OPINION

Unhappy anniversary: 100 years after the Lausanne Treaty, Turkey is still using the Russian alliance to its advantage

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The signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, in the Palais de Rumine, Lausanne, Switzerland, 24 July 1923. The treaty marks the end of the conflict between the Ottoman Empire and allied countries, which began in 1914. (Photo by Keystone France / Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

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Diplomats seem to prefer spoiling things from tidy, unspoiled locales. So Lausanne, that quaint French Swiss town overlooking Lake Geneva, was where envoys met in 1923 to redraw Mideast borders in the wake of the First World War. Events have since annulled all other treaties from that time. Only the Lausanne Treaty still stands at its centennial — an unhappy anniversary.

Amid the significance of this anniversary, the February 1924 "Confidential Prints" — the *Synopsis of and Memorandum on the Main Events in Turkey since June 1921*, obtained recently from the UK National Archives* — expose Turkey's historical utilisation of the "Russian card" to extract additional concessions from the Allies. And now, as then, Turkey again plays the Russia card. *Plus ça change …*

Before Lausanne, a prior agreement imposed by the victorious Western allies had cut Lenin's Russia out of the action, while opening hopes for sovereign, ethnically based Kurdish and Armenian states to arise on lands of the defunct multi-ethnic Ottoman empire. But then Turkey bounced back in an assertive ultra-nationalist guise. After a civil war, Russia also re-emerged as the Soviet Union and in October 1921 the two revived powers concluded a pact. The West — which then meant Britain and France — had either to fight or to give way to new realities. At Lausanne they gave way. The Western European allies abandoned their lukewarm advocacy of Kurdistan and Armenia's independence.

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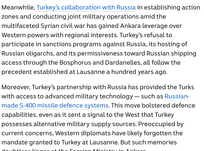
During the Lausanne conference, Turkey used its alliance with Russia to secure numerous concessions from the European Allied powers. Meanwhile America had installed a business minded Republican administration in the election of Warren G. Harding. To garner US support, Turkey granted a monopoly for railway construction and mineral exploitation in the country to American interests. As per the document, the American diplomatic observer "unfortunately stiffened Turkish resistance in the final stages of the conference on the question of concessions". This had significant repercussions for others as well, beyond just the Allies.

Kurdish and Armenian aspirations for sovereign nationhood were betrayed by the Western powers at Lausanne. Also abandoned were the Allied controls and privileges granted to the Greek and Armenian communities within Turkey. Kurds and Armenians were accorded only truncated regions in the Soviet-ruled Caucasus, but Stalin eventually abolished the Kurdish zone of Red Kurdistan and deported many Kurds to other Soviet republics. The Armenians fared better, albeit as a Soviet "republic"; since 1991, Armenia has been fully independent but remains imperilled by Turkic-speaking neighbours benefitting from Turkey's armed assistance.

Ironically, the Lausanne treaty of 1923 thus stabilised a festering instability to Turkish advantage. Kurds — a distinct ethnicity, neither Turkish, Persian, nor Arab — were the principal losers. Yet the Kurdish people, yearning for their own state, were trapped as disadvantaged minorities in Turkey, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and the Soviet Union.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin. (Mikhail Svetlov / Getty Images)

"History never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme", as Mark Twain reputedly put it, and a full century after Lausanne this same unhappy situation endures. Geopolitical dynamics once again provide Turkey with opportunities to exploit ties with Russia and advance its own interests. By cultivating close relations with Moscow, President Erdoğan diversifies alliances and reduces dependence on Western powers. Not without reason, he was quick to telephone Putin shortly after the short-lived coup attempt on the part of Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner group.

Meanwhile, Turkey's collaboration with Russia in establishing action zones and conducting joint military operations amid the multifaceted Syrian civil war has gained Ankara leverage over Western powers with regional interests. Turkey's refusal to participate in sanctions programs against Russia, its hosting of Russian oligarchs, and its permissiveness toward Russian shipping access through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, all follow the precedent established at Lausanne a hundred years ago.

Moreover, Turkey's partnership with Russia has provided the Turks with access to advanced military technology — such as Russian-made S-400 missile defence systems. This move bolstered defence capabilities, even as it sent a signal to the West that Turkey possesses alternative military supply sources. Preoccupied by current concerns, Western diplomats have likely forgotten the mandate granted to Turkey at Lausanne. But such memories doubtless linger at the Foreign Ministry in Ankara.

Turkey's utilisation of the "Russian card" in its strategic decision-making has had significant repercussions both domestically and internationally. This manoeuvre by a dubious NATO ally has not only shaped Turkey's regional dynamics, but has also posed challenges and complexities for the West.

The Treaty of Lausanne offers a time-tested lesson for the West to better navigate current and future challenges in international relations. By studying precedent, the West could better safeguard its interests and, more importantly, its democratic and humanitarian values within an evolving regional and global landscape.

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