

¹⁹⁴ Pew Research Center, "Global Indicators Database," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, March 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/>.

¹⁹⁵ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, "The Changing Face of the New Middle East," accessed March 22, 2023, <https://new-middle-east-polling.institute.global/>.

from the Kremlin's perspective, comparative analysis shows that it is at best a partial success. Notwithstanding its increased reputation among Egyptians, according to the TBIGC survey, Russia still lags behind the United States (75 percent) and China (79 percent).

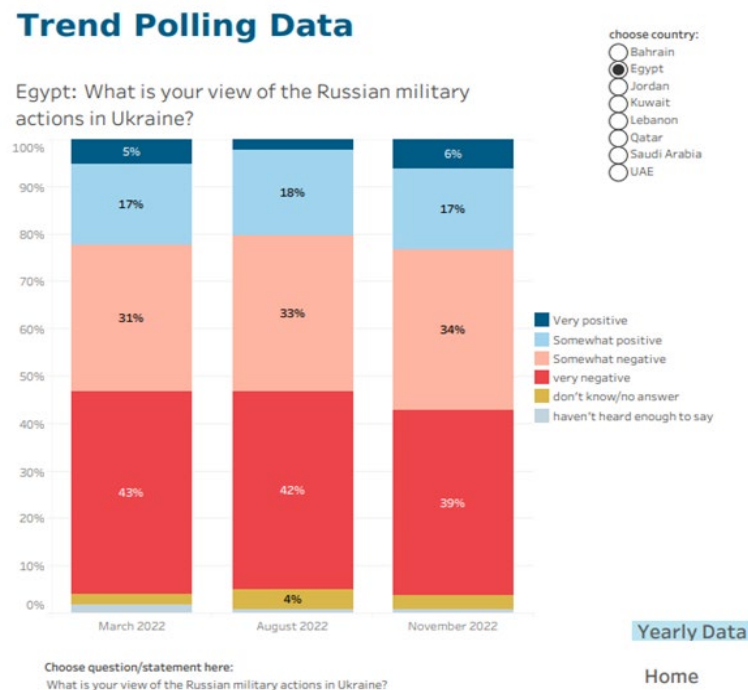


Figure 10. Egyptian Response to Survey: What Is Your View on the Russian Military Actions in Ukraine? Between March and November 2022¹⁹⁶

The data collected by TBIGC, however, must be taken with a grain of salt for two reasons. First, the survey is not embedded into a series which would allow for the identification of changes over time. This makes it a simple snapshot with relatively weak validity. Second, and possibly more relevant, the overall positive attitude of Egyptians vis-à-vis Russia as expressed in the survey conducted by the TBIGC stands in (sharp) contrast

¹⁹⁶ Source: The Washington Institute, "TWI Interactive Polling Platform," June 30, 2022, (Question: What is your view on the Russian military actions in Ukraine?), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptians-oppose-russias-move-ukraine-yet-half-still-value-ties-moscow>.

to the overall negative perception of Russian military actions, as they have been identified by the Washington Institute and presented in the previous section. Of course, having a negative view of Russia's military actions in Ukraine does not necessarily correspond to a generally unfavorable attitude toward Russia. However, given the strong rejection of Russia's military actions among Egyptians, the diverging attitudes as expressed in both surveys are difficult to explain.

In addition to Russia's reputation, the perception of its importance deserves attention. According to surveys conducted on behalf of the Washington Institute, the percentage of Egyptians who judged good relations with Russia to be "somewhat" or "very important" oscillated around 40 percent from 2017 to 2021.¹⁹⁷ Only by the beginning of 2022 did surveys demonstrate change. As Figure 11 shows, between November 2021 and March 2022 the number of Egyptians who perceived good relations with Russia as important jumped by ten points and since then has remained stable at about 50 percent. This jump correlates with the Russian attack on Ukraine and its ramifications for Egypt, including increasing prices for basic nutrition.¹⁹⁸ So while available data does not prove a direct connection between these two developments, it is at least one possible explanation. And from Russia's perspective, it is also a desirable effect.

¹⁹⁷ "TWI Interactive Polling Platform," The Washington Institute, accessed March 22, 2023, (Question: How important is it to have good relations with Russia?), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform>.

¹⁹⁸ World Economic Forum, "Egyptians Count Rising Bread Costs as Ukraine War Disrupts Wheat Exports," World Economic Forum, March 22, 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/egyptians-rising-bread-costs-ukraine-war-disrupts-wheat-exports/>.

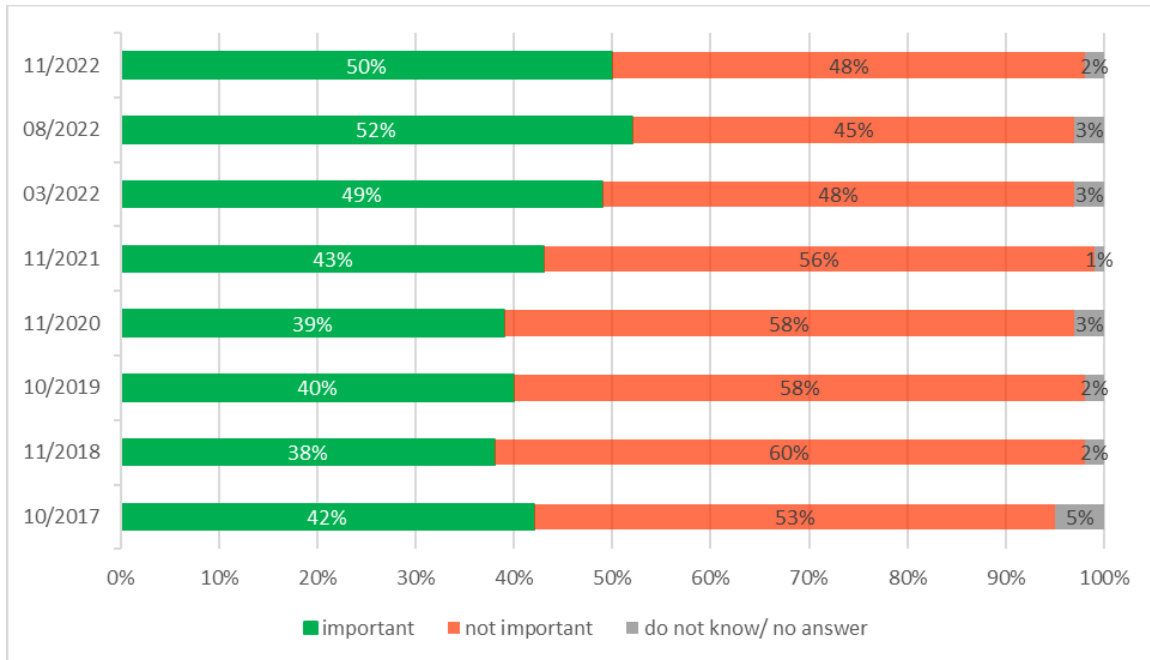


Figure 11. Egyptian’s View of Russia’s Importance¹⁹⁹

Notwithstanding the—from a Russian perspective—positive development just outlined, analysis shows that relative to the other great powers Russia again shows weaker performance. Based on data provided by the Washington Institute, Figure 12 depicts how Egyptians rated the importance of the United States and China in comparison. Derived from this table, three observations deserve special attention. First, throughout the period covered, China clearly outperformed the other great powers. Second, while during 2022 Russia narrowed the gap between itself and both of its rival powers, it failed to close that gap, much less reverse it. Third, the United States and China have been able to convince most Egyptians of the relevance of good relations since 2017. In sum, Figure 12 suggests that in comparison to the other great powers, Russia’s increasing engagement with Egypt did not pay off. Especially if one considers the question for the importance of good relations with an actor to imply the overall perception of its importance, the survey reveals Russia’s

¹⁹⁹ Adapted from: “TWI Interactive Polling Platform,” The Washington Institute, accessed March 22, 2023, (Question: How important is it to have good relations with Russia?), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform>.

junior status. At least in the perception of Egyptians, it is the least important of the great powers and—derived from perceived importance—presumably the least influential one.

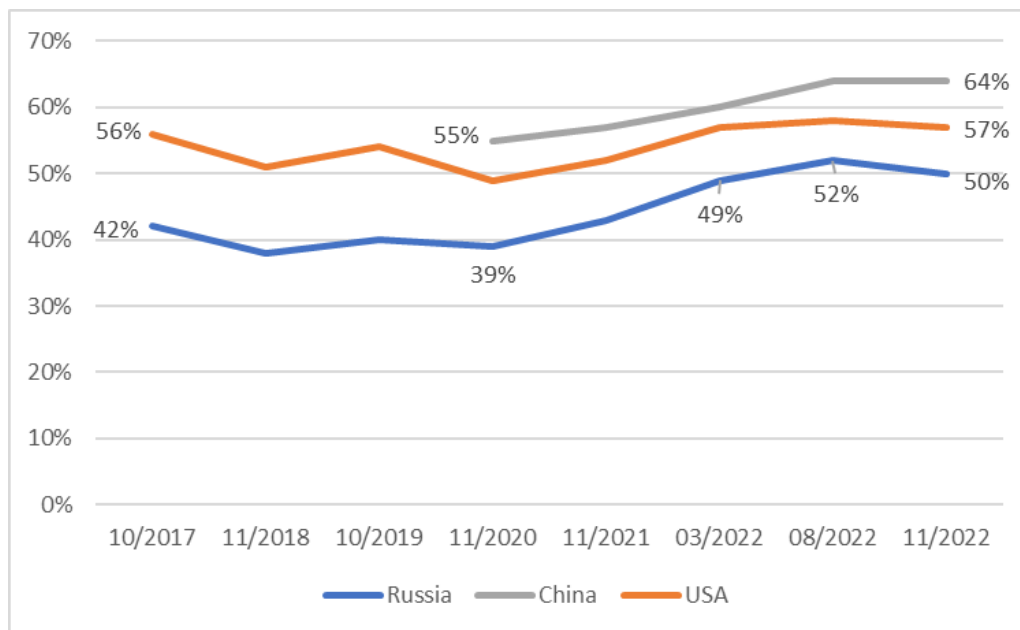


Figure 12. Share of Egyptians with Favorable View on Great Powers²⁰⁰

F. CONCLUSION

The examination of Russian engagement with and influence over Egypt reveals a mixed picture. On the one hand, Russo-Egyptian engagement has obviously increased. Throughout the dimensions analyzed, Russia and Egypt are more closely intertwined in 2022 than they had been at the beginning of the 2010s. The taking over of the Egyptian presidency by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2014 facilitated closer cooperation in the diplomatic field. The increase of Russo-Egyptian trade volumes, the engagement of Rosneft and Rosatom in Egypt’s energy sector, and especially Cairo’s and Moscow’s reciprocal long-term commitment in the Al Dabaa project demonstrate both countries’ interests to bolster

²⁰⁰ Adapted from: “TWI Interactive Polling Platform,” The Washington Institute, accessed March 22, 2023, (Questions: How important is it to have good relations with the United States?, How important is it to have good relations with China?), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform>.

their economic ties. In the military dimension, the life cycle of the advanced weaponry that Cairo has purchased from Moscow creates a long-term commitment. Together with expanded military exercises, this signals reciprocal interest in closer military-political ties. Finally, cooperation between the Kremlin's mouthpieces RT and Sputnik Arabic and Egyptian media are evidence for Moscow's increased determination to not only address the state level in Egypt, but also to reach out to the Egyptian populace. Obviously, the Kremlin does not want to leave the spread of its narratives and the shaping of Egypt's public opinion to chance.

On the other hand, evidence of Russian leverage and influence is very limited. In the diplomatic dimension, Egypt's voting behavior in the UNGA signals its willingness to take positions which clearly contradict Russian interests. Cairo's decision to cancel its plans to join MIR against the backdrop of U.S. sanction threats also sends an unpleasant message to the Kremlin: notwithstanding increased trade and cooperation in the civilian use of nuclear energy, to Egypt the United States remains at least a partner of equal influence and importance—and consequently too influential and important to jeopardize the partnership for the hope of continuously close economic cooperation with Russia. The comparison of Egyptian weapons purchases as well as its military-to-military cooperation with Western countries demonstrates that Egypt is not betting on the Russian horse alone. And even worse, from a Russian perspective, if reports about the cancellation of Su-35 fighters were correct, this would be not only further evidence for U.S. influence but also a signal that Russian weaponry has lost its appeal in Egypt. Finally, the perception of Russia's war against Ukraine among the Egyptian populace reveals that the Kremlin's narratives do not resonate with the Egyptian public. Hence, Russia has, at best, limited influence in the popular dimension.

In a nutshell, from afar, the Kremlin's achievements in Egypt and vis-à-vis Cairo seem impressive. Close-up shots reveal, however, that its performance has been only moderate. In this sense, Russia resembles an illusionary giant.

III. RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND TURKEY

A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RUSSO-TURKISH RELATIONS

Russia and Turkey are bound by a more than 500-year-long history, reaching back to the Ottoman and tsarist empires. Imperial relations were generally conflictual but also included selective cooperation, when acting together served both countries purposes. As Dimitar Bechev observes, “relentless struggles for territory and dominance, feuds, and incessant bloodsheds” characterized the history of Russia and Turkey from Ivan the Terrible in the early 16th century to the end of World War I.²⁰¹ Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Tsarist Russia’s expansion towards the Black Sea aimed to gain access to warm water ports. This effort threatened the territorial integrity of the Ottoman empire and led to its dislodging from large parts of today’s Ukraine, Moldova, the Caucasus, and southeastern Europe. In total, armies of the Ottoman sultans and Russian tsars crossed swords for dominance in these regions 12 times.²⁰² As a result, the Ottoman sultans generally perceived Tsarist Russia as a threat. But, while conflict dominated the relations between the two empires, at times, they had converging short-term interests, too. For example, a combined Russo-Ottoman fleet in 1799 sailed to Corfu and defeated French forces on the island. Similarly, a tsarist force deterred an Egyptian landing force that attempted to land at Üsküdar (present-day Istanbul) in 1831.²⁰³

After World War I, with the Tsarist Empire replaced by the Bolshevik Soviet Union and the Ottoman Empire reduced to its Anatolian core, the two countries developed a partnership which was to last until the late 1930s. During the Turkish War of Independence (1919–22), the Soviet Union provided important assistance to Atatürk and his Turkish National Movement, as the Soviet leadership of the time perceived the Turkish struggle as

²⁰¹ Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 142.

²⁰² Evren Balta and Mitat Çelikpala, “Turkey and Russia: Historical Patterns and Contemporary Trends in Bilateral Relations,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*, ed. Güneş Murat Tezcür (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 586, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190064891.013.12_update_001; Bechev, *Rival Power*, 142.

²⁰³ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 142–43.

a fight against imperialism.²⁰⁴ Consequently, in 1925, Turkey and the Soviet Union signed a treaty of neutrality and friendship.²⁰⁵ Later, in the 1920s, Soviet and Turkish forces together crushed the First Armenian Republic which had arisen as an independent state after the collapse of the tsarist empire. When World War II broke out, Turkey, in principle, remained neutral.²⁰⁶ However, its strong rejection of revisionist and expansionist tendencies resulted in a closer alignment between Turkey and Western powers like France and Great Britain.²⁰⁷ The signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939 as well as the notification by the Soviet leadership that it would not extend the 1925 treaty put an end to increasingly close ties between Russia and Turkey.²⁰⁸

Once World War II had ended and the Cold War dawned, the Turkish leadership decided to formally side with the West. But notwithstanding this general orientation, Turkish and Soviet leaders found fields of cooperation, too. The main driver for Turkish alignment with the West was the re-emerging fear of Soviet expansionism. These concerns were nourished by Stalin's calls to revise Turkey's borders in the east and his claims of Soviet basing rights in the Turkish Straits.²⁰⁹ Against this backdrop, Turkey first sought bilateral U.S. support and in 1952 became a well-appreciated member of NATO.²¹⁰ Superpower détente in the 1960s and tensions between Turkey and the United States regarding Cyprus provided the context for Soviet-Turkish reengagement. Although Turkey remained anchored in NATO, it became one of the largest recipients of Soviet development aid by the end of the 1960s. Together, the Soviet Union and Turkey initiated and executed significant infrastructure projects, including an oil refinery and factories for aluminum and steel.²¹¹ Later, in the 1980s, the countries also laid the foundations for their cooperation in

²⁰⁴ Bechev, 144.

²⁰⁵ Balta and Çelikpala, "Turkey and Russia," 587.

²⁰⁶ Pavel K. Baev, "Turkey and Russia," in *The Routledge Handbook of Turkish Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 414.

²⁰⁷ Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd. ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 202.

²⁰⁸ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 144; Balta and Çelikpala, "Turkey and Russia," 587; Zürcher, *Turkey*, 203–4.

²⁰⁹ Balta and Çelikpala, "Turkey and Russia," 587–88.

²¹⁰ Baev, "Turkey and Russia," 414; Balta and Çelikpala, "Turkey and Russia," 588.

