

"The Syrian Civil War as a Catalyst and Constraint "Reassessing Turkish–Russian Economic Ties"

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"إعادة تقييم العلاقات الاقتصادية التركية الروسية"

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SİYASET BİLİMİ VE ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER ANABİLİM DALI

Abstract

This study explores the economic dimension of Turkish–Russian relations in the context of the Syrian conflict. Prior to the conflict, both countries enjoyed a robust economic partnership grounded in energy trade, construction, and tourism. However, the outbreak of the Syrian war and the subsequent downing of a Russian jet by Turkey in 2015 severely strained this relationship, triggering economic sanctions and disruptions in bilateral trade. Despite these setbacks, both nations demonstrated resilience by compartmentalizing economic and political tensions, leading to a gradual recovery marked by renewed energy cooperation and trade normalization. By analyzing projects such as Turk Stream and Akkuyu, alongside trade data and sanction impacts, this paper highlights the dynamics of economic interdependence in shaping foreign policy behavior. The study uses a qualitative analytical approach supported by liberal theory, particularly the concept of complex interdependence, to explain how economic interests mitigated political confrontations.

Keywords: Turkish-Russian relations, Syrian conflict, economic diplomacy, energy cooperation, sanctions, liberal theory, complex interdependence

الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في البعد الاقتصادي للعلاقات التركية الروسية في سياق الصراع السوري. قبل الصراع، كان كلا البلدين يتمتعان بشراكة اقتصادية قوية تركز على تجارة الطاقة والبناء والسياحة. ومع ذلك، أدى اندلاع الحرب السورية وما تلاه من إسقاط تركيا لطائرة روسية عام ٢٠١٥ إلى توتر شديد في هذه العلاقة، مما أدى إلى فرض عقوبات اقتصادية واضطرابات في التجارة الثنائية. ورغم هذه الانتكاسات، أظهر كلا البلدين مرونة من خلال تجزئة التوترات الاقتصادية والسياسية، مما أدى إلى انتعاش تدريجي اتسم بتعاون متجدد في مجال الطاقة وتطبيع التجارة. من خلال تحليل مشاريع مثل "ترك ستريم" و"أكويو"، إلى جانب بيانات التجارة وتأثيرات العقوبات، تُسلط هذه الورقة الضوء على ديناميكيات الترابط الاقتصادي في تشكيل سلوك السياسة الخارجية. وتستخدم الدراسة نهجًا تحليليًا نوعيًا مدعومًا بالنظرية الليبرالية، وخاصةً مفهوم الترابط المعقد، لشرح كيف خففت المصالح الاقتصادية من حدة المواجهات السياسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلاقات التركية الروسية، الصراع السوري، الدبلوماسية الاقتصادية، التعاون في مجال الطاقة، العقوبات، النظرية الليبرالية، الترابط المعقد

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 marked a turning point in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East and significantly impacted the foreign relations of regional powers, particularly Turkey and Russia. Prior to the war, Turkish-Russian relations were characterized by pragmatic cooperation and growing economic interdependence. Despite differing strategic cultures and historical rivalries, both countries had succeeded in cultivating a mutually beneficial partnership, especially in the areas of energy, trade, construction, and tourism (Balta & Özlük, 2016; Hill & Taspinar, 2006). This cooperation was institutionalized through projects such as the Blue Stream and, later, the TurkStream pipeline, positioning Turkey as a key energy transit state for Russian gas to Europe.

