

Russia, Turkey declare new era with ‘strategic’ document

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The presidents of Russia and Turkey signed a joint declaration in Moscow yesterday aimed at deepening friendly relations and improving multidimensional cooperation between the two countries, with the Russian side defining the declaration as a “strategic document.”

Turkish President Abdullah Gül arrived in Moscow on Thursday, accompanied by State Minister Responsible for Foreign Trade Kürşad Tüzmen and Energy Minister Hilmi Güler, in addition to his spouse, Hayrünnisa Gül, and a large business delegation. Foreign Minister Ali Babacan joined the delegation, traveling from Riga, Latvia, where he paid an official visit, to Moscow late on Thursday.

The four-day visit by Gül, a former foreign minister, to Moscow in his capacity as president was classified as “a state visit” upon the Russian side’s request, although it was earlier planned as “an official visit.” Moscow’s request displayed the importance attached to the visit — as a state visit is described as the highest level of state protocol — and made Gül the first Turkish president to ever pay a state visit to Russia.

Gül’s visit officially began yesterday with a welcoming ceremony held ahead of his meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in the Grand Kremlin Palace’s St. George Hall. The Itar-Tass news agency highlighted that the ceremony was required by the protocol.

Speaking ahead of their meeting, Medvedev highlighted bilateral cooperation in the Black Sea region in particular.

“Turkey and Russia are doing much for the maintenance of security in the Black Sea region and the Caucasus in general. We count on strategic cooperation with Turkey in that sphere. I think both our countries are interested in it. We hope such coordination will be maintained,” Medvedev said. “I am sure the visit to Russia will become a turning point for bringing our relations to a new, higher level,” Gül said.

Following their meeting, the two leaders signed a joint declaration which Gül said displayed mutual political will to carry the ongoing multidimensional bilateral cooperation to a further point.

“I believe that this visit will open a new page between our countries,” Gül said, underlining that it was a state visit.

Back in December 2004, during a landmark visit to Ankara by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who was president at the time, the two countries signed a “Joint Declaration on the

Intensification of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership.” Putin’s visit was the first presidential visit in the history of Turkish-Russian relations since that of Chairman of the Presidium Nikolai Podgorny in 1972. Russia is an important trade partner for Turkey, with a total annual trade volume of \$38 billion between the two countries, and has close political relations with common strategic interests, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Turkey depends on Russian energy supplies, but it is also a transit route for Russian energy exports. Russia, Turkey’s main supplier of natural gas, is the biggest market for Turkey’s construction firms and millions of Russian tourists visit Turkey’s Mediterranean coast every year.

Unlike its Western allies, Turkey refrained from strong condemnations of Russia’s actions during the outbreak of a brief war between Russia and Georgia last August, fearing such language could hurt its vital economic ties with Russia.

Russia, meanwhile, had denounced US and NATO naval presence in the Black Sea, which can only be accessed via the Turkish Straits, as a “provocation.” Later, however, a statement appreciating appropriate implementation of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which governs passage through the Turkish Straits, came from the Russian capital.

Babacan, speaking in Riga ahead of the Moscow visit, advised the United States, NATO and the European Union not to adopt a confrontational attitude in their dealings with Russia.

Babacan said Thursday that Turkey and Russia enjoyed “normal, friendly relations,” while noting that Russia is Turkey’s largest trading partner.

“The key term is cooperation. A strategy of confrontation with Russia is not going to give positive results and risks producing lose-lose outcomes,” he warned in response to a question about Russian plans to station Iskander missiles in its Kaliningrad Baltic enclave in response to US plans for a “missile shield” in central and Eastern Europe.

Technical delegation for customs issue

Russia and Turkey agreed to form a joint technical delegation for overcoming ongoing problems that Turkish truck drivers have faced at Russian customs, the Anatolia news agency reported from Moscow yesterday, citing anonymous sources. The decision for establishing such a delegation was made during the meeting between Gül and Medvedev when the former raised the issue, and the proposal for a delegation came from Medvedev, Anatolia said.

Turkey and Russia agreed last September to simplify customs procedures for Turkish goods at a time when the two countries faced serious trade problems that emerged after Russia began to impose tougher inspections on Turkish trucks at border crossings. “We have a multidimensional and strengthened relationship with Russia, and we’re pleased to see this relationship improving. When relations are wide and complex to this extent, then problems will naturally occur. These are technical problems. We’ll have the opportunity of removing these at the highest-level meetings,” Gül said ahead of his visit, in response to a question concerning the issue.

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