²¹¹ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 144.

the energy sector. In 1984, during a visit of Russian prime minister Chernomyrdin to Ankara, both sides inked an energy agreement which two years later turned into a 25-year commercial contract for natural gas deliveries from Russia to Turkey. Likewise, the beginnings of Russo-Turkish trade relations date to this period.²¹²

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the potential for Russo-Turkish confrontation was significant. With the Soviet Union unravelling at the beginning of the 1990s, Turkish leaders embraced the idea of Turkey becoming the uniter and leader of the Turkic people residing in the territories stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia, a vision that was fundamentally at odds with Russian interests.²¹³ In the violent conflicts erupting in the early 1990s, from Yugoslavia to Nagorno-Karabakh to Chechnya, Russia and Turkey took opposing stances.²¹⁴ In the economic dimension, Moscow and Ankara favored diverging routes for Caspian oil and natural gas to the consumers in Europe. Whereas Russia lobbied for routes connecting the Caspian Sea with the city of Novorossiysk through Chechnya, Turkey encouraged producer countries to support its proposal of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, thereby bypassing Russia.²¹⁵

But, notwithstanding their at times diametrically opposing positions during the 1990s, Russia and Turkey proved capable of mitigating confrontation by shifting attention to non-conflictive—particularly economic—issues. Consequently, by the time the 1990s gave way to the new millennium, the stage was set for the close cooperation between Russia and Turkey under the respective leaderships of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. For example, in May 1992 the countries signed a friendship and cooperation treaty, which, according to then Russian president Yeltsin, was to turn a “new page” in bilateral relations.²¹⁶ In this spirit, the years 1992 to 1996 witnessed the signing of more than a

²¹² Balta and Çelikpala, “Turkey and Russia,” 588; Bechev, *Rival Power*, 145.

²¹³ Baev, “Turkey and Russia,” 415; Balta and Çelikpala, “Turkey and Russia,” 589; Bechev, *Rival Power*, 146, 148.

²¹⁴ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 146–47; Balta and Çelikpala, “Turkey and Russia,” 589; Baev, “Turkey and Russia,” 415.

²¹⁵ Balta and Çelikpala, “Turkey and Russia,” 589; Bechev, *Rival Power*, 147.

²¹⁶ Cited in: Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 151.

dozen further agreements, covering issues from culture and education to defense and combating terrorism. The agreement to build the Blue Stream natural gas line through the Black Sea in 1997, thereby linking Russia and Turkey directly, was a milestone in bilateral energy cooperation. Signs of improving relations were not restricted to multiplying trade volumes; they also included skyrocketing numbers of Russian tourists flocking to Turkey's shores. In sum, during the 1990s, Russian and Turkish leaders learned to mitigate tensions in their bilateral relations and focus on issues that were mutually beneficial.

Thus, when Putin assumed the Russian presidency in 2000 and Erdogan became the prime minister of Turkey in 2003, Russo-Turkish relations had a solid foundation. And even if it took them until 2004 to meet for the first time, as Bechev observes, "from that point onwards, the two leaders presided over a leap in bilateral relations."²¹⁷ It is at this stage where this case study takes over and explores Russo-Turkish relations in the diplomatic, economic, military, and popular dimensions. Analyzing the decade from 2010 to 2021, it studies how Russian engagement with Turkey has developed and whether this engagement has provided Moscow with leverage vis-à-vis Ankara.

B. DIPLOMATIC DIMENSION

Russo-Turkish diplomatic engagement has steadily increased since the beginning of the early 2000s. It experienced an additional boost in the mid- to late-2010s with the third presidency of Vladimir Putin and the first term of Erdogan as Turkish president. Likely because of the countries' success in cementing their diplomatic ties up to that point, a crisis ensuing from the downing of a Russian fighter jet by the Turkish air force in November 2015 did not cause more than a short-term setback in their relations. Adding to the historically exceptional high frequency of exchanges at the highest diplomatic level, the establishment of the High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) between Moscow and Ankara in 2010 institutionalized and formalized the relationship between both countries. However, analysis of Turkey's general voting pattern in the UNGA since the 2010s raises doubts about Ankara's willingness to fully align with Moscow in the diplomatic dimension.

²¹⁷ Bechev, 159.

This impression is reinforced by Turkish voting behavior in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine.

1. High-Level Meetings

Since the early 2000s, Russia and Turkey have maintained close relations in the diplomatic dimension. From the very beginning, diplomatic ties were driven and reinforced by reciprocal economic as well as security interests. The latter became especially evident with the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015. Additionally, the Russo-Turkish rapprochement occurred against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between both countries and the West. By the latter half of the 2000s at the latest, it became evident that Turkish efforts to join the European Union would fail. At the same time, Russia felt increasingly rebuffed in its ambitions to be recognized as a great power on equal footing with the United States. Against this backdrop, in December 2004, Turkish President Sezer rolled out the red carpet for the first visit of a Russian head of state to Turkey in more than 30 years. While in Ankara, Putin not only talked to Sezer, but also had a meeting with then Prime Minister Erdogan. Concluding his state visit and giving it substantial meaning, Putin and his Turkish counterpart signed a Joint Declaration on Strengthening the Friendship and the Multifaceted Partnership Between Russia and Turkey and half a dozen additional agreements, covering energy, finance, and security.²¹⁸ Demonstrating that the meeting was not a two-day wonder, in early 2005, the Turkish leadership visited Russia. As early as January, Erdogan arrived for bilateral talks at Moscow and in July Putin welcomed him at Sochi.²¹⁹ The year concluded with the reunion of Presidents Putin and Sezer for the inauguration of the Blue Stream pipeline in the vicinity of Samsun, Turkey. Together with their Italian counterpart Berlusconi, Putin and Sezer completed a major energy project, linking Russia and Turkey through the Black Sea.²²⁰ The years 2006 and 2007 witnessed

²¹⁸ Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 159. The meeting was hosted by then Turkish President Sezer. During the trip, Putin also had a conversation with then Chairman of the Turkish Parliament, Arinc.

²¹⁹ Bechev, 159; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Putin, Turkish Premier To Discuss Economic, Military Cooperation," July 18, 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1059986.html>.

²²⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Russian, Turkish, Italian Leaders Open Gas Pipeline," November 17, 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1063030.html>.

additional meetings on the presidential level, with Putin welcoming Sezer in Moscow first and traveling to Ankara later.²²¹ Thus were laid the foundations for diplomatic relations that endured the shifts of the presidency in both countries.

Following the transition of power from Sezer to Gül in Turkey (August 2007) and the presidential handover from Putin to Dimitry Medvedev in Russia (May 2008), the intensity of diplomatic exchange remained at a high level. Likewise, the drivers of the engagement of the highest political leadership did not change. Figure 13 shows that between 2008 and 2012—the year Putin returned to the Russian presidency for a third term—at least one personal meeting involving the Russian president and either the Turkish president or the prime minister took place per year. Additionally, during this period, the political leadership of Russia and Turkey intensified the use of the telephone to maintain contact. Of the meetings occurring during the presidency of Medvedev, the reception of Abdullah Gül in Russia in February 2009 deserves highlighting because it witnessed the renewal of the 2004 Joint Declaration. Talking to the press after the meeting, President Medvedev praised Russo-Turkish relations as “not simply relations between equals” but also “very friendly” and with “very good prospects.”²²² Echoing his counterpart, President Gül expressed his conviction that “my current visit will turn a new page in the history of Russia-Turkish relations to the benefit of the peoples of our countries.”²²³

²²¹ The Kremlin, “President Vladimir Putin Met with President of Turkey Ahmet Necdet Sezer,” July 4, 2006, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/35808>; The Kremlin, “Working Visit to Turkey. Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation Summit,” July 25, 2007, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/45694>.

²²² The Kremlin, “Press Statements Following the Russian-Turkish Talks,” February 19, 2009, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/3172>.

²²³ The Kremlin.

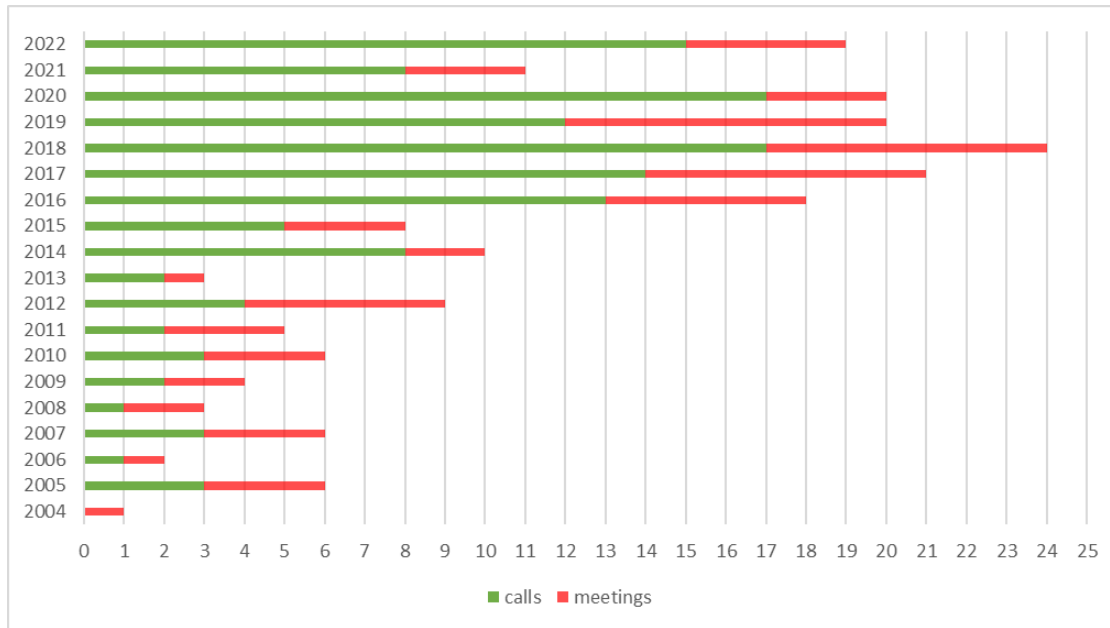


Figure 13. Russo-Turkish High-Level Contacts²²⁴

The re-transition of the Russian presidency from Medvedev to Putin in 2012 had no discernible impact on Russo-Turkish relations in the diplomatic dimension. Frequent visits and phone calls between the highest political leaders remained the rule. A numerically significant drop in high-level contacts in 2013 fell between two peaks in 2012 and 2014. Official contacts between the highest political leaders in both years climbed to nine and ten, respectively. Of the contacts in 2014, two brought together Putin and Erdogan in person. Traveling to Sochi in January, the latter was still the prime minister of Turkey. By the time Erdogan welcomed President Putin for a three-day state visit to Ankara in December, he had assumed the Turkish presidency. Talking to the press in the aftermath of his meeting with Erdogan, Putin stressed that the meeting between the two leaders had taken place in in an “exceedingly friendly and cooperative atmosphere.”²²⁵ Conversations, he added, had covered a wide range of issues in Russian-Turkish cooperation, including but not limited to cooperations in the fields of trade, energy, banking, and investment. He

²²⁴ Adapted from: The Kremlin, “President of Russia—Events,” accessed March 30, 2023, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events>.

²²⁵ The Kremlin, “News Conference Following State Visit to Turkey,” December 10, 2014, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47126>.

emphasized that both sides had signed “a solid package of documents,” thus demonstrating that Russo-Turkish cooperation had reached “the form of a productive, multidimensional partnership.”²²⁶ So, while at the time both leaders had to deal with certain issues of diverging positions (e.g., Crimea and Syria), bilateral ties were solid and grounded in mutual interests, primarily in the economic dimension.

With Presidents Putin and Erdogan in power, the years 2015–16 became a watershed moment for Russo-Turkish relations. Until November, the year 2015 seemed to proceed like previous ones. By that time, Presidents Putin and Erdogan had five phone calls and had met three times in person, either on the sidelines of other events at Baku or Antalya, or during a bilateral meeting at Moscow in September.²²⁷ The downing of a Russian fighter by the Turkish air force on November 24, however, plunged Moscow and Ankara into a deep diplomatic crisis. Putin publicly denounced it as “a stab in the back, carried out by the accomplices of terrorists” and warned Turkey of “serious consequences.”²²⁸ Additionally, he requested compensation as well as an official apology from Ankara.²²⁹ In that environment, Russian foreign minister Lavrov canceled a trip to Turkey which was supposed to begin on November 25 and thus set the stage for an icy period in bilateral relations.²³⁰

This phase of tense Russo-Turkish relations, however, was not to last long. Confronted with severe Russian sanctions as well as a deteriorating security situation caused by the ongoing civil war in Syria, President Erdogan decided to give in to Russian requests for an apology.²³¹ On June 27, 2016, he forwarded a letter of regret, in which he expressed “sympathy and condolences” to Russia and the family of the killed pilot.

²²⁶ The Kremlin.

²²⁷ The Kremlin, “President of Russia-Events.”

²²⁸ Cited in: Emre Erşen, “Evaluating the Fighter Jet Crisis in Turkish-Russian Relations,” *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 4 (2017): 91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26300559>.

²²⁹ Erşen, 91.

²³⁰ BBC News, “Turkey Downing of Russia Jet ‘Stab in the Back’—Putin,” November 24, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34913173>.

²³¹ Erşen, “Evaluating the Fighter Jet Crisis in Turkish-Russian Relations,” 91.

Additionally, he described Russia as a “friend and a strategic partner.”²³² Both acknowledgments were well received by the Kremlin and only two days later, Putin and Erdogan held their first telephone call in more than six months.²³³ When they finally came together in person in St. Petersburg on August 9, bilateral ties were recovering noticeably. While Erdogan had reversed his course on Syria, including his willingness to participate in and support Russo-Iranian approaches to solving the crises in the Astana-format, Putin had expressed his support for Erdogan following the coup attempt in July 2016.²³⁴ The latter was in sharp contrast to Western countries, including the United States, which issued supportive messages significantly later than Putin or not at all. Thus, following the August 9 meeting, Russia and Turkey were about to overcome their deep crisis. In the aftermath of their meeting in St. Petersburg, Presidents Putin and Erdogan significantly increased their conversations via phone and their personal meeting. During the remainder of 2016, they talked to each other 12 times, six times alone in December, and met each other three times.²³⁵

After the crisis of 2015–16, Russo-Turkish high-level contacts climbed to unprecedented heights. Between 2017 and 2020, the annual number of contacts between Putin and Erdogan never dropped below 20. In-person meetings peaked at eight in 2019 and even survived the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21. The drop in overall contacts in 2021 seems insignificant; at least, there are no developments in bilateral ties which would indicate a deterioration in Russo-Turkish bilateral ties.²³⁶

Part of the overall increased diplomatic engagement between Russia and Turkey is the HLCC. Its formation goes back to the signing of the “Joint Statement on Establishing a High-Level Cooperation Council between the Russian Federation and the Republic of

²³² Cited in: Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 173.

²³³ The Kremlin, “Telephone Conversation with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” June 29, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52295>.

²³⁴ Erşen, “Evaluating the Fighter Jet Crisis in Turkish-Russian Relations,” 94–96.

²³⁵ The Kremlin, “President of Russia-Events.”

²³⁶ The Kremlin.

Turkey” during a meeting between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Erdogan on May 12, 2010.²³⁷ Since then, meetings in this framework have been collectively led by the Russian president and the Turkish prime minister and have taken place alternately at Ankara and Moscow from 2011 to 2014. Following the November 2015 incident and the subsequent disruption of the annual meeting cycle in 2015 and 2016, the HLCC reconvened in 2017. The eighth and yet latest meeting took place on April 8, 2019.

According to Kenan Aslani and Birol Akgun, the HLCC with Russia serves Turkey as a means to shape bilateral relations. In their view, it functions as a framework for joint meetings between government officials on different levels, including the heads of governments, and enables them to discuss and decide upon issues of mutual interest.²³⁸ While the HLCC helps to mitigate or overcome issues that would otherwise trigger conflict in bilateral ties, it could not prevent the jet crisis in November 2015. Nevertheless, as Aslani and Akgun argue, the platform helped to overcome the period of silence following the November 2015 incident. With the HLCC in place, instead of being obliged to find channels to resume their strategic dialogue, Turkey and Russia could make use of “an existing bilateral mechanism to trace and carry forward the previous agenda.”²³⁹

The frequent Russo-Turkish meetings on the highest diplomatic level are an expression of the numerous issues by which both countries are linked and intertwined with each other. They span different policy areas and include bilateral as well as regional aspects of Russo-Turkish ties. Economic relations are continuously at the core of bilateral relations and consultations.²⁴⁰ Likewise, Turkey’s persisting security interests, especially in the Syrian context and including Turkey’s participation in the Astana- process, require close

²³⁷ The Kremlin, “Russia and Turkey Have Established the High-Level Cooperation Council,” May 12, 2010, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/7723>.

²³⁸ Kenan Aslanli and Birol Akgun, “Institutional Mechanisms of the Turkish Foreign Policy: The Case of Russia—Turkey High-Level Cooperation Council,” *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 20, no. 4 (December 15, 2020): 794, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2020-20-4-791-804>.