However, the Syrian war exposed fundamental geopolitical divergences between Ankara and Moscow. While Turkey aligned itself with the Syrian opposition and advocated for regime change as part of its broader support for Arab Spring movements, Russia decisively backed the Assad regime, both militarily and

diplomatically, to preserve its strategic foothold in the region (Larrabee & Nader, 2013; Trenin, 2018). These opposing stances culminated in a serious rupture in 2015, when Turkish forces shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter jet near the Turkish-Syrian border. The crisis prompted a sharp deterioration in diplomatic and economic relations, with Moscow imposing a series of punitive economic measures on Ankara (Kardaş, 2016). Despite the severity of the crisis, the relationship did not collapse entirely. Both sides demonstrated an ability to compartmentalize their geopolitical disagreements and prioritize areas of shared economic interest. By mid-2016, diplomatic normalization efforts had begun, leading to the resumption of trade, the continuation of energy projects, and the revitalization of institutional dialogue. The TurkStream pipeline, inaugurated in 2020, and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant project serve as key examples of how strategic economic cooperation persisted even in the context of political tension (Yilmaz & Elik, 2021). This paper explores the transformation of Turkish-Russian economic relations under the impact of the Syrian conflict. It adopts a qualitative, theory-driven approach informed by liberalism, and particularly by the concept of complex interdependence, to explain how economic interests moderated the escalation of conflict and facilitated a gradual recovery. By analyzing critical developments such as trade sanctions, energy collaboration, and institutional dialogue, the study aims to reveal the stabilizing role of economic interdependence in managing political crises.

2. Theoretical Framework: Liberalism and Complex Interdependence

The analysis of Turkish-Russian economic relations amid the Syrian conflict benefits significantly from the liberal school of thought in international relations. Unlike realism, which emphasizes power struggles and conflict as inevitable outcomes of an anarchic international system, liberalism underscores the possibilities for cooperation, mutual gain, and institutional mediation—even among strategic rivals. At its core, liberalism posits that international relations are shaped not solely by military capabilities but also by economic ties, interdependence, and the influence of domestic and transnational actors. A central concept within liberal theory, particularly relevant to this study, is **complex interdependence**, as articulated by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye. This model

challenges the traditional realist narrative by suggesting that states are interconnected through multiple channels—not only through military and diplomatic means but also via economic, environmental, and societal linkages. In such a system, the use of force becomes less likely, and the cost of conflict increases, prompting states to prioritize negotiation and compromise over confrontation.

Applying this framework to the case of Turkey and Russia reveals several key insights:

- **Multiple Linkages:** Turkey and Russia are linked not only through state-to-state relations but also through dense networks of economic actors, energy companies (e.g., Gazprom, BOTAS), tourism flows, and joint infrastructure projects. These connections complicate the pursuit of zero-sum strategies and necessitate ongoing engagement, even amidst political crises.
- **Economic Sensitivity and Vulnerability:** Both countries are economically sensitive to disruptions. For Turkey, reliance on Russian natural gas and tourism revenues creates an incentive to avoid prolonged hostility. For Russia, Turkey provides access to strategic Mediterranean markets and serves as a conduit for bypassing EU pressure in the energy sector.
- **Institutional Mediation:** Despite lacking strong formal institutions, bilateral economic forums, energy agreements, and crisis diplomacy (e.g., Astana talks, trade commissions) function as informal mechanisms that reduce volatility and allow for phased normalization.

The liberal perspective, therefore, helps explain how Turkey and Russia managed to sustain and eventually restore economic cooperation despite deep geopolitical divides over Syria. It highlights how economic interdependence does not eliminate conflict but can mitigate its escalation and facilitate strategic recalibration.

In summary, this theoretical lens offers a compelling explanation for the resilience of Turkish–Russian economic ties. While traditional geopolitical analysis might predict a complete severance of relations following the 2015 jet incident, the liberal framework reveals a more nuanced interplay where mutual economic interests act as stabilizers in a turbulent regional environment.

3. Turkish–Russian Economic Relations Before the Syrian Conflict

Prior to the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Turkish–Russian relations were widely regarded as a model of pragmatic cooperation, particularly in the economic sphere. Despite deep-rooted historical rivalries stemming from centuries of imperial competition and Cold War tensions, both Ankara and Moscow found common ground in the post–Cold War era through mutually beneficial economic engagement. The 2000s witnessed a remarkable expansion in bilateral trade, energy collaboration, tourism, and investment, all of which formed the backbone of their strategic partnership.

