

# Turkey's tilt towards Russia

Why Ankara is ready to risk NATO's ire over a defence deal with Moscow



In November 2015, a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian fighter jet over the Syrian border, ratcheting up tensions between Moscow and Ankara. There were speculations that Russian President Vladimir Putin would retaliate. But Mr. Putin didn't take any military action against Turkey. Instead, he stayed focussed on his strategic goal of defeating the anti-regime rebels and jihadists and bolstering Syria's existing state institutions. Mr. Putin's strategy was not to attack Turkey, but to win over it. He exploited the cracks in the Atlantic alliance, especially in U.S.-Turkey relations. Evolving regional equations also favoured his bet. On July 12, three and a half years after the Russian bomber was downed by the Turks, Ankara received the first batch of the S-400, Russia's most advanced missile defence systems, despite threats and warnings from the U.S. and NATO.

**An irony**  
This is a pivotal moment in the post-Soviet order. Turkey is a NATO member and also hosts a U.S. airbase in Incirlik. Turkey's strategic location, in the intersection of southern Europe, Central Asia and West Asia, makes it a pricey catch in geopolitical games. During the Cold War, Turkey was a key buffer for the Atlantic powers against the Soviet Union. Even after the Soviet Union disintegrated, the U.S. continued to maintain a close alliance with Ankara. But now, a high-tech Russian missile system protects a NATO nation's airspace. This is an irony as the idea of NATO, a relic of the Cold War, is to check Russia. The U.S. has raised several technical issues over Turkey acquiring the S-400. It fears the system will gather data from the latest radar-evading American bombers, F-35, for which Turkey has placed an order. In response to Turkey's decision to go ahead with the S-400 deal, the U.S. has already suspended training programmes for Turkish pilots. Ankara



"Russian President Vladimir Putin has made a few compromises to keep Turkey tilting." Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Putin at a joint press conference after a meeting in Ankara in April 2018. ■ REUTERS

could also attract sanctions from Washington. But beyond these issues, the political point of a NATO member defying NATO and a powerful member of the alliance to buy Russian weaponry is what makes the S-400 deal the hottest post-Soviet weapons agreement.

**Turkey's failed bet**  
Why did Turkey defy the U.S., even risking sanctions when its economy is underperforming? A host of factors led President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to redirect foreign policy. The fissures in U.S.-Turkey ties date back to the 2003 Iraq War when Ankara refused to be a launchpad for the American invasion. During the Syrian crisis, Turkey wanted the U.S. to interfere in Syria on behalf of the rebels and overthrow the Assad regime, but the Obama administration refused to do that. Turkey at that time was betting on the Arab Spring as a foreign policy tool to expand its influence in West Asia and North Africa. The expectation was that the dictatorships in the region would be replaced by Islamist political parties (say, the Muslim Brotherhood which is ideologically aligned with Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party). But this bet was counterproductive, especially in Syria.

In the initial years of the Syrian crisis, the porous Syrian-Turkish border was a crucial transit point for rebels and jihadists alike. By the time Turkey started sealing the border, the Islamic State (IS) had established itself as a dominant player in Syria.

The IS initially attacked Syrian government forces and rebel groups. But once it started facing the heat on the battlefield, it turned against Turkey, carrying out a host of terror attacks in 2016. Another consequence of Turkey's failed Syrian bet was the empowerment of Syrian Kurdish rebels, who have close ideological and military ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has been fighting the Turkish forces for decades. When Kurds fought the IS in the battlefield, the U.S. started supporting them directly. So Turkey lost all sides in Syria. It failed to topple the Assad regime as the Russians and Iranians came to the regime's rescue. The porous border policy backfired as jihadists turned against Turkey. Finally, there is an empowered Kurdistan across the border controlled by battle-hardened Kurdish rebels, who Turkey sees as its primary enemies.

Turkey accepted this new reality. It gave up its demand to topple the Assad regime, and shifted its focus to creating a buffer between its border and Syrian Kurdistan. For this it needs Russian and Syrian help, as the Syrian government also doesn't want to see the Kurds being empowered any further. But Kurds were the U.S.'s partners in the war against the IS, and over 2,000 U.S. troops are still stationed in Syrian Kurdistan. Here Turkey's interests directly clash with the U.S.'s.

There were other issues as well. Ankara blames Fethullah Gulen, a U.S.-based Turkish cleric, for the 2016 failed coup bid against Mr. Er-

dogan, and wants him to be extradited to Turkey. (Turkey also issued an arrest warrant against a former top CIA officer with links to Mr. Gulen.) The U.S. refused to give in to Turkey's demands. Turkey also wanted to buy the Patriot missile defence system from the U.S., but Washington initially was not keen on selling it to Ankara. As all these issues piled up, Turkey turned to a willing Russia.