²³⁹ Aslanli and Akgun, 800.

²⁴⁰ This aspect is further developed in Chapter III, Sec. C.

coordination with Russia.²⁴¹ Additionally, Libya and the tense situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia involve Russia and Turkey.²⁴² Fourth, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the need for Moscow and Ankara to talk to each other, as Turkey not only oversees the Turkish Straits and thus regulates naval traffic into the Black Sea but has also taken over the role of a mediator in the grain deal between Russia and Ukraine.²⁴³ Finally, the presidents of Russia and Turkey are tied together by their personal relationship as much as by the fact that they face difficult relations with the West due to the authoritarian character of their regimes.²⁴⁴ The latter is especially relevant to the Kremlin, since maintaining close relations with Ankara may generate influence over the latter's behavior in NATO at a time of increased tension with the Western alliance. In sum, the extraordinary number of high-level contacts between Presidents Putin and Erdogan mirror numerous and complementary interests of their respective countries. At the same time, they have a strong personal component.

2. Comparison to Other Great Powers

Since Erdogan assumed the Turkish presidency in 2014, his meetings with President Putin have by far exceeded his contacts with the heads of state of the other great powers. As Figure 14 depicts, in-person meetings between President Erdogan and Russian President Putin in this timeframe total 42, whereas the Turkish head of state had only 12 encounters with U.S. Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden and met with Chinese President

²⁴¹ Dimitar Bechev, "Russia and Turkey: The Promise and the Limits of Partnership," in *Russia Rising. Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, and Stanislav Secieru (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2021), 89–90.

²⁴² Bechev, 91–94.

²⁴³ Raul Pedrozo, "Closing the Turkish Straits in Times of War," Lieber Institute West Point, March 3, 2022, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/closing-turkish-straits-war/>; Alexandra Prokopenko, "How the Ukraine Grain Deal Went From Boon to Burden for the Kremlin," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 17, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89307>.

²⁴⁴ Bechev, "Russia and Turkey: The Promise and the Limits of Partnership," 88–89.

Xi on only eight occasions.²⁴⁵ Meetings between Erdogan and the leadership of the United States were almost completely limited to meetings on the sidelines of other events. The last U.S. president who traveled to Turkey for a bilateral meeting was Barack Obama in April 2009. While he also met President Erdogan at Ankara in November 2015, his main motivation for traveling to Turkey at the time was to attend the G-20 summit.²⁴⁶ President Erdogan's latest visits to the White House date back to the presidency of Donald Trump. In 2017 and 2019, the leaders joined for bilateral meetings in Washington.²⁴⁷ Under the presidency of Joe Biden, U.S.-Turkish high-level meetings have been limited to sideline meetings in the context of the G-20 meetings at Rome in 2021 and Bali 2022.²⁴⁸

The pattern of Sino-Turkish high-level exchanges since President Erdogan has assumed the Turkish presidency resembles the U.S. case. The only official Sino-Turkish exchange yet at the presidential level occurred in July 2015, when President Xi welcomed his Turkish counterpart at Beijing.²⁴⁹ While Xi and Erdogan also met in Ankara in November the same year and Erdogan traveled to China in 2016, the principal drivers for both trips were the G-20 summits held at Ankara and Hangzhou, respectively.²⁵⁰ In sum, neither U.S.-Turkish nor Sino-Turkish ties generate high-level meetings with the frequency

²⁴⁵ Presidency of The Republic of Turkey, "Speeches & Statements," accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/receptayyip Erdogan/speeches/>; The Kremlin, "President of Russia—News," accessed March 30, 2023; Department of State, "Office of the Historian," accessed March 21, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/.

²⁴⁶ Department of State, "Turkey—Travels of the President," Office of the Historian, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/travels/president/turkey>.

²⁴⁷ Department of State, "Turkey—Visits by Foreign Leaders," Office of the Historian, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/visits/turkey>.

²⁴⁸ The White House, "Readout of President Biden's Meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey," October 31, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/31/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-of-turkey/>; The White House, "Readout of President Biden's Meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey," November 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/15/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-of-turkiye/>.

²⁴⁹ Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Erdogan Is in China," accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/president-erdogan-is-in-china.en.mfa>.

²⁵⁰ Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Xi Jinping Meets Turkish President Ahead of G20 Summit," People's Daily Online, November 15, 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1115/c90000-8976633.html>.

of the Russo-Turkish relationship. This reinforces the assessment that Moscow and Ankara are linked by a significant number of topics requiring close coordination at the presidential level. Likewise, the exceptionally high frequency of meetings suggests that personal ties between Putin and Erdogan are a factor bolstering bilateral ties and exchange.

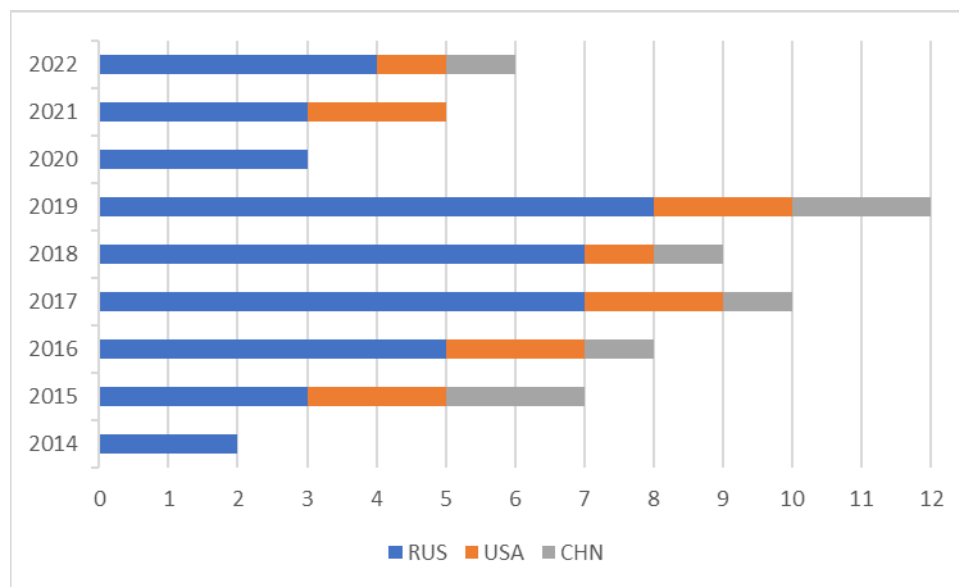


Figure 14. Meetings of Turkish President Erdogan with Heads of State of Great Powers²⁵¹

3. Russian Leverage in the Diplomatic Dimension

Driven by the same assumptions as in the Egyptian case, this section studies Russian influence in the diplomatic dimension by referring to Russo-Turkish voting alignment in the UNGA between 2010 and 2019 on the one hand and Turkey's voting patterns in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war on the other. Analysis of Turkey's voting behavior in the UNGA between 2010 and 2019 demonstrates only weak overall alignment with Russia. Based on the percentages of its voting alignment with

²⁵¹ Adapted from: Presidency of The Republic of Turkey, "Speeches & Statements," accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/receptayyip Erdogan/speeches/>; The Kremlin, "President of Russia—News," accessed March 30, 2023; Department of State, "Office of the Historian," accessed March 21, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," accessed March 30, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/.

Russia in the UNGA, Turkey came in only 131st out of 193 countries during this period.²⁵² Figure 15 demonstrates this overall limited alignment between the two countries in the UNGA. Out of 812 total votes, Russo-Turkish voting alignment did not exceed 58.1 percent and thus remained about 20 points lower than the countries with the highest voting alignment with Russia like Uzbekistan (75.8 percent), Belarus (75.7 percent), and China (74.8 percent). This overall limited voting alignment indicates limited Russian influence over Turkey.

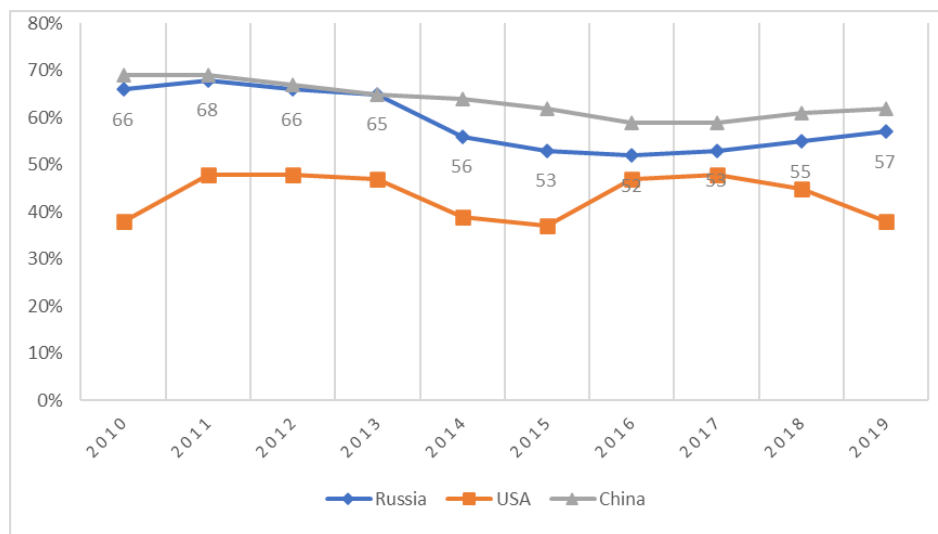


Figure 15. Alignment of Turkish Voting Pattern in the UNGA with the Great Powers²⁵³

Likewise, there is no indication that increased high-level diplomatic engagement has led to a stronger voting alignment in the UNGA. Figure 15 shows that between 2010 and 2013 Russo-Turkish voting alignment remained constant at about 65 percent. In 2014, it dropped almost 10 points and further decreased to 52 percent in 2016. After hitting this

²⁵² “UN View: United Nations General Assembly Voting Patterns (1946–2019),” accessed March 23, 2023, <https://dataviz.yiqinfu.com/unview/>. The presented data is reproducible if country selection is “Russia” and the tab selection is “Full Datatable.”

²⁵³ Adapted from: “UN View: United Nations General Assembly Voting Patterns (1946–2019),” accessed March 23, 2023, <https://dataviz.yiqinfu.com/unview/>. Data is reproducible if country selection is “Turkey” and tab selection is “Timeseries.” In this case, the presented chart allows for the extraction of the exact percentages of voting alignment in a selected year.

low point, from 2017 to 2019 Russo-Turkish voting alignment increased moderately from 53 to 57 percent. These developments do not reflect the strong trend of increased diplomatic engagement during this period. In particular, while the drop in 2015/2016 can be correlated to the crisis following the downing of a Russian jet in November 2015, the modesty of the later recovery does not mirror the significant increase in calls and meetings between the Russian and Turkish leadership throughout 2017 to 2019. Thus, the absence of increasingly high voting alignment also indicates limited Russian influence over Turkey.

Turkish voting behavior in the UNGA in the context of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine has also opposed Russia's positions and interests, further suggesting limited Russian influence. At the time of writing, Turkey has supported all UNGA resolutions in the context of the 11th emergency session. On February 22, 2022, Turkey joined the overwhelming majority of UN member states and voted *yes* for resolution A/ES-11/1, demanding Russia's immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal from Ukraine's territory.²⁵⁴ Turkey also voted favorably for resolution A/ES-11/2, which on March 24 demanded that Russia immediately cease its hostilities against Ukraine and civilians in particular.²⁵⁵ Likewise, on April 7, it was favorable to suspending Russia's membership in the HRC as requested by A/ES-11/3.²⁵⁶ In the second half of the year, on October 12, Turkey again opposed Russian interests by joining resolution A/ES-11/4, which asked UN members not to recognize the referendum about the secession of four eastern Ukrainian oblasts.²⁵⁷ It also voted *yes* on A/ES-11/5, calling for remedies and reparations on November 14.²⁵⁸ Finally, on February 23, 2023, Turkey confirmed its previous voting patterns by supporting UNGA resolution A/ES-11/6, reiterating UN demands for immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of all Russian military

²⁵⁴ United Nations General Assembly, *Aggression against Ukraine*.

²⁵⁵ United Nations General Assembly, Humanitarian Consequences of the Aggression against Ukraine.

²⁵⁶ United Nations General Assembly, Suspension of the Rights of Membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council.

²⁵⁷ United Nations General Assembly, *Territorial Integrity of Ukraine*.

²⁵⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Furtherance of Remedy and Reparation for Aggression against Ukraine.

forces from Ukrainian territory.²⁵⁹ By voting in favor of all resolutions of the 11th emergency session of the UNGA, Turkey clearly chose sides—to Russia’s disadvantage.

C. ECONOMIC DIMENSION

Russo-Turkish relations in the economic dimension are multifaceted and deep. During the period stretching from 2010 to 2022, Turkey maintained close relations with Russia in the energy sector, most notably as a major importer of Russian oil and natural gas. Additionally, in 2010, Moscow and Ankara concluded an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) for the Akkuyu NPP, which was to be built, owned, and operated (BOO) by the Russian enterprise Rosatom. Throughout this period, the volume of trade between Russia and Turkey almost doubled. Finally, the period witnessed Turkey’s entry into Russia’s MIR payment system as an alternative to SWIFT. Especially Russo-Turkish cooperation in the energy sector provides Russia with leverage. However, Turkish banks’ decision to cease their participation in the MIR payment system towards the end of 2022 illustrates that, if confronted with the prospect of painful Western sanctions, Turkey would rather step back from cooperation with the Kremlin than risk its relations with the West and the United States in particular.

1. Relations in the Energy Sector

Russo-Turkish relations in the energy sector have a significant energy component. Given the research design of this thesis, future-oriented aspects of Russo-Turkish energy relations, including Turkey’s potential role as a natural gas hub or impacts of the recent Turkish natural gas discoveries in the Black Sea, will not be considered here. Instead, this thesis turns its attention to Turkey’s dependency on oil and natural gas imports from Russia and the Russo-Turkish cooperation in the use of nuclear energy. Both dimensions provide Russia with leverage over Turkey.

The first aspect to consider in Russo-Turkish energy relations is the latter’s strong dependency on the import of oil and natural gas to meet its total primary energy

²⁵⁹ United Nations General Assembly, Principles of the Charter of the United Nations Underlying a Comprehensive, Just and Lasting Peace in Ukraine.

requirements. According to the 2021 International Energy Agency's (IEA) report on Turkey, in 2019, oil and natural gas each accounted for about one-third of Turkey's primary energy requirements.²⁶⁰ Simultaneously, the IEA notes, "nearly all natural gas is imported" and domestic oil production meets "only seven percent of [Turkish] domestic demand."²⁶¹ To fill these gaps, Turkey intensively relies on Russia. Data provided by the Turkish Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EPDK) shows that Russia is one of the country's principal sources of crude oil and refined oil products. Between 2015 and 2021, Russia continuously ranked first or second among the top originators of petroleum products imported to Turkey, accounting for shares between 17 percent in 2015 and 35 percent in 2019.²⁶² EPDK's latest Oil Market Sector Report in 2022 identified Russia as the second biggest source of Turkish oil imports, accounting for a 24 percent share, behind Iraq at 29 percent.²⁶³ Reporting by the *New York Times* suggests that compared to same time period in the previous year, Turkey's daily crude oil imports from Russia more than doubled from 113,000 to 292,000 in the second half of 2022. According to the same reporting, Turkey increasingly refines Russian crude and sells the refined products to customers in the United States and Europe.²⁶⁴

In sum and as a general assessment, Turkey's dependence on Russian crude and refined oil products is significant and provides Russia with potential leverage. The recent increase in Turkish crude oil imports, however, does not increase this leverage, as the additional imported crude is not needed to meet Turkey's domestic demand. Instead,

²⁶⁰ International Energy Agency, *Turkey 2021—Energy Policy Review* (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2021), fig. 2.3, https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/cc499a7b-b72a-466c-88de-d792a9daff44/Turkey_2021_Energy_Policy_Review.pdf.

²⁶¹ International Energy Agency, 21.

²⁶² Turkish Energy Market Regulatory Authority, "Annual Sector Report," accessed April 7, 2023, <https://www.epdk.gov.tr/Detay/Icerik/3-0-107/yillik-sektor-raporu>. The websites provide the annual Oil Market Sector Reports in Turkish and English for download. The data presented in the paragraph is taken from the annual reporting of the EPDK between 2015 and 2021. Though the website provides access to further reporting going back as far as 2005, the presentation of data changed in 2015. Therefore, previous data cannot be included in the analysis.

²⁶³ Turkish Energy Market Regulatory Authority, *Turkish Petroleum Market Report 2021* (Ankara, 2022), <https://www.epdk.gov.tr/Detay/Icerik/3-0-107/yillik-sektor-raporu>.