A key pillar of this relationship was energy interdependence. Russia emerged as Turkey’s primary supplier of natural gas, accounting for more than 60% of Turkey’s gas imports by 2010 (IEA, 2011). The **Blue Stream pipeline**, inaugurated in 2003, symbolized the deepening of this relationship, delivering Russian gas directly to Turkey via the Black Sea. This was followed by discussions and agreements over the **TurkStream** pipeline, which would eventually allow for Russian gas to reach Europe through Turkey, bypassing Ukraine (Yilmaz & Elik, 2021).

Trade relations also flourished. By 2010, the volume of bilateral trade had reached approximately \$26 billion, with both countries benefiting from complementary trade profiles. Russia exported energy products, metals, and grains, while Turkey provided consumer goods, textiles, agricultural products, and construction services (World Bank, 2010). Turkish construction firms, in particular, played a significant role in Russian infrastructure development, securing contracts worth billions of dollars in projects ranging from shopping centers to residential complexes and transportation networks (Kavak, 2020).

Tourism became another vital link in the economic relationship. Russia consistently ranked among the top sources of inbound tourists to Turkey, with over 3 million Russian visitors in 2010 alone, contributing significantly to Turkey’s service and hospitality sectors (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2011).

In addition to sectoral growth, institutional mechanisms were also established to facilitate economic cooperation. The **High–Level Cooperation Council**, formed in 2010, was designed to strengthen bilateral coordination across various domains, including energy, transportation, and finance (Balta & Özlük, 2016).

These frameworks enabled sustained dialogue, minimized friction, and reinforced the perception of economic interdependence as a stabilizing force in Turkish–Russian relations. In summary, the period preceding the Syrian conflict was marked by robust and expanding economic ties between Turkey and Russia. This economic foundation would later prove crucial in cushioning the impact of diplomatic crises and facilitating post–conflict normalization.

4. Disruption: The Impact of the Syrian Conflict and 2015 Jet Incident

The eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011 introduced a critical fault line in Turkish–Russian relations, exposing underlying strategic divergences that had been largely masked by strong economic cooperation. While Turkey quickly positioned itself as a vocal opponent of the Assad regime—framing its stance within broader support for Arab Spring movements—Russia adopted a diametrically opposed approach, becoming the Syrian government's most influential international backer. This strategic divergence intensified over time and culminated in a major diplomatic rupture following the **November 2015 jet incident**, when Turkish forces downed a Russian Su–24 warplane near the Syrian border, claiming it violated Turkish airspace (Kardaş, 2016).

Russia's response was swift and multifaceted. While avoiding direct military retaliation, Moscow imposed a series of harsh economic sanctions against Turkey. These included bans on the import of Turkish agricultural products, suspension of charter flights and tourist travel, visa restrictions, and a freeze on major joint projects—including negotiations over TurkStream and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant (TASS, 2015; Siddi, 2016). The sanctions had an immediate and tangible impact on Turkey's economy, particularly in the agricultural and tourism sectors. Turkish exports to Russia plummeted by over 40% in 2016 compared to the previous year, and tourist arrivals from Russia declined sharply (Turkish Ministry of Trade, 2017).

Beyond sanctions, the jet crisis also disrupted institutional cooperation and diplomatic communication. Bilateral summits were suspended, and the High–Level Cooperation Council was effectively put on hold. In addition, Russia increased its military presence in Syria by deploying advanced S–400 missile systems and deepening its partnership with the Assad regime—moves that directly undermined

Turkey's strategic interests, especially regarding its opposition to Kurdish armed groups in northern Syria (Trenin, 2018; Lund, 2019).

The economic implications of the crisis extended beyond immediate sanctions. It prompted a reconsideration within Turkish policy circles of the risks associated with excessive dependence on a single energy supplier. Discussions emerged about diversifying Turkey's energy imports through renewed interest in LNG and regional alternatives, although in practice, Russian gas remained dominant due to infrastructure and pricing considerations (IEA, 2017).