**Putin's calculus**  
For Mr. Putin, Turkey is a big win, a luxury which even his Soviet bosses didn't have. If it has Turkey on its side, Russia will have seamless access to the Mediterranean Sea from the Black Sea (where it has Naval bases) through the Bosphorus Strait. And if Russia wants to deepen its engagement in West Asia in the long term, Turkey's role would be critical. Mr. Putin has made a few compromises to keep Turkey tilting. He didn't do anything when Turkey invaded Afrin, a largely Kurdish town on the Syrian side, last year, despite protestations from Damascus. Also, after freeing much of Syria from rebels' hands, Russia didn't do the same in Idlib, Syria's last rebel/jihadist-held enclave where pro-Turkey rebels are also stationed. Instead, Russia initiated talks with Turkey and Iran for truce, and reined in the Syrian government. Step by step, Mr. Putin lured Turkey to his side.

This doesn't mean that Russia and Turkey have become new regional allies. There are still structural issues between them. In Syria, where both countries continue to back rival sides, the crisis remains unresolved. Turkish national security establishment has historically been aligned with the U.S. Russian and Turkish interests vary in several other countries, from Libya to Israel. But the unmistakable message that Turkey has sent is that the U.S. is no longer an indispensable partner in its national security strategy. Turkey has also told NATO that it's ready to risk the organisation's ire over a defence deal with Russia. Turkey is tilting. The U.S. will have to either mend its ways to retain a drifting Turkey or take retaliatory steps against an ally. Either way, it's a "check" by Mr. Putin on the grand geopolitical chessboard.

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# The price of a good cuppa

The lives of tea-estate workers in West Bengal have worsened in many aspects over the years



The tea plantation sector continues to play a significant role in the economy of north Bengal. There are 276 organised tea estates spread over the three tea-growing regions of West Bengal: Darjeeling Hills, Terai and Dooars. Besides the formally registered large tea plantations, there are thousands of small growers. According to one estimate, the plantations employ about three lakh permanent daily-wage workers. However, despite their large numbers, the issues of tea plantation workers, such as labour standards and violation of human rights, hardly get any space in the media, let alone being discussed in policy circles. As the plantations are located in remote places, the narratives of deprivation remain confined to these alienated enclaves.

Our independent survey in 30 tea gardens across West Bengal in 2017 revealed that the living conditions in the plantations have not seen any improvement in decades. In fact, the situation has worsened in some respects in recent years, despite the presence of laws for labour protection.

**Dismal implementation of law**  
The Plantations Labour Act (PLA), 1951 gave certain social and economic rights to the workers. Nevertheless, the ground realities point to a dismal implementation of the Act's major provisions in West Bengal.

For instance, though the Act makes it mandatory to provide housing accommodation to every worker and his/her family, almost one-third of the 501 surveyed households were found to be living in huts made of wood, mud, straw and dry leaves. Further, half of them were living in semi-kutcha homes and only a fourth of the families were residing in pucca houses. Moreover, one in 10 homes did not have electricity.

Water and sanitation remained a major issue. Half of the households lacked safe drinking water and toilets. Latrines had not been set up in labour lines by the management of many tea estates and plantations and though some toilets had been constructed through government initiatives, they were not properly maintained. Hence, labourers had to go to the fields to relieve themselves.

Access to quality education remained a dream for the children of the plantation workers as the government schools were in a shambles. Many of the children either never had an opportunity to go to school or attained education only up to the primary level (nearly 40% of those surveyed belonged to these categories). Further, workers in certain plantations reported that they were unable to send their children to high school because of the distance. Though the PLA requires plantation owners to provide transport for schoolchildren, many estates chose to look the other way.

Further, though the PLA makes provision of medical facilities mandatory, only four of the 30 tea gardens surveyed were found to have fully functioning hospitals. More than half of them did not have hospitals at all and of those that had a medical facility, most did not have a residential doctor.

**Lack of quality medical care**  
The unhealthy living conditions, coupled with a lack of quality medical care, had a bearing on the health of the workers. Respiratory and digestive diseases were common while many reported chronic ailments such as hypertension, diabetes, arthritis and asthma. Nonetheless, one-sixth of the sick workers did not seek treatment.

Apart from being deprived of their PLA entitlements, at least 11% of the workers reported denial of rations from the Public Distribution System as they did not possess ration cards. Not surprisingly, these deprivations pushed them further into the vicious cycle of poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Every second child under the age of five was found to be stunted and starvation deaths were very common. However, these issues did not come into public knowledge as governments refused to acknowledge them.