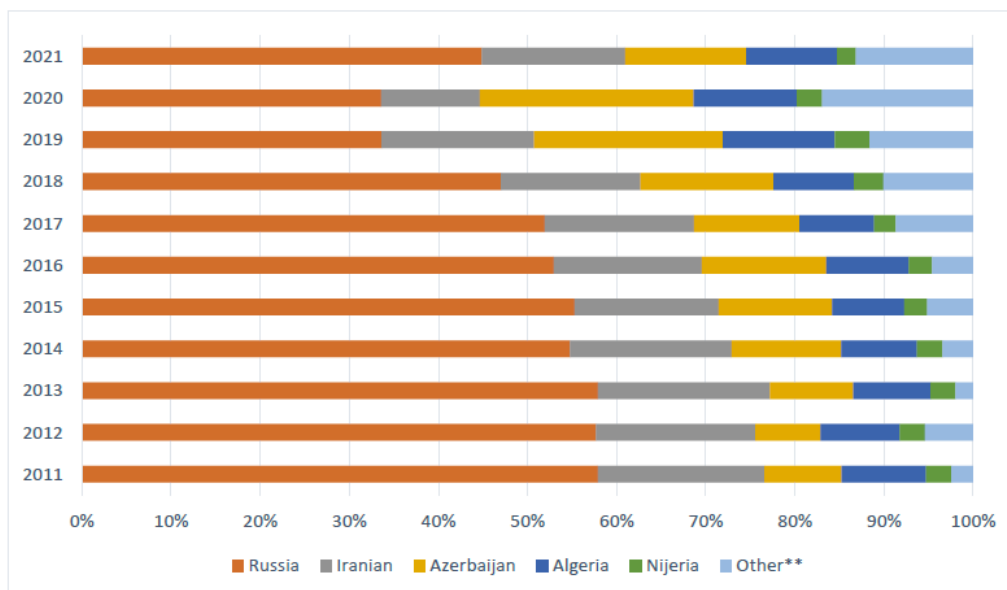
²⁶⁴ Patricia Cohen, "Turkey Is Strengthening Its Energy Ties With Russia," *The New York Times*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/09/business/turkey-erdogan-energy-russia.html>.

Turkey refines this oil and exports it to customers in the United States and Europe. Finally, Turkey's choosing not to participate in U.S. and EU sanctions is a success for the Kremlin. But as long as continuous oil imports from Russia do not require Ankara to make tradeoffs either with Washington or the European capitals, maintaining these ties does not reflect Russian influence.

Turkey also relies intensively on Russian natural gas imports. Data provided by the EPDK in its annual Natural Gas Market Report 2022 is illustrative: between 2011 and 2021, Russia was by far the most important originator of Turkish natural gas imports. Until 2017, Russia accounted for more than 50 percent of Turkey's natural gas imports. In 2016, its share started to drop until hitting a low point of 33 percent in 2019 and 2020.²⁶⁵ Five years later, however, its share rebounded by more than 10 points to 44 percent. While yearly data is not yet available, media reporting on EPDK's monthly assessment suggests that in 2022 the Turkey's share of natural gas imports from Russia has again slightly dropped to 40 percent.²⁶⁶ With Russia's share of Turkey's natural gas imports hovering around 40 percent, the country is vulnerable to Russian influence. However, as Figure 16 shows, the Turkish government has tried to diversify its natural gas imports in recent years. This suggests that the political leadership is aware of its vulnerability and is attempting to reduce it.

²⁶⁵ "Turkish Energy Market Regulatory Authority—2022—Turkish National Gas Market Report 2021.Pdf," accessed April 7, 2023, 11.

²⁶⁶ Mirela Petkova, "Russia's War in Ukraine Inspires Turkish Gas Dreams," Energy Monitor, March 28, 2023, <https://www.energymonitor.ai/policy/russias-war-in-ukraine-inspires-turkish-gas-dreams/>.



** It represents the countries where Spot LNG imports are made until 2020 and the countries where spot LNG/pipeline gas imports are made in 2020.

Figure 16. Change in Shares of Import Resources for the Years 2011–2021 (%)²⁶⁷

Turkish cooperation with Russia in the civilian use of nuclear energy is the second factor shaping the countries' energy relations. Turkey's ambitions to acquire NPPs go back as far as the 1950s and have reflected growing energy demand as well as Turkey's intention to diversify its electricity production. Likewise, nuclear power has historically been associated with modernization, status, and prestige.²⁶⁸ For different reasons, however, until the late 2000s several Turkish attempts to build an NPP did not materialize.²⁶⁹ In 2008/9, the Turkish government made a renewed attempt to establish nuclear power as an alternative form of electricity generation. To this end, it initiated a bidding process, which

²⁶⁷ Source: Turkish Energy Market Regulatory Authority, *Turkish National Gas Market Report 2021* (Ankara, 2022), 12, <https://www.epdk.gov.tr/Detay/Icerik/3-0-94/yillik-sektor-raporu>.

²⁶⁸ Ali Alkis and Valeriia Gergiieva, "Why Russia May Control Turkey's Nuclear Energy for the Next 80 Years," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, February 21, 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/02/why-russia-may-control-turkeys-nuclear-energy-for-the-next-80-years/>.

²⁶⁹ Jessica Jewell and Seyithan Ahmet Ates, "Introducing Nuclear Power in Turkey: A Historic State Strategy and Future Prospects," *Energy Research & Social Science* 10 (November 1, 2015): 275–77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2015.07.011>; Cem İskender Aydın, "Nuclear Energy Debate in Turkey: Stakeholders, Policy Alternatives, and Governance Issues," *Energy Policy* 136 (January 1, 2020): 2–5, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2019.111041>.

attracted six applicants. In the end, however, only a subsidiary of Russia's Rosatom submitted a concrete bid.²⁷⁰ By 2010, this bid became the basis for an IGA between Russia and Turkey on the construction of Turkey's first NPP.²⁷¹ Concluding the IGA created a novelty in the history of the civilian use of nuclear energy in the sense that for the first time, a state-owned company, Rosatom, was to build, own, and operate an NPP on the territory of another country (Turkey).²⁷²

Generally, the IGA obligated both partners to take certain steps in connection with the construction and operation of Akkuyu. Rosatom agreed to build, maintain, and operate four 1,200 MW reactors of the VVER-1200 type.²⁷³ This included the delivery as well as the repatriation of nuclear fuel elements for the NPP's operating life cycle of 60 years. Additionally, it agreed upon cooperation in the development of human resources. Finally, as the sole owner, Rosatom had to provide full financing of this USD 20 billion project. Turkey, on the other hand, had to cede the soil on which the NPP was to be built, install about 1,000 km of electricity lines to connect Akkuyu to Turkey's high voltage grid, and issue licenses and permits to Rosatom as a precondition for operations. Finally, it had to provide Rosatom with a purchase guarantee of 12.35 cents/MWh for 70 percent of the output of reactors one and two and 30 percent of reactors three and four.

Towards the end of 2022, information on the possible construction of a second NPP by Russia's Rosatom appeared. By 2010, Turkey had not only signed an IGA with Russia but also with Japan. According to the latter, a consortium comprising Japanese as well as European companies was to build an NPP in the Black Sea city of Sinop. This IGA, however, never materialized into concrete construction. By October 2022, an official announcement by the Turkish presidency as well as media reporting indicated that the

²⁷⁰ Aydın, "Nuclear Energy Debate in Turkey," 5.

²⁷¹ Jewell and Ates, "Introducing Nuclear Power in Turkey," 278–79; Aydın, "Nuclear Energy Debate in Turkey," 5–7.

²⁷² Jewell and Ates, "Introducing Nuclear Power in Turkey," 278.

²⁷³ All information presented here is based on: Jewell and Ates, 278–79; Aydın, "Nuclear Energy Debate in Turkey," 5–7; and Vladimir Likhachev, "Russia and Turkey: State and Prospect of Energy Cooperation," Working Paper 63/2021, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 2021, 13–14, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/sostoyanie-i-perspektivy-rossiysko-turetskikh-otnosheniy-v-e/>.

Russian and Turkish presidents had discussed the option of Russia building a second NPP at Sinop, thus replacing Japan.²⁷⁴ A month later, additional reporting suggested that both sides had moved forward on the issue, including the start of concrete negotiations with Russia's Rosatom..²⁷⁵ In view of the high financial burdens caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine on the one hand and the continuing sanctions of the West on the other hand, it seems unrealistic that Russia could currently or in the near future shoulder another multi-billion NPP project in Turkey. Thus, while the arrival of the first Russian-made nuclear fuel elements at the Akkuyu NPP in April 2023 suggests that the construction of this project is proceeding as planned, the prospects for further Russo-Turkish nuclear cooperation are not promising.²⁷⁶

Cooperation with Russia on the construction of the Akkuyu NPP creates several vulnerabilities for Turkey. The first is centered around the provision of new nuclear fuels as well as the retraction of spent ones. As in the Egyptian case, the reactors of the Akkuyu NPP are designed to operate with unique fuel assemblies. Should Russo-Turkish relations deteriorate to the point that cooperation in the nuclear sector ceases, Russia might suspend the provision of new fuel assemblies. In this case, Turkey may run out of nuclear fuels or at least face the serious hardship of raising alternative supplies of fuel assemblies. Worsening bilateral relations may also lead to Russia's suspension of nuclear waste disposal. Should Russia decide not to take back spent fuels, this would leave Turkey with highly toxic waste in its territory for which it has neither safe storage facilities nor reprocessing capacities.

²⁷⁴ Presidency of The Republic of Turkey, "President Erdoğan Meets with President Putin of Russia," October 13, 2022, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/140141/president-erdogan-meets-with-president-putin-of-russia>; Selcan Hacaoglu, "Turkey Asks Russia to Build Another Nuclear Plant, Defying US," Bloomberg, October 20, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-20/turkey-asks-russia-to-build-another-nuclear-plant-defying-us>.

²⁷⁵ Daily Sabah, "Türkiye in Talks with Russia for Building 2nd Nuclear Plant," November 21, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/turkiye-in-talks-with-russia-for-building-2nd-nuclear-plant>; Nuclear Engineering International, "Turkey Considers Construction of Third NPP—Nuclear Engineering International," November 8, 2022, <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newsturkey-considers-construction-of-third-npp-10273516>.

²⁷⁶ World Nuclear News, "Presidents Address Ceremony Inaugurating Turkey's First Nuclear Plant," April 27, 2023, <https://world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/Presidents-address-ceremony-inaugurating%C2%A0Turkey-s>.

The second vulnerability is linked to the agreed-upon training of a Turkish nuclear work force. According to the Russo-Turkish IGA, the workforce overseeing the Turkish nuclear sector and forming the Turkish share of the workforce operating the Akkuyu NPP will receive training in Russia. Based on this provision, several Turkish universities and the National Research Nuclear University (Moscow Engineering Physics Institute) agreed on the creation of common curricula including dual master's degrees for graduates.²⁷⁷ While the Russo-Turkish cooperation in this area has produced up to 244 graduates by 2022, Russia has demonstrated its willingness to use this part of the agreement as leverage.²⁷⁸ Following the downing of a Russian fighter by a Turkish aircraft in November 2015, Russia temporarily suspended the training in a kind of retaliatory measure. Since then, following the resolution of the Russo-Turkish tensions by the presidents of both countries, the training has resumed. The intentional interruption by Russia demonstrates, however, that it is willing to use it as a lever in its relations with Turkey.

Adding to the aforementioned vulnerabilities, the peculiarities of the BOO-model may create further leverage for Russia. The IGA stipulates that Rosatom will maintain a 51 percent share as long as Akkuyu produces electricity. Hence, as long as Akkuyu stays operational, it remains Russian property on Turkish soil. Against this backdrop, and as a low probability–high risk scenario, it is imaginable that in very grave circumstances, Russia might even deploy troops to protect its property. Given Turkey's membership in NATO, this could create the bizarre situation in which Russian armed forces protect Russian property within NATO territory. Even if such a development is very unlikely, it brings with it the potential for (military) escalation. With a similar intonation, media reporting as of November 2022 suggested that Russia was pursuing plans to install radar systems and even to deploy S-400 air-defense systems on the soil belonging to the Akkuyu NPP. The same reporting referred to the proximity of a NATO radar site, which could be compromised following the deployment of Russian military equipment to the Akkuyu

²⁷⁷ Hürriyet Daily News, "Russia Cancels Nuclear Training Deals with Turkish Universities," January 7, 2016, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/russia-cancels-nuclear-training-deals-with-turkish-universities-93565>.

²⁷⁸ Daily Sabah, "43 More Turkish Engineers Complete Russian Nuclear Training," February 16, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/43-more-turkish-engineers-complete-russian-nuclear-training>.

site.²⁷⁹ Again, the scenarios including military forces and full-scale military conflict are low probability–high risk. It is reasonable to assume that Russia would bring to bear other levers first, before resorting to the military. However, the potential for escalation exists and thus puts pressure on Turkey, which makes the government vulnerable to Russian influence.

Running the Akkuyu NPP under the BOO-model, while creating vulnerabilities for Turkey, entails risks for Russia as well. Most importantly, Moscow is making a substantial USD 20 billion advance payment for the project. As, according to the IGA, Turkish repayment is linked to the electricity production of the NPP, repayment will not start before Akkuyu becomes operational. Additionally, reimbursement will be only gradual. In sum, the stipulations of the IGA may create an outcome in which an economically and financially strapped Russia will be holding the bag for Turkey. A second aspect to consider is that running the NPP under the condition of the BOO-model reduces Moscow's opportunity to use nuclear fuel assemblies as a lever. If Russia was to suspend the supply of nuclear fuels, it would not only hurt Ankara by cutting it off from about 10 percent of its electricity demand, but this move would also inflict harm on Russia because repayment is linked to electricity production. From Moscow's perspective, in other words, disconnecting Turkey from nuclear fuels corresponds to blocking itself from getting repaid. This cannot be in Moscow's interest and improves Ankara's position.

2. Russo-Turkish Trade Relations

Beyond Russo-Turkish energy relations, the two countries are strongly intertwined by their overall trade relations. As Figure 17 depicts, the trade volume of combined Russo-Turkish imports and exports between 2010 and 2021 rose from USD 18.82 billion to USD

²⁷⁹ Abdullah Bozkurt, "Russia to Install Radar and Missile Systems Close to Critical NATO Facilities in Turkey, Prompting Security Concerns," Nordic Monitor, November 14, 2022, <https://nordicmonitor.com/2022/11/russia-to-build-radar-and-missile-base-in-turkey-close-to-critical-nato-facilities-prompting-security-concerns/>.

32.94 billion, or by 175 percent.²⁸⁰ Figure 17 also shows that during the decade trade volumes mostly remained above the trend line, indicating continuous growth. Notwithstanding, the chart also shows two dips. In 2015–16, trade volumes plummeted from USD 23.06 billion to USD 15.85 billion, thus losing about one-third of their value. Similarly, 2020 witnessed a decline in trade volumes by 19 percent from USD 26.03 billion to USD 21.04 billion.

In both cases, however, trade relations recovered quickly, so that within a year the losses were almost made up (2017) or reversed to reach new peaks (2021). The 2015 drop was linked to the downing of Russia's fighter jet by the Turkish air force and the subsequent sanctions imposed by Russia, which were lifted following President Erdogan's visit to St. Petersburg in August 2016.²⁸¹ The decrease in 2020 correlated to an overall weak global economy prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most recent data indicates that the sharp increase in trade volumes characterizing the period of 2020–21 has even been exceeded by the growth rates of 2021–22. According to Yevgeniya Gaber, Russo-Turkish trade more than doubled during this period, climbing to an unprecedented USD 68.1 billion.²⁸² Hence, as of the end of 2022, Russo-Turkish trade relations are closer than ever and moving towards the USD 100 billion threshold.²⁸³ The latest massive increase in Russo-Turkish trade volume also suggests that Turkey has disregarded sanctions that Western countries imposed on Russia following its aggression in Ukraine.

²⁸⁰ Trade Map, "Bilateral Trade between Russian Federation and Turkey," accessed April 16, 2023, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c643%7c%7c792%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

²⁸¹ The background for this dip is the downing of the Russian fighter jet by a Turkish plane in November 2015. This is discussed further in the section covering Russian leverage as a result of close trade relations.

²⁸² Yevgeniya Gaber, "One Year into the War, It's Time for Turkey to Reconsider Its Ukraine-Russia Balancing Act," March 1, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/one-year-into-the-war-its-time-for-turkey-to-reconsider-its-ukraine-russia-balancing-act/>.

²⁸³ Presidency of The Republic of Turkey, "We Aim to Increase the Bilateral Trade Volume between Turkey and Russia to \$100 Billion," March 8, 2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/103850/-we-aim-to-increase-the-bilateral-trade-volume-between-turkey-and-russia-to-100-billion->.