Importantly, despite the intensity of the crisis, both Ankara and Moscow avoided a complete rupture. Informal diplomatic channels remained active, and back-channel negotiations paved the way for de-escalation. This period of disruption revealed both the fragility and the depth of Turkish-Russian economic interdependence: while the crisis caused significant damage, the costs of long-term disengagement were too high for either side to sustain.

In essence, the Syrian conflict and the jet incident served as stress tests for Turkish-Russian economic relations. The crisis demonstrated how geopolitical confrontation could undermine economic cooperation, but it also set the stage for a recalibration of ties based on a more cautious and interest-driven approach.

5. Gradual Normalization and Economic Recovery (2016–2023)

Following the sharp downturn in Turkish-Russian relations in late 2015, both countries recognized the mutual costs of prolonged confrontation and began a cautious process of normalization in 2016. This diplomatic reset was initiated after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sent a letter of regret to Russian President Vladimir Putin in June 2016, expressing sorrow over the downing of the Russian jet and emphasizing the importance of restoring relations (BBC, 2016). The gesture opened the door to re-engagement across multiple domains, particularly in trade and energy.

By late 2016, Russia began to lift sanctions gradually. Charter flights to Turkey resumed in September, and visa restrictions were partially relaxed. Bilateral trade, which had declined by nearly 43% in 2016, began to recover, reaching \$25.7 billion by 2018 and surpassing pre-crisis levels by 2022 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023). Turkey also resumed agricultural exports to Russia, particularly in tomatoes, citrus,

and poultry, while Russia restored its flow of tourists to Turkey—a vital component of Turkey’s service economy.

The most emblematic sign of normalization was the revival and completion of the **TurkStream pipeline**, which officially began delivering Russian natural gas to Turkey and Southern Europe in January 2020. TurkStream, with an annual capacity of 31.5 billion cubic meters, not only deepened Turkey’s energy dependency on Russia but also strengthened its role as an energy transit hub bypassing Ukraine and Eastern Europe (Yilmaz & Elik, 2021; Gazprom Export, 2022). Simultaneously, the **Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant**, funded and constructed by Russia’s Rosatom, progressed rapidly with the first unit expected to be operational by 2024. This \$20 billion project marks Russia’s long-term economic and strategic footprint in Turkey’s energy infrastructure (IAEA, 2023). Moreover, both governments restored institutional mechanisms. The **High-Level Cooperation Council** resumed its meetings, and joint intergovernmental commissions facilitated renewed coordination on customs, transportation, and infrastructure. This institutional revitalization reinforced bilateral confidence and created platforms for dispute management.

Despite broader geopolitical tensions—including Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine and Turkey’s growing ties with NATO—the economic relationship between Ankara and Moscow remained resilient. In fact, trade volumes surged further in 2022 and 2023, partly due to Turkey’s unique position as a non-Western NATO member that did not join Western sanctions against Russia. Ankara became an alternative route for Russian exports and financial operations, prompting some analysts to describe Turkey as a “strategic buffer zone” in Russia’s economic reorientation (Habibi, 2023; IMF, 2023).