The PLA is considered to be one of India's most labour-friendly pieces of legislation. However, it remains largely unenforced and governments have turned a blind eye to the infractions. In the light of what our survey has found, there is a need to recognise that provision of services mandated by the PLA would call for a far-reaching enforcement. However, so far, the state has not demonstrated the political will needed to raise the standard of living of tea-plantation workers. It is high time governments, both at the Centre and in West Bengal, ensured that the workers are able to live a life of dignity.

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# The benefits of blockchain

India could take a leaf out of Europe's book instead of calling for a blanket ban on cyptocurrencies

ANIL K. ANTONY & ANKUR PRASAD

The Banning of Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2019 has proposed stringent penalties, including 10 years of imprisonment, for holding, selling or dealing in cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin. Given the high chances of cryptocurrencies being misused in money laundering, various government bodies such as IT, CBDT, and the customs departments have endorsed this endeavour.

While it is important to put mechanisms in place to deter bad actors, a blanket ban on all forms of cryptocurrency transactions will result in India missing out on what may become one of the biggest technology revolutions since the Internet.

**The potential of blockchain**  
While an oversimplification, blockchain can be described as a way for people to share extra space and computational power in their computers to create a global supercomputer that is accessible for everyone. Every computer connected to a blockchain network helps validate and record transactions. People who connect their computers to a network are known as validators and receive transaction fees in the form of tokens.

Many technologists believe that the blockchain industry is poised for an explosion similar to what happened to the smartphone industry. None of us could have imagined services such as Google Maps or Uber which came to fruition due to the new mobile platform. Start-ups have already built thousands of apps on blockchain platforms like Ethereum. However, these apps aren't easily available to non-tech savvy consumers through an app store, and hence their usage remains low. They also face technical problems including scalability and slowing down of the network when many people use these apps simultaneously. New companies such as Algorand and Casper-Labs are investing millions in research and development and are close to solving these issues.

Blockchain technology has the potential to create new industries and transform existing ones in ways we cannot imagine. For instance, it has the capacity to facilitate nano-pay-

ments proportionate to an individual's contribution and value creation in the Internet, making it an ideal wealth redistribution tool for our digital age.

Even big technology companies have started to take blockchain applications seriously. Facebook, for instance, recently announced its own cryptocurrency to facilitate payments globally with minimal fees and no dependency on a central bank. Venture capitalists invested \$2.4 billion in blockchain and cryptocurrency start-ups in 2018. So far, 2019 is poised to exceed this benchmark.

None of the above is possible without the underlying tokens that facilitate transactions in a blockchain network. A law to ban holding or transacting in cryptocurrency would not only prevent Indians from reaping economic benefits by participating in blockchain networks as validators and earning transaction fees, but also stifle any innovation related to this disruptive emerging technology.