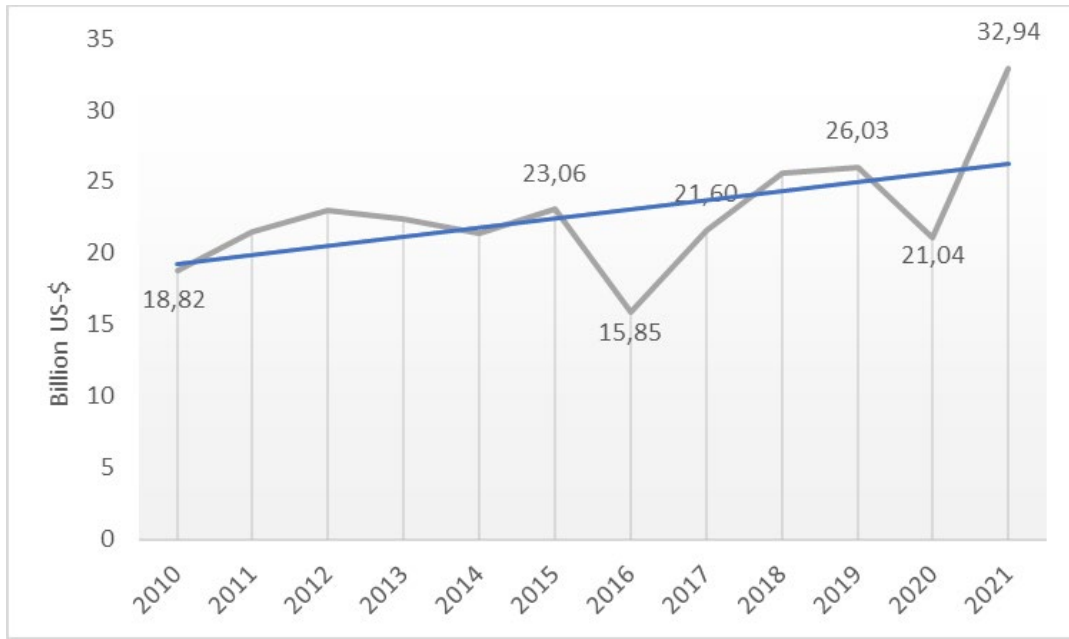


Figure 17. Russo-Turkish Trade Relations²⁸⁴

While Russo-Turkish trade relations have reached unprecedented volumes, they are not balanced. From Russia’s perspective, Turkey is a less important trade partner than vice versa. Between 2010 and 2021, Turkey’s share of Russia’s global trade was on average 3.5 percent, whereas Russia on average accounted for 7 percent of Turkey’s global trade volume.²⁸⁵ Consequently, throughout the period analyzed, Russia gained significant trade surpluses, ranging from a low of USD 7.85 billion in 2013 to a high of USD 19.91 billion in 2021.²⁸⁶ A significant portion of Russia’s surpluses results from its energy exports, which in 2021 alone accounted for about 50 percent of Russian exports to Turkey, worth about USD 13 billion.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁴ Adapted from: Trade Map, “Bilateral Trade between Russian Federation and Turkey,” accessed April 16, 2023, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c643%7c%7c792%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

²⁸⁵ Author’s calculations based on data provided by: Trade Map, “Bilateral Trade between Russian Federation and Turkey,” accessed April 16, 2023, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c643%7c%7c792%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

²⁸⁶ Trade Map.

²⁸⁷ Trade Map.

Trade relations with Russia create several vulnerabilities for Turkey. The first arises from Turkey's negative trade balance with Russia. To the extent that Russo-Turkish trade has been factored in USD, the trade deficit has led to a persistent drain of USD from Turkey to Russia.²⁸⁸ This development may have caused unintended side effects, such as the increasing need to replace spent USD by amassing foreign debt. In the case of Turkey, this seems a relevant issue, as its gross foreign-exchange reserves have been reduced by half within only five years to a low of USD 59 billion in July 2022.²⁸⁹ Possibly against this backdrop, in August 2022, Turkey reached out to Russia to process bilateral trade in local currencies, i.e., the ruble and the lira.²⁹⁰ According to media reporting, however, Turkey's attempts were only partially successful. While President Putin assented to using the ruble for purchasing Russian natural gas, he refused to accept any payments in lira.²⁹¹ As a result, as Ibad Ibadoghlu suggests, while Turkish dependence on USD might decrease marginally, it will require more USD or other strong currencies to buy rubles.²⁹² This leads to the assumption that, notwithstanding the Turkish-Russian agreement to use rubles for payments, the principal Turkish vulnerabilities resulting from unbalanced trade relations remain.

The second factor contributing to Turkey's vulnerability in the trade sector results from the lack of balance in Russo-Turkish trade relations. For Russia, accidental or intentional disruption of trade is far less painful than it is for Turkey. Evidence for this dynamic became obvious in Moscow's decision to severely restrict economic ties with Turkey following the downing of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015. This event not only caused the 2016 dip in trade relations as depicted in Figure 16, but also inflicted

²⁸⁸ Ibad Ibadoghlu, "Who Stands to Gain from Closer Relations between Russia and Turkey?," *European Polity and Policy (EUOPP)* (blog), September 21, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2022/09/21/who-stands-to-gain-from-closer-relations-between-russia-and-turkey/>.

²⁸⁹ Firat Kozok, "Turkey Looks to Ditch Dollar in Payments for Russian Energy," July 19, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-19/turkey-looks-to-ditch-dollar-in-payments-for-russian-energy>.

²⁹⁰ Kozok.

²⁹¹ Fehim Tatsekin, "Russia Offers Erdogan Economic Lifeline," August 10, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/erdogan-offers-russia-economic-lifeline-paying-rubles>.

²⁹² Ibadoghlu, "Who Stands to Gain from Closer Relations between Russia and Turkey?"

damage on the Turkish agricultural, tourism, and construction sectors. Following the incident, the Russian government not only banned the import of Turkish food items but also halted charter flights for Russian tourists who otherwise would have flocked to the Turkish Black Sea or Mediterranean coasts. Meanwhile, the construction sector suffered from the Kremlin's decision to exclude Turkish companies from lucrative contracts.²⁹³ As Bechev summarizes, Russia's response [to the downing of the Russian fighter jet] took a heavy toll on the Turkish economy."²⁹⁴

3. Comparison to Other Great Powers

A comparison of the trade volumes between Turkey and the other great powers reveals that Russo-Turkish trade relations are not exceptional. If anything, Russia performed relatively weaker than the United States and, even more so, China. Figure 19 shows that trade volumes between Turkey and the great powers have generally developed in lockstep. They took off from similar levels in 2010 and since then have developed largely synchronously. Based on total numbers, China (USD 34.2 billion) is the biggest trade partner for Turkey, followed by Russia (USD 32.94 billion) and the U.S. (USD 28.93 billion).²⁹⁵ If growth rates are considered as the main indicator, the picture slightly changes, as Russia turns out to be the least dynamic trade partner (175 percent increase between 2010 and 2021), whereas U.S.-Turkish trade volume almost doubled (193 percent) and Sino-Turkish trade volumes more than doubled (223 percent). Based on the data presented in Figure 18, there is no indication that any of the great powers has particular leverage resulting from general trade relations.

²⁹³ Neil MacFarquhar and Tim Arango, "Putin and Erdogan, Both Isolated, Reach Out to Each Other," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/09/world/europe/russia-putin-turkey-erdogan-syria.html>.

²⁹⁴ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 171.

²⁹⁵ Author's calculations based on data provided by: Trade Map, "Bilateral Trade between Turkey and China," Accessed April 17, 2023, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c792%7c%7c156%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1; Trade Map, "Bilateral Trade between Turkey and United States of America," accessed April 16 '7, 2023, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c792%7c%7c842%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

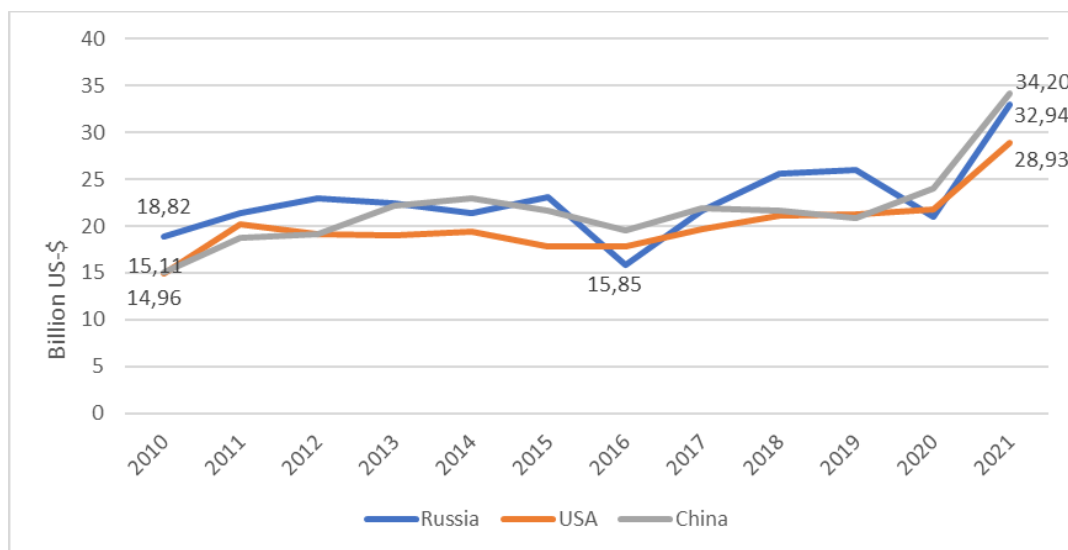


Figure 18. Turkish Trade Volumes with the Great Powers²⁹⁶

4. Introduction of Russia's MIR Payment System

In the second half of 2022, Russia and Turkey agreed to cooperate in the framework of Russia's MIR payment system. Following the meeting with his Russian counterpart in Sochi on August 5, 2022, President Erdogan announced that in an attempt to bolster economic ties through closer financial cooperation, Turkey would join Russia's MIR payment system. Five Turkish banks, he noted, had already adopted MIR and further "significant moves in this issue, which will eventually improve conditions for the stay of Russian tourists," were underway.²⁹⁷ Thus, as one observer identified, Putin and Erdogan had agreed on a deal that would "profoundly transfer the Russo-Turkish relationship."²⁹⁸

The motivations for Russia and Turkey to cooperate in the MIR framework do not deviate from those outlined for Egypt. For Russia, integrating Turkey into MIR forged the

²⁹⁶ Adapted from: Trade Map, "Trade Statistics for International Business Development," accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>.

²⁹⁷ Russia Briefing, "Russia and Türkiye Agree to Trade in Rubles and Dump U.S. Dollar," August 7, 2022, <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russia-and-turkiye-agree-to-trade-in-rubles-and-dump-us-dollar.html>; Tugce Ozsoy, "Turkish Banks Are Adopting Russian Payments System, Erdogan Says," *Bloomberg.Com*, August 6, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-06/turkish-banks-are-adopting-russian-payments-system-erdogan-says>.

²⁹⁸ MK Bhadrakumar, "Russia, Turkey Launch New Economic 'Roadmap,'" *The Cradle*, April 15, 2023, <https://thecradle.co/article-view/14036/Russia, Turkey launch new economic 'roadmap'>.

opportunity to mitigate Western sanctions by reducing financial transactions in USD and avoiding the channeling of payments through Western financial institutions like SWIFT. Additionally, integrating Turkey was economically far more enticing than incorporating Egypt, because Moscow's trade volumes with Ankara are about seven times those with Cairo. Finally, winning over Turkey was promising politically, as it provided the opportunity to draw a country into the Kremlin's orbit that was formally embedded in the West through its membership in NATO. From Turkey's perspective, the promises of joining MIR were primarily economic. Not only would the move facilitate trade and tourism, but it would also ease the pressure on Turkey's limited foreign exchange reserves.

But whatever the motivations and goals associated with Turkey's ascension to MIR were, they remained short lived. Only six weeks after joining MIR, the Turkish leadership and subsequently Turkish banks made a turnaround. On September 22, 2022, Bloomberg reported that two Turkish banks had suspended MIR transactions.²⁹⁹ Only a few days later, on September 27, the three remaining Turkish banks announced that they, too, had decided to cease participating in the MIR framework.³⁰⁰ Analyzing the background of the decision, reporting by First Kozok and Beril Akman identified changes in President Erdogan's stance following his travels to the United States on the occasion of the annual meeting of the UNGA in September 2022. Additionally, both authors referred to warnings issued by the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control about "entering new agreements or expanding existing ones with the Russian operator of Mir cards."³⁰¹ In other words, it seemed that by September 2022 Washington had intensified its warnings to Turkish financial institutions of the possible imposition of secondary sanctions, including being banned from the USD. Confronted with this choice, the Turkish government, and subsequently its financial institutions, public as well as private, bowed to U.S. pressure.

²⁹⁹ Firat Kozok and Beril Akman, "Erdogan Seeks Alternatives after Private Banks Exit Russia's Mir Payment System," September 22, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-22/erdogan-seeks-alternatives-after-private-banks-exit-russia-s-mir>.

³⁰⁰ Firat Kozok, "Turkish State Banks Set to Exit Russia's Mir on U.S. Warning," September 27, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-27/turkish-state-banks-set-to-exit-russia-s-mir-after-us-warning>.

³⁰¹ Kozok.

From Ankara's perspective, it turned out, access to the USD was more important than the prospect of closer Russo-Turkish economic ties.

D. MILITARY DIMENSION

Between 2010 and 2021, Russo-Turkish relations in the military dimension remained marginal. Yet Turkey's decision to purchase Russia's most advanced S-400 air-defense system in 2017 and the conduct of joint exercises by the Russian and Turkish navies in the Black Sea in 2017 and 2019 indicate that, while remaining limited, bilateral ties had grown closer in the military dimension, too. Additionally, and possibly more worrisome, Russo-Turkish rapprochement snubbed Turkey's NATO allies and the United States in particular. The latter reacted harshly to the S-400 deal and excluded Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Consortium. In sum, while the military dimension of their relations does not provide leverage for Russia, their rapprochement allows the Kremlin to disrupt the unity among NATO partners.

1. Russian Arms Deliveries

Russian arms deliveries to Turkey between 2010 and 2022 were marginal. Figure 19 depicts that only in 2019 did Turkey spend a significant amount on Russian weaponry. This spending relates to the Turkish decision to purchase Russia's most advanced S-400 air-defense system, worth about USD 2.5 billion, in September 2017 and the subsequent deliveries and payments in 2019.³⁰² Consequently, Turkey is not an important destination for Russian weapons deliveries, and the Russian leverage resulting from weapons sales and deliveries is low.

³⁰² Tuvan Gumrukcu and Ece Toksabay, "Turkey, Russia Sign Deal on Supply of S-400 Missiles," Reuters, December 29, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles-idUSKBN1EN0T5>; Sarah Dadouch and Idress Ali, "Turkey Begins Receiving Russian Missiles in Challenge to U.S. and NATO," Reuters, July 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-idUSKCN1U70S9>.

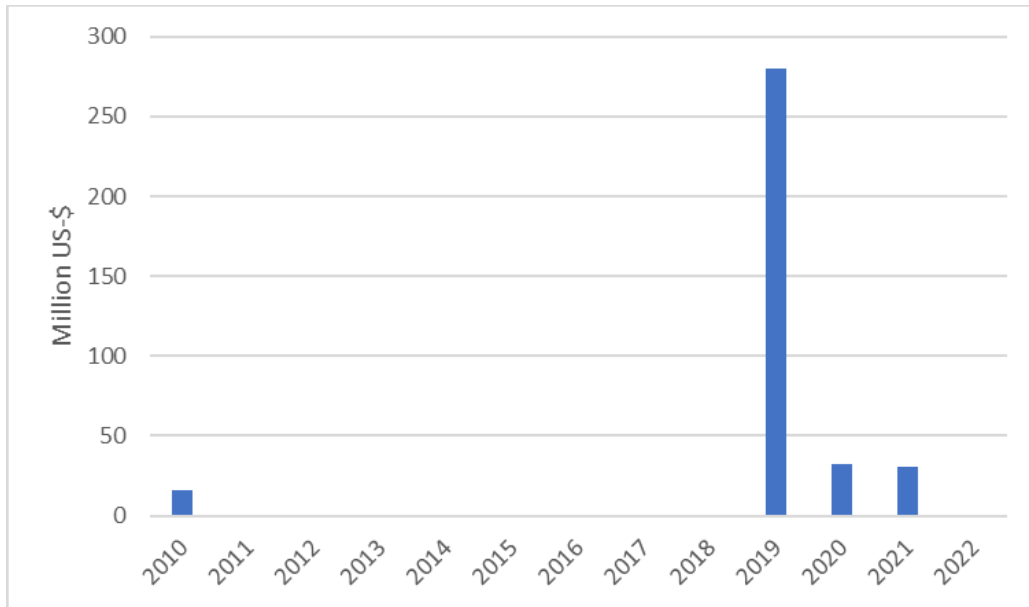


Figure 19. Turkey's Arms Purchases from Russia³⁰³

The reaction of Turkey's NATO partners to the S-400 deal was unanimously critical. NATO officials were visibly attempting to craft responses that included criticism but avoided pushing Turkey into a corner or, worse, closer towards the Kremlin.³⁰⁴ Then-chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Dunford stated that from a U.S. perspective the Turkish decision was a reason for "concern."³⁰⁵ Since 2017, Dunford's concerns have translated into noticeable U.S. reactions, including the termination of Turkey's membership in the F-35 JSF Consortium, the imposition of sanctions under CAATSA on the Turkish defense procurement agency, and the denial of the Turkish request to purchase 40 new F-16 fighter aircraft and to modernize 80 additional F-16s in the Turkish fleet.³⁰⁶

³⁰³ Adapted from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "TIV of Arms Exports to Turkey, 2010–2021," accessed March 30, 2023, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

³⁰⁴ Carlotta Gall and Andrew Higgins, "Turkey Signs Russian Missile Deal, Pivoting from NATO," *New York Times*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/world/europe/turkey-russia-missile-deal.html>.

