

Interview – Isa Yusibov

Written by E-International Relations

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Isa Yusibov has a background as a Eurasia geopolitical risk analyst, predominantly focusing on Russia, Turkey and former Soviet republics. Based upon his broad area of expertise as a senior analyst he has contributed to various think tanks and media outlets, and worked for various UK-based corporate intelligence companies over the last years, while also being a guest speaker at relevant institutions such as the Dutch Ministry of Defense and several universities.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I would point out China in most of them, whether it is about the geopolitical consequences of the One Belt One Road project, the emerging Cold War rhetoric between China and US, and last but not least the challenges derived from the global corona pandemic and how that might change the supply chain from a global perspective for example. There are some topics in the Eurasian region which will continue to be important in the coming years, such as the situation in Ukraine, frozen conflicts in post-Soviet hemispheres, energy security and supply to the EU, Chinese influence in Central Asia, developments regarding Iran and sanctions and of course the upcoming political transition in authoritarian countries like Russia and Turkey.

How has the way you understand the world shifted over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When I was born, the Soviet Union was still there. The very first geopolitical event I experienced, as a kid though, was the fall of the Soviet Union and the creation of a new reality in the whole region with its opportunities and challenges. When I was studying Political Sciences and continued my master's in Russian and Eurasian Studies I already had a set of values, a frame which defined my world view, I would say based on the liberal internationalist aspect from a theoretic perspective. That has not changed much, I must say. But there are of course certain topics where I can see a difference: as a student, I was much more enthusiastic about the geopolitical power of the European Union. As a geopolitical analyst, years later, I do consider the EU being totally toothless when it comes to the geopolitical chessboard.

You have repeatedly dismissed concerns over Turkey potentially leaving NATO. Can you explain your reasoning?

To be honest, I have never understood why renowned think tanks keep pushing the scenario possibility that Ankara will leave NATO and pursue its own foreign/military policy. If there is one thing which will never happen in Turkey, that is the exit from this alliance. Never. For a simple reason: NATO is the ultimate shield protecting Turkey against nuclear powers in the proximity, especially against Russia. That is why Erdogan immediately called NATO General Secretary when Putin threatened Turkey after Ankara shot down a Russian military jet in November 2015. Ankara perfectly understands that leaving NATO will be a disastrous thing to do. Turkey's geostrategic position is also way too important for the US in particular to accept Turkey's potential (but impossible) exit from NATO. Turkey supports NATO membership of Ukraine and Georgia while some Western countries are cautious about it. Turkey also wants more NATO influence in the Balkans and therefore supported Montenegro and Albania as well.

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As Azerbaijan and Armenia clashed in the conflict over Nagorno – Karabakh in 2020, we saw Russia and Turkey supporting different sides in the conflict. Can you explain what the respective interests of the Turks and the Russians are in the Caucasus, and how the situation has evolved since the ceasefire was brokered between Armenia and Azerbaijan?

It is indeed an interesting conflict to observe. When the war started in the late 80s until a ceasefire in 1994, Russia supported Armenia, but Turkey didn't support Azerbaijan simply because Ankara did not want to get involved in a clash with Russia. In 2020, Russia was apathic, did not support Armenia, but Turkey provided military support for Azerbaijan in terms of drones for example. Russia did not intervene until a certain point to push both Baku and Yerevan to sign a ceasefire agreement, and the reason why Russia decided to not to intervene derives from Moscow's geopolitical interests. On the one hand, Putin wanted to put the pro-Western Armenian PM Pashinyan under pressure, on the other hand, he wanted to show goodwill to Azerbaijan by allowing Baku to retake its occupied territories. Without Putin's approval, that won't be the case. When it comes to the interests of Russia and Turkey, the region is of course within their sphere of influence and certain parts overlap them, especially the South Caucasus. Russia considers the Caucasus as its backyard. For Turkey, it is the ultimate route for opening up to Central Asia for example.

Personally, I think that the war in 2020 and its aftermath were perfectly planned by Russia to exert and increase its influence in the region. First, the timing was important: the US was busy with presidential elections, the EU was busy dealing with the pandemic. Russia has always supported the status-quo of the conflict, as in to keep it frozen. But this time, changing the status-quo had two specific advantages for the Kremlin: on the one hand, Russia brought back military personnel to the territory of Azerbaijan, on the other hand, it made clear that the political establishment in Armenia should not even try to leave the Kremlin's orbit, looking to the West. At this moment, Russia is the only player in the region with all the necessary tools for influence.

How do Russia and Turkey see each other in relation to their geopolitical position?