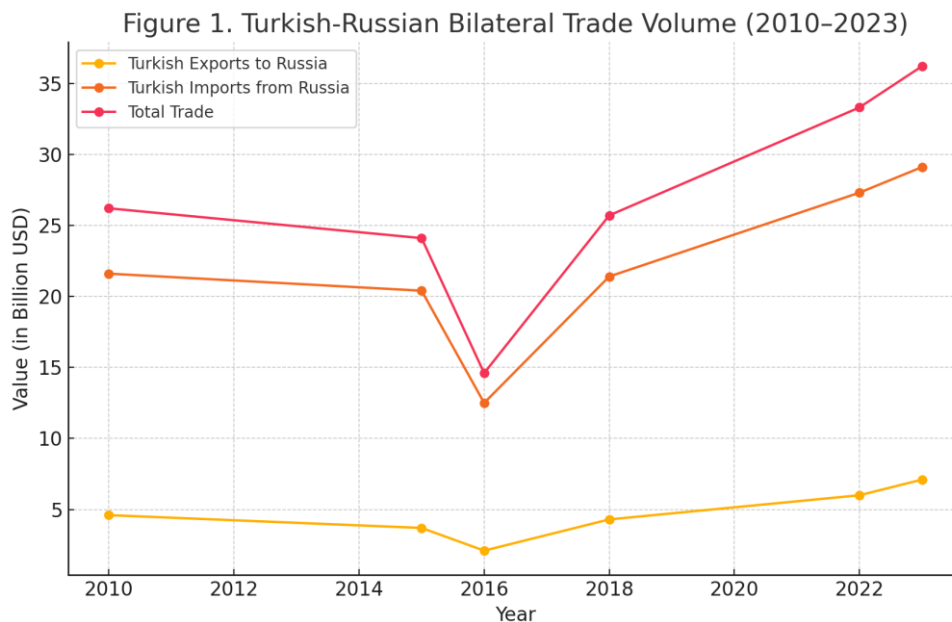
This resilience underscores the adaptive nature of Turkish-Russian economic ties. Their relationship has evolved into a pragmatic partnership, in which both sides tolerate political divergences to sustain long-term economic collaboration. The renewed emphasis on bilateral trade, energy projects, and institutional dialogue reflects a deliberate effort by both Ankara and Moscow to insulate economic interests from diplomatic volatility.

6. Findings

1. Economic Interdependence as a Buffer Against Political Breakdown

One of the most significant findings is that strong economic interdependence served as a stabilizing mechanism during the crisis years. Although the 2015 jet incident resulted in a dramatic diplomatic fallout, both countries avoided a full severance of trade and energy ties. Trade volume declined temporarily but was quickly restored once normalization efforts began in 2016. Energy cooperation—especially through long-term projects like TurkStream—proved resilient and continued even during periods of high tension.

Figure 1. Turkish–Russian Bilateral Trade Volume (2010–2023)



Source: Turkish Statistical Institute; IMF (2023).

As shown in Figure 1, bilateral trade dropped sharply in 2016 to \$14.6 billion, reflecting the impact of Russian sanctions. However, the recovery was rapid and robust, with trade reaching \$25.7 billion by 2018 and hitting an all-time high of \$36.2 billion in 2023. This trajectory confirms that economic ties played a critical role in cushioning political shocks and maintaining engagement between Ankara and Moscow.

2. Compartmentalization as a Strategic Tool

Both Ankara and Moscow adopted a strategy of compartmentalization, maintaining economic cooperation even while clashing over Syria. Despite diplomatic tensions

and military confrontations, the two states deepened their collaboration in trade, construction, and energy. This behavior aligns with the notion of transactional resilience, where states prioritize economic logic over ideological or geopolitical alignment.

3. Post–Conflict Recovery Was Rapid but Selective

The normalization that began in 2016 progressed swiftly but focused primarily on state–driven, high–value sectors. Projects like TurkStream and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant received immediate political backing, while other areas—such as defense cooperation or civil society exchange—remained more limited. A clear example of this selective recovery is the tourism sector, which suffered a major blow following the 2015 crisis but rebounded impressively.

Figure 2. Number of Russian Tourists Visiting Turkey (2010–2023)