³⁰⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Turkey Signs Deal To Buy Antiaircraft Missiles from Russia," September 12, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-russia-s-400-missile-system/28731021.html>.

³⁰⁶ Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. R41368 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023), 48–50, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41368/81>.

The reaction of its partners has possibly led to Turkish reluctance to deploy the S-400 system. According to the Congressional Research Service, as of 2023 “Turkey does not appear to have activated the system for general use and seems to remain open to negotiating with the United States about whether to do so.”³⁰⁷ Additionally, rumors from September 2022 claiming that Turkey had signed for a second batch of S-400 seem to be unsubstantiated.³⁰⁸ In sum, the West’s reaction to the S-400 deal seems to have discouraged Turkey from going further in the use of the system. This suggests Western (and U.S.) rather than Russian influence. However, this assessment must keep in mind that the Kremlin does not have to fully draw Turkey into its military orbit to stir troubles in NATO and drive a wedge into the Alliance’s unity.

2. Russian Arms Deliveries in Comparison

Russian arms deliveries to Turkey are even less impressive if their share is contrasted with that of selected other countries. Figure 20 depicts the share of Turkish weapons purchases based on data provided by SIPRI for the years 2010 to 2021. According to this data, the United States was by far the most prominent originator of Turkish weapons imports, accounting for roughly two-thirds, followed by Italy (21 percent), and Germany (6 percent).³⁰⁹ Combined, NATO partners accounted for 92 percent of Turkish weapons purchases. Russia’s 6 percent share as well as China’s contribution (2 percent) seem marginal.

³⁰⁷ Zanoliti and Thomas, 24.

³⁰⁸ Ragip Soylu and Aaron Mehta, “A Second S-400 Deal with Turkey? Not so Fast, Insiders Say,” *Breaking Defense*, September 12, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.sites.breakingmedia.com/2022/09/a-second-s-400-deal-with-turkey-not-so-fast-insiders-say/>; Bryant Harris, Joe Gould, and Burak Ege Bekdil, “US Holds Fire on Reports of Turkey’s Second S-400 Shipment,” *Defense News*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2022/08/16/us-holds-fire-on-reports-of-turkeys-second-s-400-shipment/>.

³⁰⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “Arms Exports to Turkey.”

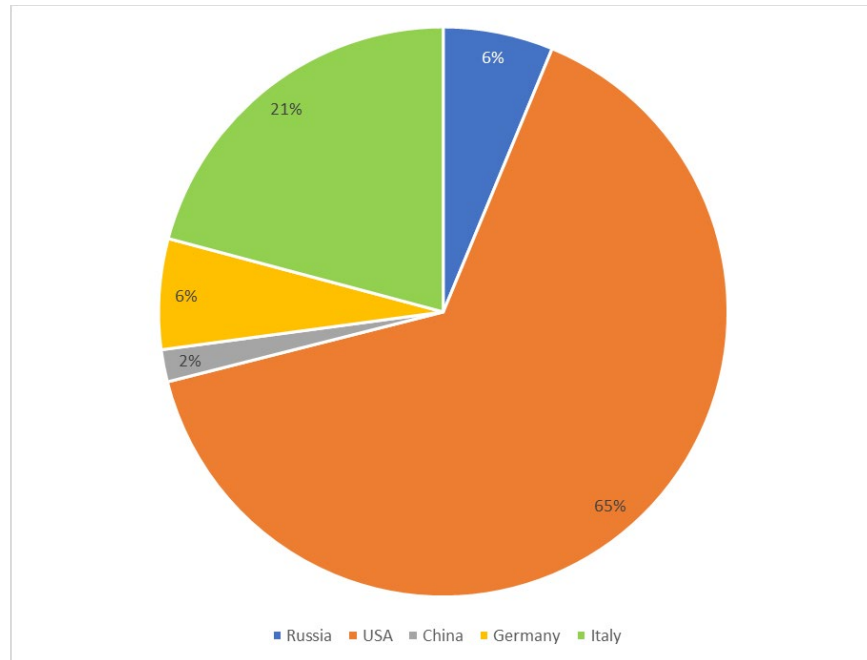


Figure 20. Share of Turkish Weapons Purchases from Selected Countries between 2010 and 2022³¹⁰

Adding to the previous assessment, Figure 21 indicates that Russia has not been able create momentum from the S-400 deal. At the beginning of the decade observed here, SIPRI data identifies the United States as the dominant originator of Turkish weapons imports, accounting for shares between 80 and 90 percent. Since 2016, U.S. shares have been in decline, hitting a low point at a little less than 10 percent in 2021. Shrinking U.S. weapons sales, however, have not paved the way for Russia. Instead, Italy as another NATO partner of Turkey jumped in and filled the void.³¹¹ Combined, Figures 20 and 21 provide evidence that Russia only has a marginal role as a provider of weaponry to Turkey. Thus, its capacity to exert influence on Turkey through weapons sales is weak.

³¹⁰ Adopted from: “TIV of Arms Exports to Turkey, 2010–2022,” accessed March 30, 2023, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

³¹¹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

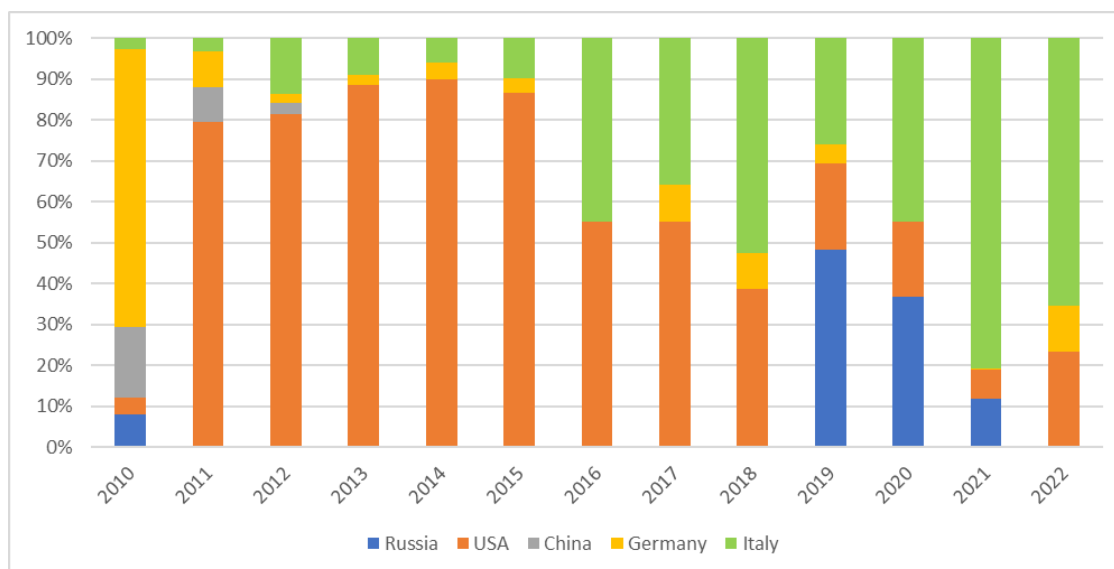


Figure 21. Share of Turkey's Arms Purchases from Selected Countries³¹²

3. Russo-Turkish Exercises

Adding to its limited role as a vendor of weaponry, Russia also has a minor role as a partner for military exercises with Turkey. A 2017 joint Russo-Turkish naval drill assembled an overall of five vessels, among them Russian and Turkish frigates *Admiral Grigorivich* and *Barbaros*, respectively. The exercises conducted were rather basic, comprising naval maneuvers like following a minesweeper, repelling speedboat attacks, inspecting vessels, and executing search-and-rescue missions.³¹³ Two years later, the number of vessels participating in another joint exercise did not exceed four. Turkey dispatched a corvette and a minesweeper, whereas Russia joined with a patrol ship and a sea trawler. According to media reporting, the 2019 drill occurred in the context of a major annual Turkish naval exercise labeled Blue Homeland, bringing together more than 100 vessels and geographically spanning the seas surrounding Turkey. Tasks executed with the

³¹² Adapted from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "TIV of Arms Exports to Turkey, 2010–2022," accessed March 30, 2023, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

³¹³ Dave Majumdar, "Why Are Russia and Turkey Holding Joint Naval Exercises in the Black Sea?," The Center for the National Interest, April 5, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-are-russia-turkey-holding-joint-naval-exercises-the-20041>.

Russian navy were limited to navigations out of a minefield.³¹⁴ Like Turkish weapons purchases from Russia, the conduct of common exercises can best be understood as a means for the Turkish government to signal its discontent with its treatment by its Western partners. Russian President Putin likely encourages and appreciates this behavior as it also serves his purposes. But he is not the driver. Thus, cooperation between Russia and Turkey in the military realm is not the result of Russian influence, but a deliberate choice by Turkish President Erdogan. In this regard, the conduct of exercises in 2017 and 2019 is possibly not an accidental correlation with the purchase of the S-400 system but a deliberate message about Turkey's independence.

E. POPULAR DIMENSION

Russian engagement with Turkey also has a popular component, which aims at shaping the perceptions of the Turkish populace in Moscow's favor. In its endeavor to achieve this outcome, Russia can rely on Kremlin-sponsored media such as Sputnik Türkiye (SputnikTR) as well as domestic Turkish outlets. During the latter half of the 2010s, Moscow successfully made use of its information ecosystem to shape the perception of the Turkish populace and to influence the Turkish government alike. Notwithstanding Russian successes in the shaping of perceptions and actions, its influence remains limited. In particular, the Turkish populace persistently perceives the United States as a more politically influential and economically stronger actor than Russia.

1. Shaping Perceptions through Russia's Information Ecosystem in Turkey

In its effort to shape popular perceptions in Turkey, Russia relies on Kremlin-sponsored as well as domestic Turkish media outlets. Together, as H. Akin Ünver observes, they form a "pro-Russian information ecosystem in Turkey."³¹⁵ The most important

³¹⁴ TRT World, "Turkey, Russia Hold Joint Naval Drill in Black Sea," March 9, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-russia-hold-joint-naval-drill-in-black-sea-24801>; TRT World, "In Pictures: Turkish Navy Drill Billed to Contribute to NATO Goals," accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/in-pictures-turkish-navy-drill-billed-to-contribute-to-nato-goals-24593>.

³¹⁵ H. Akin Ünver, *Russian Digital Media and Information Ecosystem in Turkey* (Oxford: Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, 2019), 9.

element within this ecosystem is the Kremlin-funded outlet SputnikTR. In November 2014, it became one of the first foreign-language offshoots created under the auspices of its parent institution, Sputnik News (SN), and comprises a website and the radio station Rusya'nin Sesi FM (Voice of Russia FM).³¹⁶ According to Ivo Furman et al., SputnikTR's ambition is to position itself as a corrective "to the 'west centrist' approach in the world media."³¹⁷ In its attempt to provide alternative narratives, the authors add, SputnikTR aggressively makes use of social media and particularly Twitter. Its coverage of international developments remains limited to translations of the content published by SN.³¹⁸ Adding to the Russian-sponsored media, the pro-Russian media outlet Aydinlik as well as a pro-Russian website TurkRus spread Moscow's narratives. As Ünver notes, Aydinlik has a reputation for providing reports on Russo-Turkish relations that present the Kremlin's perspectives and thus favor the Russian view. Similarly, TurkRus covers bilateral relations and shares Russian opinions.³¹⁹ Combined, Russian-sponsored and domestic Turkish outlets provide the Kremlin with a moderate but nevertheless relevant means to shape the popular dimension in Turkey.

Reinforcing the activities of its information ecosystem, Moscow may also achieve effects in the popular dimension through cooperation between the main Russian and Turkish news agencies. In March 2017, Russia's state-owned TASS and Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency agreed to increase their cooperation. The signing of the deal occurred in the presence of the Russian and Turkish presidents.³²⁰ The timing of the agreement as well as the presence of the Russian and Turkish presidents in the ceremony suggest that this

³¹⁶ The Economist, "In Sputnik's Orbit," March 2, 2019, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2187121479/abstract/ED1F6711A86B4C72PQ/1>; Ivo Ozan Furman, Kurt Bilgin Gürel, and Fırat Berk Sivaslıoğlu, "'As Reliable as a Kalashnikov Rifle': How Sputnik News Promotes Russian Vaccine Technologies in the Turkish Twittersphere," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221150418>.

³¹⁷ Furman, Gürel, and Sivaslıoğlu, "'As Reliable as a Kalashnikov Rifle,'" 4.

³¹⁸ Furman, Gürel, and Sivaslıoğlu, 4.

³¹⁹ Ünver, Russian Digital Media and Information Ecosystem in Turkey, 9.

³²⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Russia's TASS Signs Cooperation Deal With Turkey's Anadolu News Agency," March 11, 2017, sec. Russia, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-tass-signs-cooperation-agreement-anadolu-turkish-news-agency/28363230.html>.

cooperation is not only an indicator of increasingly close bilateral ties but also has a political dimension.

2. Russian Media Campaigns in Turkey

Russia has repeatedly made use of information operations to influence the Turkish government and the Turkish populace. In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, Russian narratives resonate with the Turkish populace—even though there is no indicator of a specific campaign run by Russia's media ecosystem. Studies by the RAND Corporation and Ünver dating to 2018 and 2019, respectively, have identified several occasions on which Russia has made use of its media resources to shape public perceptions in Turkey. The RAND study by Katherine Costello analyzes the downing of the Russian fighter jet in November 2015, the coup attempt against Erdogan in July 2016, and the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey in December of the same year. These events, Costello notes, present “key-moments in the Russia-Turkey relationship” and are “revealing and representative examples of different Russian propaganda strategies and techniques.”³²¹ In all cases, Moscow's actions in the mediascape supported the Kremlin's foreign policy goals related to Turkey, most notably the alienation of Turkey from its Western partners (in particular, NATO) and, inversely, the intensification of Russo-Turkish ties. Insofar as the Kremlin's information operations have had an anti-U.S. component, surveys suggest some success. Asked *How do you define the USA in its relations with Turkey?*, the share of Turks identifying the United States as a strategic partner dropped from 23.8 percent in 2016 to only 14.1 percent in 2017. Conversely, the percentage of the Turkish populace judging the United States an unreliable country increased from 41.6 to 48.5 percent.³²²

³²¹ Katherine Costello, *Russia's Use of Media and Information Operations in Turkey: Implications for the United States*, RAND Perspective , PE-278-A (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 1, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE278.html>.

³²² Mustafa Aydin, *Public Perceptions of Turkish Foreign Policy Research 2022* (Istanbul: Kadir Has University Turkish Study Group, 2022), 68, https://www.khas.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/TDP_2022_ENG_FINAL_07.09.22.pdf.

The study by Ünver covers all three episodes from the RAND study but adds the potential meddling of Russia with the 2018 presidential election in Turkey and the S-400 procurement process between 2016 and 2019. Its most interesting part, however, is centered around the downing of the Russian fighter jet by a Turkish plane in November 2015 and the Kremlin's subsequent media offensive targeting the Turkish administration. According to Ünver's assessment, the Russo-Turkish media confrontation unfolded between November 2015 and August 2016.³²³ Of the story lines created during the campaign, Russia's account of Turkey purchasing crude oil from ISIS and the involvement of a member of the Erdogan family "put Turkey on the defensive from a digital standpoint."³²⁴ Whatever measures Ankara took to ward off Russian narratives, Ünver stresses, it was unable to counter this Russian line. Eventually, the ferocity of the Kremlin's media operation abated following the coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 and after President Erdogan's visit to St. Petersburg in August came to an abrupt halt.³²⁵ According to Ünver, this campaign was "the first and the last time that Moscow flexed its digital hybrid muscle" in a confrontation with the Turkish government.³²⁶ Likewise, he stresses, it remained the only case in which a Russian information operation "had a measurable effect on policy."³²⁷ The principal Turkish policy change consisted of President Erdogan's decision to give in to Russian demands to present an apology for the downing of the Russian fighter jet. This aspect is covered in more depth in the section on the Russo-Turkish relations in the diplomatic dimension (Chapter III, Section B).

