

Erdo?an and Putin open TurkStream pipeline after Iran strikes US bases in Iraq

By Ula? Ate?ci
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On Wednesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin attended the official inauguration of the TurkStream pipeline project. The ceremony came amid mounting war tensions across the region after the US assassination of General Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, and the missile retaliation on US bases in Iraq by Tehran. Erdogan and Putin came together for closed-door discussions, including on growing war tensions in Syria and Libya.

Putin came to Istanbul on Tuesday night after visiting the Syrian capital, Damascus, to discuss the situation in northern Syria, including in Idlib province, where Turkey has deployed troops and provides support to Islamist militias against President Bashar al-Assad's government.

According to an official statement, the 930-kilometer TurkStream project consists of two lines with a total capacity of 31.5 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year. The first will carry 15.75 bcm of Russian gas through the Black Sea to Turkey every year, and the second will carry the same amount from Russia to Europe via Turkey. The second line, supplying Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary, was planned to open this year. TurkStream will bypass current pipeline routes through Ukraine, as does Nord Stream 2, a planned undersea pipeline directly linking Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea.

The opening of this strategic pipeline reflects improving relations between Turkey and Russia, despite threats from Washington. The TurkStream deal was sealed in October 2016 in Istanbul, just three months after the failed Washington- and Berlin-backed coup against Erdo?an on July 15. The coup failed because Erdo?an, alerted by Moscow, was able to

make a timely appeal to his voters to take to the streets to defend him.

The Turkish government later began to discuss buying the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system from Russia. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 adopted last month by the US Congress imposes sanctions on Turkey because of the S-400 system and the TurkStream. Washington saw them as two important, unacceptable strategic steps bringing Turkey closer to Russia at US expense.

While Turkish officials hailed the pipeline for allegedly making Turkey a "new regional energy hub," Turkish consumers will still pay more than Europeans for the same gas. Citing comments by Kerim Has, a Moscow-based analyst, Al-Monitor stated: "In EU markets, the average price for Russian gas is about \$220 per 1,000 cubic meters, while the Turkish market will pay about \$305 for the same quantity via the TurkStream pipeline."

Russia initiated economic sanctions after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet over Syria in November 2015. Although relations between the two countries were increasingly rebuilt and developed after the coup, Moscow has not softened its opposition to bilateral agreements until now.

Speaking at the ceremony, Russian President Putin called TurkStream an "an extremely important and unique gas transfer system that will help boost cooperation even more. ... The successful realization of TurkStream shows the remarkable outcome of Turkish-Russian strategic partnership."

Referring to US aggression against Iran, Putin stated, "We are living in a difficult world. Unfortunately, there are some acts that aim to escalate tension in our region," adding that "But Turkey and Russia present a very different example." Putin refrained from openly

condemning US aggression and chose not to comment on Iranian strikes on US bases in Iraq.

Erdo?an called the project “historic” and said, “I am sure that in the future Russia and Turkey will implement many more mutually beneficial projects both in energy and other areas.”

As a clear sign of fear among the Turkish ruling elites, who face an economic crisis and growing class tensions at home, on the latest developments in region, Erdo?an spent more time discussing the dangerous situation in the Middle East. “Nobody has the right to throw the entire region, especially Iraq, into a ring of fire for the sake of his or her own interests,” Rdogan said.

After almost uninterrupted US-led imperialist wars and interventions in the Middle East since the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Erdo?an called for “de-escalation”, stating: “As Turkey, we do not want Iraq, Syria, Lebanon or the Gulf region, where more than 30 percent of maritime energy trade takes place, to become battlegrounds for wars of tutelage.” Turkey nonetheless supported the US invasion on Iraq and was directly involved in the regime change war in Syria, as well as assaulting US-backed Kurdish nationalist forces in both Iraq and Syria.

In its statement, the IRGC warned all US allies that they would be a target of military retaliation if attacks on Iran were launched from bases in their countries. This clearly includes Turkey, a NATO ally of America that hosts US soldiers and nuclear weapons in the strategic Incirlik air base. In December, Erdo?an responded to US sanctions on Turkey by threatening to close Incirlik. It is unclear how Ankara would respond if Washington tried to use these bases to attack Iran, or, conversely, if Iran bombed the bases in an attempt to prevent further US attacks.

Erdogan also raised the conflict over eastern Mediterranean energy reserves. “There is no chance of realizing any project in the Eastern Mediterranean that excludes our country,” he said, after a rival regional energy deal was signed by Israel, the Greek Cypriot regime and Greece on last Thursday.

It came after agreements signed between Turkey and Faye? el-Sarraj’s Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli at the end of November covering military assistance and a delineation of maritime boundaries. While Ankara claims hydrocarbon reserves

under the eastern Mediterranean via the Turkish Cypriot regime and Libya, almost all the major regional powers oppose the Turkish claims.

As in Idlib province in Syria, the Turkish and Russian governments are supporting opposite sides in the Libyan conflict. While Ankara backs the UN-recognized GNA regime in Tripoli, Moscow supports General Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army, which is linked to a rival government based in Libya’s eastern port city of Tobruk. Moscow opposed the Turkish military deployment to Libya decided by the Turkish parliament last week.

Erdo?an has declared that Turkish soldiers will not fight alongside Islamist fighters in Libya but “will develop the operation center there.” So far, 35 Turkish soldiers have reportedly been deployed to the North African country.

After a bilateral meeting between Erdo?an and Putin following the TurkStream ceremony, in a joint press conference with his Russian counterpart, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşo?lu declared that they “are calling for cease-fire in Libya by midnight on January 12.”

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