There has always been a rivalry between these two countries, also when they were empires in the past. There are no other nations which have been involved in so many wars with each other as the Turks and the Russians. And it is not a surprise because the fight for spheres of influence is not something new. Under Erdogan and Putin, they have tried to redefine their geopolitical interests and co-operate in terms of certain topics, such as energy, but from a macro perspective they are two actors with different geopolitical aspirations within the same region. And that makes it impossible for Ankara and Moscow to be geopolitical allies. It is only a co-operation of convenience when necessary. That is why I oppose the dominant idea in the West that Turkey has been pivoting towards the East (Moscow/Beijing axis) abandoning the West. That is definitely not the case.

Western media often reports on the differences of opinion between Western-European countries and Turkey. Can you explain the relationship between Eastern-European states and Turkey? Is this relationship changing?

It is an interesting relationship with new dimensions, changing the overall outlook in the region. The main reason for that is the fact that the majority of those countries were once part of the Soviet Union. So Turkey wants to use that to increase its geopolitical influence by offering them co-operation against Russian influence. And that is considered as a great strategy from the perspective of those Eastern European countries, so they have tried to tighten the co-operation with Turkey, mostly in economic and military terms, but also visa-free travel opportunities. In that sense, I am not surprised that some of the Eastern European countries have also decided to buy Turkish drones and other military equipment. Poland for example became the first NATO country to buy Turkish drones after its successes against Russian missile systems in Syria, Libya and more recently in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Ukraine has been following the same path and has already started using Turkish drones above Donbass, currently occupied by separatists backed by the Kremlin.

How do Russia and Turkey observe and engage with the rise of China in the international political arena?

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Relations between Moscow and Beijing were always fine, because they didn't see each other as main rivals. To the contrary, they have tried to co-operate as their main anti-Western sentiment could be aligned. When it comes to Ankara, it is a bit ambiguous. Turkey has also sought co-operation with China and accepted growing Chinese influence to attract foreign investments in order to revive its economy. At some point, during the visit of Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Beijing, the minister literally said that China's security was linked to Turkey's security and no negative messages in Turkish media would be allowed to disturb the friendship.

On the other hand, Turkey has been very quiet about the ongoing genocide against the Uyghurs in China. Turkey was also one of the first countries to import Chinese corona vaccines. But I think the situation might change if Erdogan succeeds in attracting Western investments whereas taking position against China might be a requirement from a geopolitical perspective. The pragmatic in Erdogan won't think twice about it.

What are the interests of Russia and Turkey in the Middle East? Why have we witnessed both countries supporting different sides in Libya and Syria for example?

Same as in other regions: geopolitical influence. Especially with diminishing American influence, both Turkey and Russia have tried to fill that power vacuum, to demonstrate their ability as a mediator, to attract new political alliances etc. The Middle East is also a region with access to the Mediterranean Sea with its (newly) proven gas reserves, which makes the area even more interesting.

Russia and Turkey have supported different sides in both Syria and Libya indeed. In Syria, Turkey was one of the first countries from the Western coalition which demanded the resignation of Assad. Russia intervened in Syria in 2015, once again using the political vacuum created by the indecisiveness of the Obama administration to punish Assad for the use of chemical weapons against his own people. Russia saw an opportunity to get on the board, by providing military support to Assad so he could regain control over the lost administrative territories. For Russia, the involvement in Syria is not only about protecting Assad, but mostly about safeguarding the Kremlin's access to the Mediterranean. It is important to note that the Soviet Union had its naval base in Syria in the 70s, and it was the only one outside the borders of the former Soviet republics which has been operative since then. Meanwhile Russia has expanded its air forces in Syria.

In Libya, Turkey supports the central government recognized by United Nations as the rightful administration, while Russia supports the militia led by General Haftar. Once again, it is about geopolitical interests. Turkey is interested in the political continuity of the current government which has close ties to Turkey. Russia knows that Haftar will be able to safeguard Russian energy role in Libya, something the central government doesn't favour to do so. But both conflicts are intertwined and push Turkey and Russia to negotiate. Escalation in Syria means de-escalation in Libya and vice versa.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

What helped me understand Russian and Turkish geopolitical ambitions is my knowledge of both languages. If you are able to speak and understand the languages of your region of interest, you will be one step ahead of people and analysts without that linguistic advantage, because they won't have access to alternative sources to come up with a more detailed analysis. So my first advice would be: familiarize yourself with your region.

Furthermore, I would encourage young scholars to be even more critical against famous think tanks, relevant strategic institutions and their analyses as they might demonstrate serious flaws based on wrong conclusions and forecasts. Don't be afraid to challenge dominant theories and approaches because they are not necessarily correct ways of thinking in a field which is constantly evolving.