Though no source indicates an explicit Russian campaign to shape the perceptions of the Turkish people about the ongoing war in Ukraine, survey data suggests that Turks have absorbed the Kremlin's story line about it. The previous chapter on Egypt highlighted the activities of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic in the context of the Russian aggression

³²³ Ünver, *Russian Digital Media and Information Ecosystem in Turkey*, 14–19.

³²⁴ Ünver, 17.

³²⁵ Ünver, 18.

³²⁶ Ünver, 20.

³²⁷ H. Akin Ünver, *Russian Digital Media and Information Ecosystem in Turkey* (Oxford: Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, 2019), 20.

against Ukraine and the narratives used to denounce the Ukrainians as well as their Western supporters.³²⁸ Data collected by the Istanbul-based Kadir Has University, and depicted in Figure 22, affirms that these narratives resonate with the Turkish populace. While one-third of respondents identified Russian expansionist policies as the main reason for the war, a combined two-thirds of the Turkish populace explained the war with the same arguments as Russia. Responding to the question *What is the main reason for the Russia-Ukraine war?*, they pinpointed the discrimination against Russians in Ukraine (2.5 percent), the fact that Ukraine historically belonged to Russia (7.5 percent), Nazi influence (10.5 percent), NATO’s threat to Russia (19.5 percent), or Ukraine’s desire to join NATO (27.7 percent) as the underlying causes of the war.

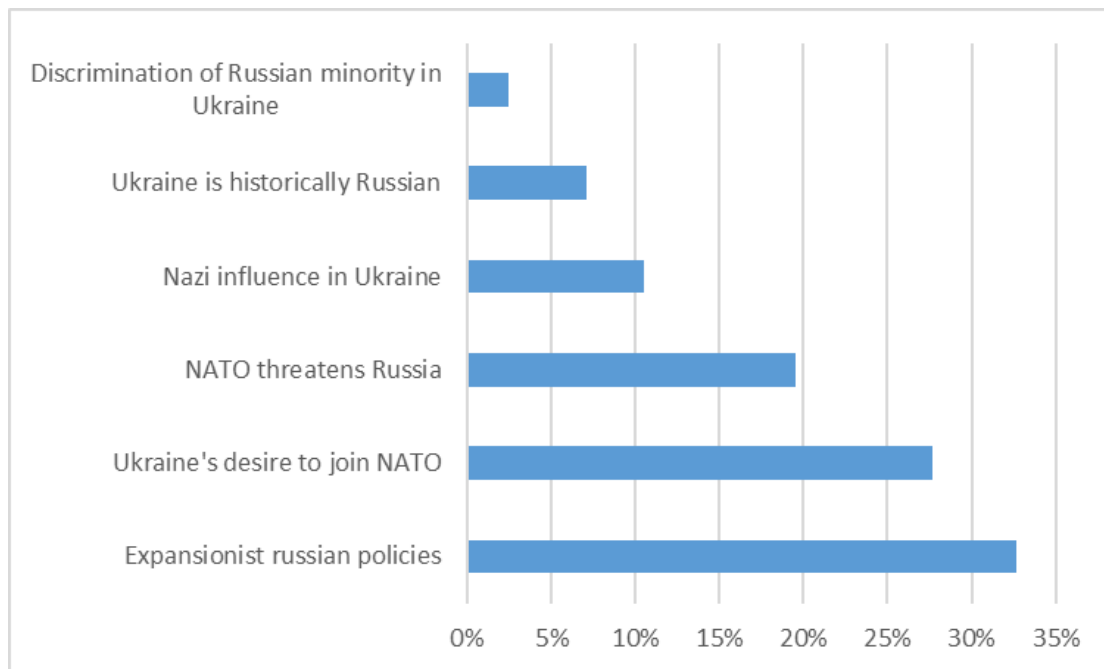


Figure 22. Reasons for Russo-Ukrainian War According to Turkish Populace³²⁹

³²⁸ Nour, “Analysis: Behaviour of Russia’s Arabic Media during the Ukraine War.”

³²⁹ Adapted from: Mustafa Aydin, *Public Perceptions of Turkish Foreign Policy Research 2022* (Istanbul: Kadir Has University Turkish Study Group, 2022), 130, https://www.khas.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/TDP_2022_ENG_FINAL_07.09.22.pdf.

Other surveys covering the question of responsibility for the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war either align with the findings by Kadir Has University or present only slightly diverging results. Findings by the Turkish polling institute Metropoll substantiate previously presented attitudes of the Turkish populace. In a survey dated March 2022, about one-third of Turks identified Russia as the aggressor. Meanwhile, 48.3 percent of the interviewees considered the United States and NATO responsible, and 7.5 percent even claimed that the outbreak of the war was Ukraine's fault. Another 2.5 percent referred to other reasons and 8 percent had no idea or did not provide responses.³³⁰ A February 2023 survey conducted by Al-Monitor/Premise Poll captured slightly diverging perceptions among Turks. According to this survey, the number of Turks identifying Russia as the aggressor had increased to 41 percent. Conversely, the number of those blaming the West decreased to 33 percent overall, split between 25 percent identifying the war as the United States' fault and 8 percent stating that the EU was responsible. Six percent of Turks said that Ukraine had brought the war on itself. Another 2 percent identified other reasons and an exceptionally high 17 percent did not know who was to blame for the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In contrast with similar polls, Al-Monitor/Premise Poll did not ask for a potential role of NATO.³³¹

In sum, even if the latest survey by Al-Monitor/Premise Poll suggests that Turks are taking a more critical stance towards Russia, Moscow's storyline about its aggression against Ukraine still resonates strongly with them. If one takes the Al-Monitor/Premise Poll survey as the one with the most disadvantageous figures from a Russian perspective and sums up those who openly blame the West (33 percent), Ukraine (6 percent) and those who are undecided (17 percent) or see other reasons as decisive (2 percent), still about 60 percent of Turks share the Kremlin's narrative.

³³⁰ Ozer Sencar [@ozersencar1], "Question of the Month; Who Do You Hold Responsible for the Invasion of Ukraine?," *Twitter*, March 30, 2022, 2:32 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ozersencar1/status/1509101371794018310>.

³³¹ Al Monitor, "Al-Monitor/Premise Poll: Russia's Role Seen as Negative in Turkey, Yemen, Iraq," February 23, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/al-monitorpremise-poll-russias-role-seen-negative-turkey-yemen-iraq>.

3. Assessing Russia's Reputation and Importance

Detached from specific political events and developments, other surveys provide insights into about the extent to which Turks have favorable opinions of Russia and consider it an important actor. Data collected by Pew for the period from 2007 to 2019 and depicted in Figure 23 shows the percentage of Turks having a favorable opinion about Russia. Between 2007 and 2015, appreciation for Russia remained low, never exceeding 20 percent. By 2016–17, the percentage of those expressing a favorable opinion increased remarkably. Until 2017 figures doubled and by 2019 had further risen to 39 percent.³³² The growth of the Turks' favorable opinion of Russia following 2015 correlates to an overall improvement in Russo-Turkish relations following the November 2015 incident. From a Russian perspective, this is likely a desired effect. Notwithstanding, a comparison of the prevalence of favorable and unfavorable opinions about Russia reveals that Russian success is not complete. Much of the Turkish populace (47 percent) maintains a negative perception of Russia.³³³

Adding to the data provided by Pew, which allows the identification of long-term trends, other surveys provide insights on the current perception of Russia among Turks. The February 2023 Al-Monitor/Premise Poll survey also found that Turks still see Russia more negatively than positively. Asked about Russia's role in their country, 39 percent of Turks said Russia's role in Turkey was negative, whereas 30 stated the opposite.³³⁴ While the data collected by Pew and Al-Monitor/Premise Poll should not be compared against each other, the latter allows an inside view of what Turks think of Russia after it has started its war against Ukraine. From a Russian perspective, this outcome is likely a disappointment.

³³² Pew Research Center, "Global Indicators Database," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, March 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/>.

³³³ Pew Research Center.

³³⁴ Al Monitor, "Al-Monitor/Premise Poll: Russia's Role Seen as Negative in Turkey, Yemen, Iraq."

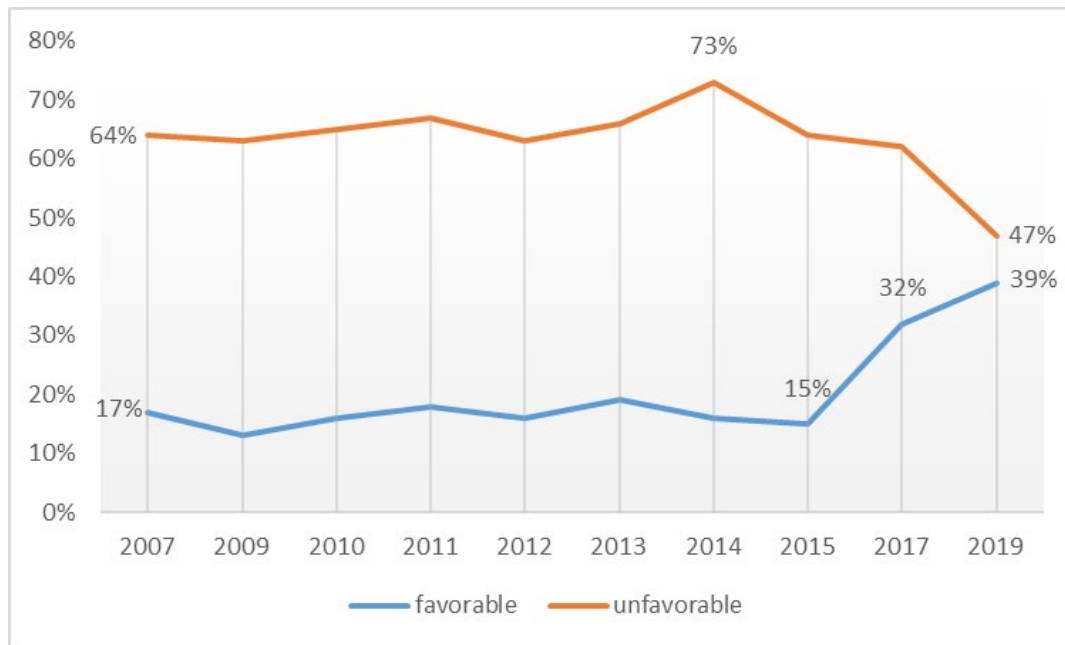


Figure 23. Share of Turkish Populace with (Un)Favorable Opinion of Russia³³⁵

Additional statistics provided by Pew allow for the measurement of Russian favorability among Turks in comparison to the other great powers. Figure 24 presents the approval ratings of the great powers, indicating an overall volatility and the lack of general trends. Nonetheless, it appears as if after climbing to a high in 2015, U.S. approval ratings among Turks dropped and since then have remained low, whereas appreciation for Russia and China roughly doubled between 2015 and 2019. Hence, by 2019, Russia clearly outperformed the United States and was on par with China.

³³⁵ Adapted from: Pew Research Center, "Global Indicators Database," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, March 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/>.

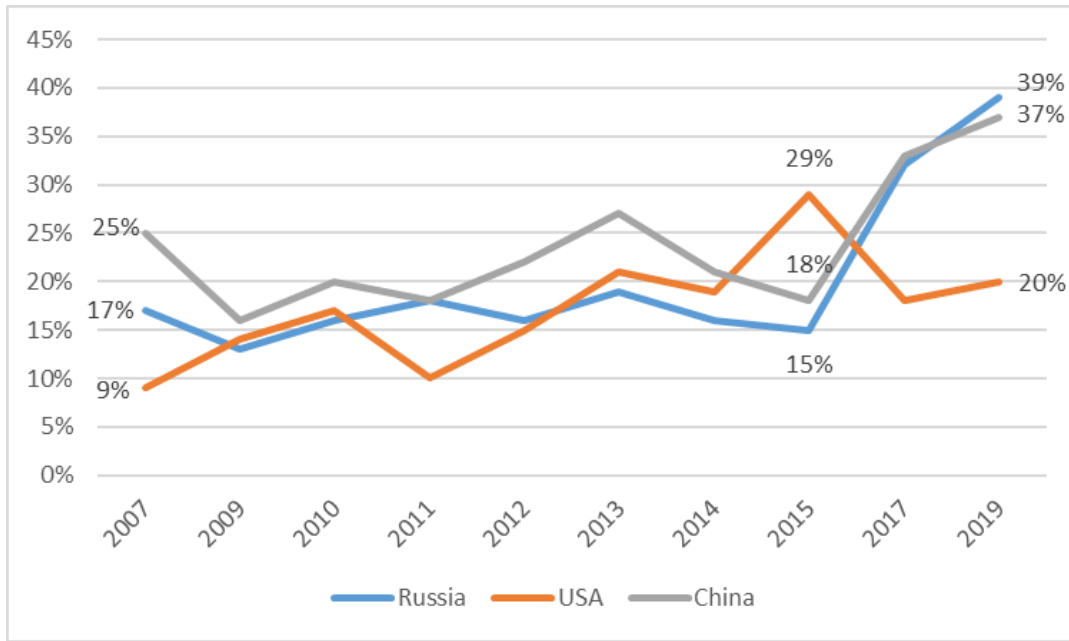


Figure 24. Share of Turkish Populace with Favorable Opinion of the Great Powers ³³⁶

For a comparison of the relative standing of the great powers since the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the previously cited survey by Al-Monitor/Premise Poll again provides insights. As of February 2023, Turks consider Russia's role in their country more positive than that of the other great powers. Whereas 30 percent state that Russia has a positive impact on their country, only 19 percent note the same about China and 18 percent come to the same assessment for the United States.³³⁷ Given that the questions asked by Al-Monitor/Premise Poll and Pew differ, one should again refrain from comparing the two surveys directly with each other. Nevertheless, the data collected by Al-Monitor/Premise Poll indicates that even as a warring party in the Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia has a better reputation among Turks than the United States and even China. From the Kremlin's perspective, both developments are positive and suggest that Russia might eventually win over the Turkish populace.

³³⁶ Adapted from: Pew Research Center, "Global Indicators Database," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, March 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/>.

³³⁷ Al Monitor, "Al-Monitor/Premise Poll: Russia's Role Seen as Negative in Turkey, Yemen, Iraq."

Turning to the Turkish perception of Russia as an important country, the situation is less promising for Russia. As of 2022, only 10 percent of the Turkish population believed that Russia is the world's leading economic power. Likewise, only 10 percent believed that Russia could evolve into this position within the next decade. In this regard, Russia falls short of China (14 and 19 percent) and, even more visibly, of the United States (59 and 51 percent).³³⁸ On a similar scale, Turks rate the United States and China higher than Russia when asked about the most powerful country globally. Only 10 percent of the respondents thought that Russia occupies this position or will turn into the most powerful country within the next ten years.³³⁹ Possibly reflecting the Turkish perception of Russia being a lesser power compared to the United States and China, the share of Turks favoring cooperation with Russia in foreign policy remains limited. Though the share of Turks supporting closer cooperation with Russia tripled between 2013 and 2022, it still did not exceed 18.6 percent.³⁴⁰ Hence, Russia has parity with China (18.1 percent), but significantly falls short compared to the United States (39 percent).³⁴¹

Turning finally to the Turkish perception of Russia as an influential actor in the Middle East, data collected by Kadir Has University and presented in Figure 25 provides key insights. Superficially, figures are promising for Moscow, as they suggest that between 2013 and 2022 the number of Turks considering Russia the most influential power for the future of the Middle East more than doubled.³⁴² Overall, this would resonate with increased Russo-Turkish engagement. Deeper analysis, however, reveals that Russian euphoria is misplaced for at least four reasons. First, the percentage of Turks considering Moscow influential for the future of the Middle East remains at a very modest level of only 10 percent. Second, after rising to almost 20 percent in 2020, the percentage of those considering Russia as influential has almost been reduced by half again. Third, even though Russia is continuously considered to be the second most influential country by the Turkish

³³⁸ Aydin, Turkish Foreign Policy Research 2022, 30.

³³⁹ Aydin, 31.

³⁴⁰ Aydin, 47.

³⁴¹ Aydin, 47.