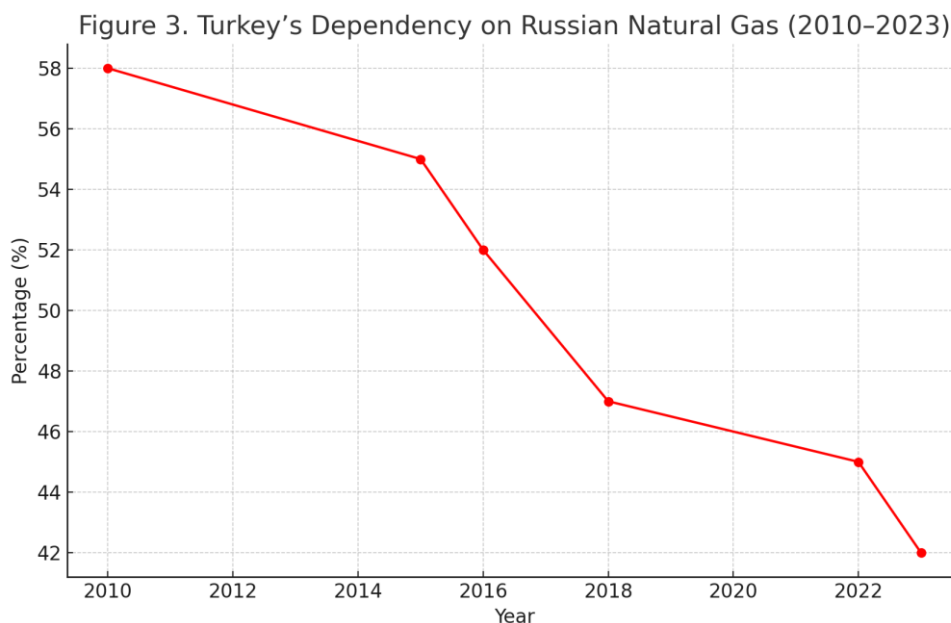
Source: Turkish Ministry of Culture & Tourism (2023).

As illustrated in Figure 2, the number of Russian tourists to Turkey fell dramatically in 2016 to 0.9 million, down from 3.6 million in 2015. However, tourism surged again by 2018 with 5.9 million visitors, and remained high in 2023 with over 5.2 million. This reflects how certain civilian sectors—especially tourism—are highly responsive to diplomatic normalization and symbolize broader economic resilience.

4. Asymmetrical Dependence Did Not Undermine Leverage

Although Turkey is more reliant on Russian energy than vice versa, it was still able to exercise strategic leverage by offering access to Mediterranean markets, construction expertise, and a geopolitical balancing role. This supports liberal theories of interdependence, which argue that even asymmetrical relationships can produce mutual constraints and benefits.

Figure 3. Turkey's Dependency on Russian Natural Gas (2010–2023)



Source: International Energy Agency (IEA); Turkish EMRA (2023).

Figure 3 illustrates Turkey's gradual diversification of energy sources. While over 55% of its natural gas imports came from Russia in 2010–2015, this figure declined steadily to 42% by 2023. This indicates that while energy cooperation with Russia remained important, Turkey also sought strategic flexibility by reducing excessive dependence on a single supplier, especially after experiencing geopolitical tensions in 2015.

7. Discussion: Interdependence Versus Political Conflict

The Turkish–Russian relationship, especially in the context of the Syrian conflict, presents a rich case study of how economic interdependence can shape the behavior of states facing geopolitical tension. Drawing upon liberal theory—particularly the concept of **complex interdependence**—this section interprets the findings through a theoretical lens, highlighting how mutual economic interests have

constrained conflict escalation and promoted strategic flexibility, despite ongoing rivalry and mistrust.

1. Economic Rationality Versus Geopolitical Tensions

Despite conflicting positions in Syria, both Turkey and Russia prioritized the continuation of their economic ties. At the height of the 2015–2016 crisis, when Russia imposed severe economic sanctions on Turkey, one might have expected a full diplomatic rupture. However, bilateral trade, energy projects, and tourism resumed within months—a reflection of economic rationality overriding political hostility. Turkey’s dependence on Russian natural gas, nuclear energy cooperation, and Russian tourists created strong economic incentives to de-escalate. Conversely, Russia valued Turkey as a market, a construction hub, and an essential partner in circumventing Western sanctions after 2014 and especially post-2022 (IMF, 2023; Habibi, 2023).

This behavior supports Keohane and Nye’s theory of **complex interdependence**, which argues that in a world of dense economic ties, states are less likely to escalate disputes to military confrontation due to the high costs involved.