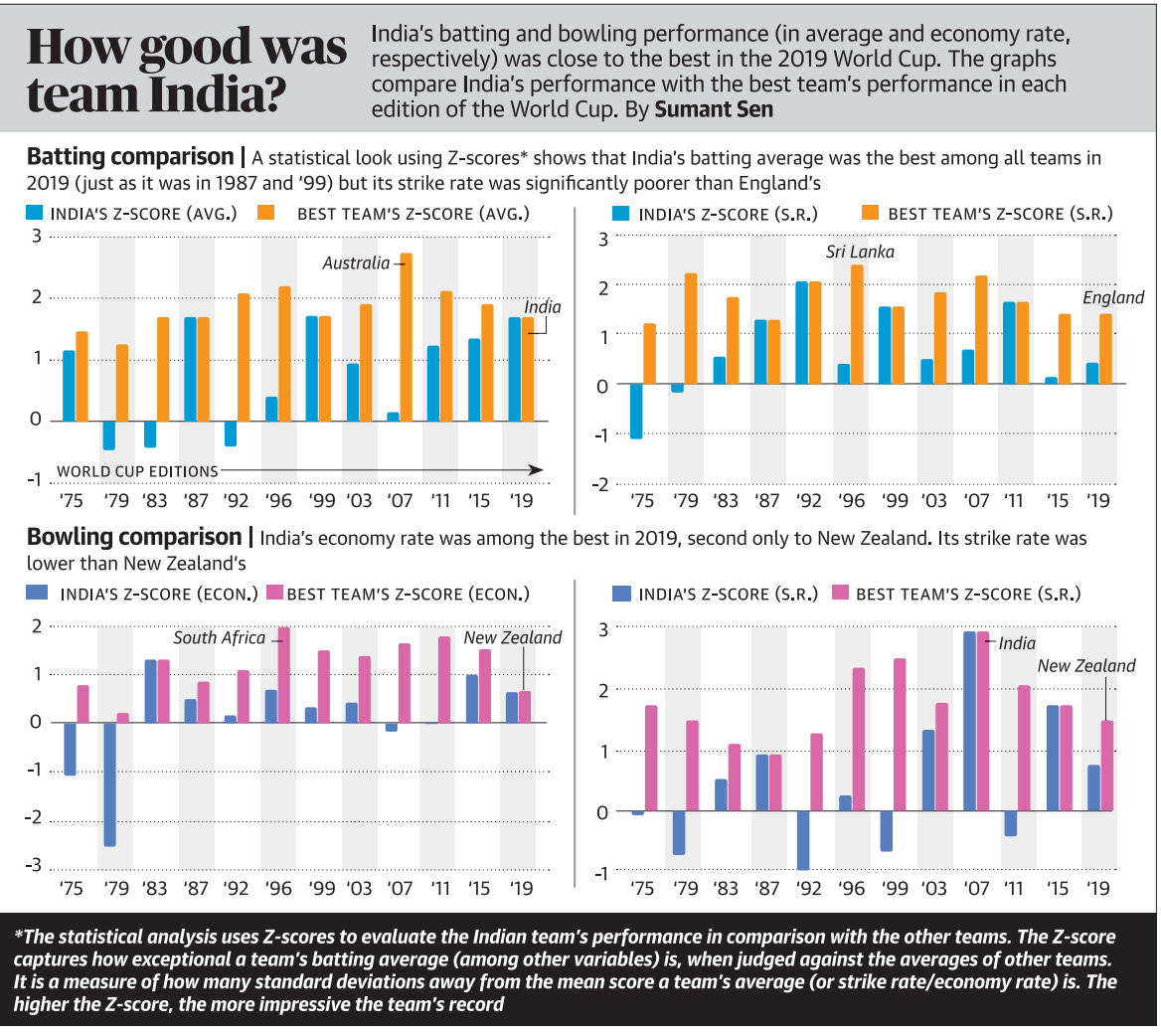
**The European example**  
The European Parliament and European Council are working on an anti-money laundering directive, known as AMLD5. The deadline for its implementation is January 2020. All crypto exchanges and wallet custodians operating in Europe will have to implement strict know-your-customer (KYC) on-boarding procedures and need to register with local authorities. They will also be required to report suspicious activities to relevant bodies. This will not fully solve the problem since it is not always possible for the exchange to know a beneficiary's details.

The EU Commission is aware and has been mandated to present further set of amendment proposals regarding self-declaration by virtual currency owners, the maintenance of central databases registering users' identities and wallet addresses, and norms while using virtual currencies as payment or investment means by 2022. This is a more reasonable approach, and the Indian government could follow suit.

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## DATA POINT



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 18, 1969

**Apollo II racing to the moon**

Apollo-II was well on target for the moon today [July 17] after its three-man crew had successfully fired its main rocket for three seconds - the first flight path correction of the historic mission. The spacecraft's speed was increased by 25 KPH (21 feet per second), an essential correction if it is to pass 111 kilometres above the moon on Saturday [July 14]. Had the firing failed the craft would pass 323 kilometres above the moon, marking it necessary for the astronauts to make unscheduled orbital changes. The three second firing was made at 16-17 GMT (21-47 IST) less than two hours after the spacecraft passed the halfway stage on its historic mission. Officials at the Houston Space Centre let them wake on their own accord as there was nothing urgent for them to do. "Good morning up there," said a ground controller when he heard noises from the capsule. One of the first things the American astronauts learnt after they awoke this morning from a good night's sleep was that Luna-15, the latest Russian unmanned spacecraft, was orbiting the moon. They made no comment. They breakfasted on fruit cocktail, sausage, meat patties, cinnamon, toasted bread cubes, cocoa and grapefruit drink. To conserve energy for their moon lauding this week-end, today's flight plan was not a crowded one.

## A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 18, 1919. Judicial Methods Criticised.

Mr. Eardley Norton addressed this evening [July 17, in Calcutta] a public meeting at the Indian Association on the present political situation. Mr. Norton began with a short history of the growth of political life in India and said that the people of the country would be well advised in taking whatever reforms were offered to them and then press for more. They should work out their own salvation by fighting their own battles and by pressing the rulers that they were fit to be entrusted with further installments of freedom. They should co-operate in the successful working of the Reform Scheme and thus lay their claim to get more freedom. They should accept whatever political concessions now given to them and then go on agitating for more and more. Though there were a few Englishmen here who were against Indian aspirations they did not represent the millions of liberal-minded Englishmen, who sympathised with Indian aspirations and who wanted to see India more and more prosperous and self-governing.