³⁴² Aydin, 152.

populace, its lead over China has shrunk massively. Finally, and likely most disappointing for Moscow, in comparison to Washington, it continuously and by a large margin plays second fiddle.³⁴³

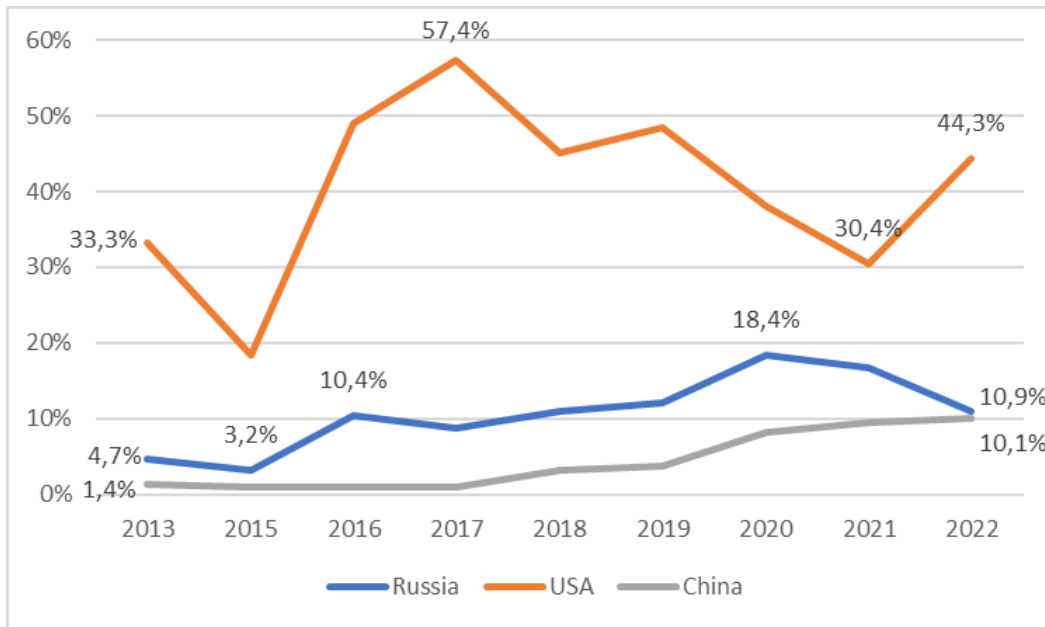


Figure 25. Turkish Populace's Perception of Most Influential Country for the Future of the Middle East³⁴⁴

To sum up, during the last decade Russia has turned into a more favored partner in the eyes of the Turkish populace. This positive development, however, contrasts with the overall perception of the Turks that Russia falls short in terms of being economically or politically powerful and possessing the capacity to influence the future of the Middle East. Hence, Russian success in favorably shaping the popular dimension of Russo-Turkish relations remains mixed at best.

³⁴³ Aydin, 152.

³⁴⁴ Adapted from: Mustafa Aydin, *Public Perceptions of Turkish Foreign Policy Research 2022* (Istanbul: Kadir Has University Turkish Study Group, 2022), 152, https://www.khas.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/TDP_2022_ENG_FINAL_07.09.22.pdf.

F. CONCLUSION

To draw conclusions about the intensity of Russo-Turkish relations in the period stretching from 2010 to 2022, it is again important to distinguish between engagement and influence. Whereas there is certainly more of the former, the picture is significantly less clear regarding the latter. With respect to engagement in the diplomatic dimension, the number of high-level contacts in absolute terms as well as compared to other heads of state is striking. The frequency of exchange either by phone or in-person meetings illustrates the intensity of Russo-Turkish ties and their foundation in a multitude of issues. Likewise, in the economic dimension, Russia and Turkey are intensively and increasingly interconnected not only through their close relations in the energy sector but also by their rising trade volumes. In the military dimension, Turkey's membership in NATO sets a high bar for cooperation with Russia. If, as was the case with the purchase of the S-400 air-defense system, Turkey crosses this threshold, this signals a remarkable (and to some extent concerning) development. Finally, regarding the popular dimension, establishing its mouthpiece SputnikTR in 2014 and forging cooperation between Russian TASS and Turkish Anadolu Agency in 2017 is a significant development. It creates the conditions for spreading Russian narratives on events and issues and thus for shaping Turkish public perceptions in the Kremlin's favor.

But has more engagement also provided Russia with more influence over Turkey? In the diplomatic dimension of their relations, overall voting alignment in the UNGA since 2010 as well as Turkey's voting pattern in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine suggest otherwise. Rather, it appears as if Ankara is navigating an independent course.

In the economic dimension, Ankara has stayed away from the Western sanctions and even increased its cooperation with Russia. While these developments suggest Russian leverage and possibly influence in the economic dimension, the decision of Turkish state-controlled and private banks to exit the MIR payment system is a clear and strong indicator that if confronted with the prospect of painful Western sanctions, Turkey shies away from being drawn closer into Russia's economic orbit.

In the military dimension, purchasing Russia's S-400 air-defense system was a remarkable development, because it resulted in Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 JSF consortium. But, while the decision played into the Kremlin's hands economically and even more politically, it hardly is a triumph or evidence of Moscow's influence. Instead, Ankara's decision not to order a second batch of S-400s and its reluctance to deploy the system it acquired highlights Turkey's careful attempt not to get too close with Russia in the military dimension and further strain its relations with its allies in NATO.

In the popular dimension, Russia successfully conducted a media campaign targeting the family of President Erdogan following the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015. Together with imposed economic sanctions, this campaign led to a policy change by the Turkish government and thus indicates Russian influence. Adding to this success, a large segment of the Turkish populace shares Moscow's narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian war and since 2010 has developed a more favorable opinion of Russia in general. However, when it comes to attributing an influential role to Moscow in the Middle East, surveys suggest that still, and by a wide margin, Turks consider the United States to be the most influential great power in the Middle East.

In sum, and similar to the Egyptian case, in its relations with Turkey, the Kremlin looks potent and influential from afar. The closer one gets, however, the more visible its limitations become.

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IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

A. KEY FINDINGS

The aim of this thesis was to test, in two ways, whether Russia's return to the Middle East has been successful. First, the thesis investigated whether Russia has increased its engagement with Middle Eastern countries in the diplomatic, economic, military, and popular dimensions. Second, it assessed whether this increased engagement has yielded influence for the Kremlin. Based on evidence collected for two case studies—Egypt and Turkey—this thesis concludes that the Kremlin's success remains incomplete. While Moscow is much more engaged and intertwined with Cairo and Ankara today than it was in 2010, its ability to exert influence over Egypt and Turkey and hence to coerce the two countries into alignment remains weak.

Looking first into the aspect of increased engagement in Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish relations, the findings are unequivocal. Throughout the dimensions studied in this thesis, bilateral ties have intensified, at times even significantly. In the diplomatic dimension, the frequency of exchange at the presidential level has become high in both absolute and relative terms. President Putin dedicates much more time and effort to Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish ties than do his U.S. or Chinese counterparts. This is particularly obvious in the case of Turkey, where several policy issues require frequent coordination between Russia and Turkey. By dedicating resources to Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish relations, President Putin has committed himself to close bilateral ties and signals that they are important to him.

Greater economic engagement in Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish relations is evident in many forms. For one, bilateral trade has increased significantly. In the Egyptian case, trade volumes were particularly high between 2016 and 2019 and—withstanding setbacks during the COVID-19 pandemic—more than doubled between 2010 and 2021. In the Turkish case, the increase in trade volume is even more impressive in absolute as well as in relative terms, climbing from about USD 19 billion in 2010 to USD 68 billion in 2022. In the nuclear energy sector, Russia has agreed with Egypt and Turkey to execute multi-

billion-dollar projects. Additionally, although under different circumstances, Egypt and Turkey are linked to Russia through cooperation in the natural gas sector. Whereas Turkey is one of Russia's major clients and connected with Russia by two major natural gas pipelines, Egypt and Russia are tied together through the joint exploitation of the Zohr natural gas field in the Mediterranean.

The third dimension in which cooperation has grown is the military. Egypt has purchased significant amounts of Russian weaponry during the studied period. Because these weapons systems, including fighter jets, attack helicopters, and air-defense systems, have a long lifespan, the links they establish are long-lasting. Additionally, Russia and Egypt intensified joint exercises between their armed forces. For Turkey, cooperation with Russia in the military dimension is much less visible and intensive. Nevertheless, given Turkey's membership in NATO, its decision to purchase Russian S-400 air-defense-systems in 2017 and to conduct joint exercises with the Russian navy are remarkable developments.

Finally, in terms of popular sentiment, Russia has increased its outreach to the local populations in Egypt and Turkey alike. In this context, the establishment of RT and Sputnik Arabic as the Kremlin's mouthpieces for the Arabic-speaking world is a significant step in Moscow's attempts to shape the perceptions of the Middle Eastern population, including Egyptians. Likewise, the forging of cooperation between the Kremlin-sponsored outlets and local media has increased Moscow's capacity to spread its storylines in the region. The patterns observed and described for the Arabic-speaking outlets also apply for Turkey, where the Kremlin supported the introduction of a Turkish-language offshoot of Sputnik and encouraged cooperation between Russia's TASS and the Turkish Anadolu Agency. Finally, in the popular dimension, Russia has demonstrated its readiness to conduct media campaigns, targeting either the local population or governments.

In view of this long list of activities demonstrating increasingly high levels of cooperation and engagement in a variety of dimensions, it is tempting to assume that these developments have yielded the Kremlin with more influence in its bilateral relations with Cairo and Ankara. The analysis presented in this thesis, however, suggests otherwise. To start with, in the diplomatic dimension, the study of Egyptian and Turkish voting patterns

in the UNGA suggests neither overall strong alignment with Russia since 2010 nor increasingly strong alignment correlating to otherwise closer bilateral ties. In a ranking of countries with the highest voting alignment with Russia since 2010, Egypt finishes only at 52, and Turkey performs even worse, at 131 out of 192. Likewise, in the context of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, Egyptian and Turkish voting patterns in the UNGA do not align with those of Russia. While Egypt voted in favor of most UNGA resolutions related to the Russo-Ukrainian war and abstained otherwise, Turkey voted *yes* in all cases. In sum, Egyptian and Turkish voting behavior highlights Russia's inability to exert influence over either country.

In the economic dimension of Russia's relations with Turkey and Egypt, the Kremlin has some leverage. Given the importance of Russia as a source of strategically important goods—grain in the case of Egypt, and natural gas in the case of Turkey—both countries are exposed to accidental or intentional disruptions of bilateral trade. Egypt felt its vulnerability when Russian grain exports slowed down following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Turkey faced Russia's economic power when the latter interrupted trade and economic exchange more broadly in the aftermath of the downing of the Russian fighter jet in November 2015. Cooperation with Russia in the civilian use of nuclear energy, while not without risk for Russia, too, creates dependencies on the Egyptian and Turkish sides for the uninterrupted delivery of nuclear fuel, the training of a nuclear workforce, and nuclear waste repatriation and storage.

But while Russia undoubtedly has levers of influence in its economic relations with Egypt and Turkey, those are not strong enough to draw the two countries into Russia's economic orbit. Regarding trade, for example, Russo-Egyptian volumes are only half the size of those between Egypt and the United States, and only one-fourth of the volumes traded between Egypt and China. Further, although the Kremlin has benefited from Cairo's and Ankara's decisions to maintain economic ties with Moscow despite Western sanctions against Russia, there is no indication that this decision is the result of Russian influence. Rather, it seems that this development is the outcome of sober analysis in Cairo and Ankara about whether cooperation with Russia serves their respective national interests or not. Their respective decisions to either stay away or to terminate participation in Russia's MIR

payment system is the most obvious expression of the trade-offs taking place in Cairo and Ankara. Confronted with the risk of secondary U.S. sanctions, including the loss of access to the U.S. dollar, the two countries in 2022 gave in to U.S. pressure. Weighing the costs and benefits of either aligning with Russia—and thus bolstering tourism, trade, and other forms of economic cooperation—or maintaining cooperative relations with the United States—and thus maintaining access to the global lead currency—Cairo and Ankara opted for the latter and clearly decided to stand with Washington instead of Moscow.

Indicators for Russian influence over Egypt and Turkey are also limited in the military dimension of their respective relationships. In the Egyptian case, weapons purchases as well as the conduct of joint exercises demonstrate that Cairo is not willing to put all its eggs into the Russian basket. Egypt's weapons purchases from Russia and the United States between 2010 and 2021 were at an almost equal share of 33 and 30 percent, respectively. Additionally, during the same period, Egypt bought significant shares of its weaponry from European countries which are allies and partners of the United States. Hence, there is no indication that Egypt is switching to the Russian camp. The latest major Russo-Egyptian agreement on the purchase of advanced Su-35 fighter jets worth about USD 2 billion seems to be in a deadlock. While it is unclear to what extent the U.S. threat to impose the CAATSA influenced Egypt, the prospect of being sanctioned by the Washington presumably had an impact on the decision making in Cairo. In terms of joint military exercises, Egypt maintains close ties with Russia in recurring training series. But exercises with Russian armed forces are only a small part in the yearly schedule of joint trainings of the Egyptian military.

Regarding Russo-Turkish relations in the military dimension, Turkey's purchase of the S-400 air defense system is the only major deal concluded between 2010 and 2021. Ankara's decision to buy the S-400 from Russia was at odds with the position of the United States and Turkey's allies in NATO. It was also made despite threats to exclude Turkey from the F-35 JSF consortium. The fact that the Turkish leadership nevertheless stuck to its decision to cooperate with Moscow can be interpreted as an expression of Russian influence. At the same time, however, Ankara refrained from purchasing a second tranche of the S-400 and abstained from deploying the system. Both actions suggest that Turkey—

contrary to Moscow's interests—does not want to further strain its relations with the United States and NATO partners and thus demonstrate that Russian influence remains limited.

Finally, in the realm of popular opinion associated with Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish ties, Moscow has failed to exert influence in Egypt but has achieved some successes in Turkey. Among Egyptians, the Russian media offensive led by the Kremlin's Arabic-speaking mouthpieces RT and Sputnik Arabic to shape the Egyptians' perception of the Russo-Ukrainian war can be considered a failure. Between March and November 2022, three surveys by the TWI found that three-quarters of the Egyptian populace had a negative perception of the Russian military actions in Ukraine. Equally disappointing for the Kremlin, other surveys found that the Egyptians expressed more favorable opinions about the United States and China than for Russia. Likewise, Egyptians assessed relations with Washington and Beijing as more important than ties with Moscow. Hence, in the case of Egypt, Russian influence in the popular dimension remains weak.

In the case of Turkey, the situation differs. Following the downing of the Russian fighter jet in November 2015 and as part as an overall strategy to exert pressure on the Turkish government, Russia initiated a media campaign that went so far as to attack President Erdogan's family and suggest that Turkey benefited from oil trade with ISIS. Overall, Russia has achieved mixed results in swaying public opinion in Turkey. Surveys suggest that more Turks have absorbed Russian narratives about its aggression against Ukraine. Given that there is no indication of a specific Russian campaign to shape this perception—contrary to the case of Egypt—this development is a remarkable achievement for the Kremlin. Likewise, Moscow can consider it a success that, as recently as February 2023, a survey found the Turks have a more favorable opinion of Russia than they do of the United States and China. Nevertheless, the Turks' level of appreciation for Russia is moderate overall and falls short in comparison to unfavorable votes. Adding to this disappointment for the Kremlin, in the view of Turks, Russia falls short in its economic and political power when compared to the United States and China. Finally, the Turkish public assesses the Kremlin to have only weak influence on the future of the Middle East. Although on par with China, Russia performs significantly weaker than the United States

on this point. In sum, Russia's successes and its ability to be influential in shaping popular opinion in these partner countries remain limited.

B. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

With the review of the findings completed, the final question dealt with here is: What could be next? Honest assessment must admit that analyzing Russo-Egyptian and Russo-Turkish ties only provides snapshots of Russian engagement with the Middle East. So, for a more complete picture, further case studies are essential. Such case studies could focus on countries that, contrary to the case selection for this thesis, are rich in energy resources like the Gulf States. Such analysis could lead to the identification of additional Russian approaches to achieving influence in countries which are not only rivals for market shares in the global oil and natural gas market, but which are also financially stronger than the examples studied in this thesis.

In addition to broadening the focus, it would also be possible to deepen the analysis of the case studies. In the cases of Egypt and Turkey, it would be possible and interesting to focus more on the energy aspect. To a larger or smaller extent, each country aims to become an energy hub. Turkey, for its part, could turn into a central player for channeling Russian and Caspian natural gas to Europe via the existing pipeline systems but also via Turkish LNG terminals. Egypt, on the other hand, could become central for the shipment of Mediterranean LNG to Europe. If Egypt and/or Turkey were evolving into natural gas hubs for Europe, this change in status could trigger changes in their relations with Russia.

A Turkey-centric approach could build on the relatively recent discoveries of natural gas in the Black Sea and explore the implications of these discoveries on Russo-Turkish relations. Would Turkey make use of these discoveries to reduce its dependency on Russian natural gas deliveries? Or would it make use of those as a bargaining chip to negotiate better natural gas deals with the Kremlin? Or would it use these discoveries to bolster its role as a natural gas hub?

Finally, a Russian-centric approach could be attempted to dive deeper into the question of whether Russian engagement with the Middle East is sustainable at the current level. While Russia has apparently been able to manage its engagement up to this point,

the war against Ukraine and its exorbitant costs may alter the situation. Thus, a study could focus on the question of whether and for how long Russia can balance skyrocketing expenses for its aggression against Ukraine, the persisting Western sanctions, and the financially exorbitant commitments associated with major cooperative infrastructure projects, such as the NPPs, in the Middle East.

In sum, the story of Russian engagement with the Middle East has not come to an end yet. Consequently, the opportunity for students at the Naval Postgraduate School to grow intellectually by analyzing it continues.

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