2. Compartmentalization and Transactional Resilience

The Turkish–Russian model exemplifies **compartmentalization**, whereby both parties isolate political conflicts from economic cooperation. While the two countries continue to back opposing actors in Syria, they have managed to strengthen joint energy projects and expand trade volumes. This compartmentalization is reinforced by a **transactional logic**: both governments are guided less by long-term ideological alignment and more by short-term strategic and economic interests. The bilateral relationship functions on the basis of calculated reciprocity, often facilitated through **leader-level diplomacy** rather than institutional frameworks (Kardaş & Balta, 2022). While this provides flexibility, it also exposes the relationship to sudden shifts when leadership dynamics or national interests change.

3. Limits of Interdependence: Persistent Strategic Friction

While interdependence has mitigated conflict escalation, it has not resolved underlying strategic tensions. The Syrian conflict continues to produce **divergent security goals**: Russia supports the Assad regime’s consolidation, while Turkey

seeks to limit Kurdish influence near its border and maintain control over areas like Idlib. Moreover, both countries support rival proxies in Syria, leading to occasional military clashes despite the existence of coordination mechanisms such as the **Astana Process** (Lund, 2019; Stein, 2020).

These unresolved tensions highlight a key limitation of economic interdependence—it can delay or contain conflict but does not eliminate the structural sources of rivalry.

4. Strategic Flexibility in a Shifting Global Order

The Turkish–Russian relationship also reflects a broader trend of **strategic flexibility** among middle powers navigating an increasingly multipolar world. Turkey’s ability to maintain ties with both NATO and Russia, and Russia’s turn toward non–Western partners, underscore a move toward **adaptive, dual-track foreign policy**. In this model, economic diplomacy is not only a tool of development but also a buffer against isolation and geopolitical volatility (Brookings, 2023). Turkey’s role as an intermediary in post–Ukraine trade and finance, especially after refusing to fully implement Western sanctions, elevated its relevance in Russia’s external strategy. This shift further validates the notion that **economic interdependence can be actively used to increase geopolitical autonomy**, rather than merely being a passive constraint on conflict.

Synthesis

In sum, the discussion confirms that while Turkish–Russian economic relations remain vulnerable to political shocks, their depth and diversification have enabled both countries to **navigate crises pragmatically**. Complex interdependence, personalized diplomacy, and selective compartmentalization form the triad that sustains their bilateral engagement. However, without institutional depth and strategic convergence, this model remains fragile and dependent on context and leadership.

8. Conclusion

The economic dimension of Turkish–Russian relations under the shadow of the Syrian conflict illustrates a complex and dynamic interplay between cooperation and confrontation. Despite profound geopolitical disagreements—particularly regarding the Syrian civil war and broader regional security interests—both Ankara

and Moscow managed to maintain, and eventually deepen, their economic ties. This outcome was neither accidental nor purely reactive, but rather the result of strategic choices informed by mutual interests and reinforced by economic interdependence.

The research has shown that even after the sharp diplomatic rupture caused by the 2015 jet incident, both sides demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to restore cooperation. Energy megaprojects such as **TurkStream** and the **Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant**, along with the revival of trade and tourism, served as key drivers of normalization. These developments validate the liberal theory of **complex interdependence**, which posits that multiple channels of interaction—especially economic—can act as buffers against conflict escalation.

At the same time, the findings highlight important limitations. Turkish–Russian relations remain **transactional** and heavily dependent on **personalized diplomacy** rather than robust institutional mechanisms. While economic ties facilitated recovery and sustained dialogue, they did not resolve the underlying strategic divergence between the two countries—particularly concerning their roles in Syria, relations with the West, and regional alliances.

Furthermore, the adaptability of this bilateral relationship has been tested and reinforced by broader geopolitical shifts, especially in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Turkey’s refusal to fully align with Western sanctions has further elevated its economic and diplomatic importance for Russia, positioning Ankara as a critical intermediary in an evolving global order.

In conclusion, Turkish–Russian economic relations under the impact of the Syrian conflict offer a compelling example of how economic interdependence can **contain** but not necessarily **resolve** political conflict. Their experience demonstrates that in a multipolar and turbulent world, economic pragmatism can serve as both a tool of resilience and a foundation for continued engagement—albeit one that requires constant recalibration.

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