

**REGIONAL CENTERS OF POWER AND
THEIR EURASIAN POLITICS**
*(Rivalry in the Islamic East—
The Turkish Vector)*

Pavel VARBANETS

*Ph.D. (Political Science),
fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations,
Ukraine National Academy of Sciences
(Kiev, Ukraine)*

In the last twenty years, the international relations system has undergone major changes, however, contrary to America's expectations, the bipolar world order that disappeared together with the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War was not replaced with a unipolar world. Today,

international processes are somewhat chaotic, which explains the appearance of several poles of power—the United States, EU, Russia, Southeast Asia, and the Islamic world. While in the West the rivalry over spheres of influence is drawing to an end and a new order has all but emerged, the Islamic world is only just being drawn into the process. There is the opinion in the expert community that the Muslim world will change its makeup and the Arabic domination of today will be replaced

with a new system concentrated around new centers of power such as Turkey and Iran. The former is claiming the role of a regional leader in the Islamic East due to several new circumstances: it enjoys the most advanced and stable Islamic democracy, a dynamically developing economy, and the largest corridors of energy resources. The mounting rivalry over regional domination will inevitably heat up competition in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The Turkish Model: Is It the Third Way for the Islamic World?

Turkey and Iran, two regional centers of power, are also two traditional rivals in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Each of them has close cultural, political, and economic ties with the Central Asian republics and enjoyed domination in the region in the past. They offer not only different formats of cooperation with the local states, but also different development models in which Turkish Islamic democracy stands opposed to the Iranian conception of Islamic society.

On the whole, throughout the 20th century, the Islamic world acquired two system-forming poles of regional influence. The first is the traditional pole with Iran and Saudi Arabia as its binary core. It is a source of politicized Islam with the corresponding stereotypes of reorganization of the socio-state systems of the regional countries, as well as their unification with the norms of the Shari‘a. The second is the secular pole with Turkey as its core and the center of the transformation processes of the public and state foundations, according to the secular principles, with an orientation toward gradual democratization and liberalization of the political regimes. The West regards the Turkish model as the Third Way of social and political development of the Islamic world. It is considered to be the only one that promotes political liberalism. In the future, this model might develop into viable democratic Islamic states. According to Henri Tincq of *Le Monde*, coexisting side by side with the official Islam of the Arabic dictatorships and extremist Islam, the Turkish model is an example of the Third Way, where respect of religion is combined with democratic institutions, the secular state, ethnic tolerance, and integration into Europe.¹ The outcome of the competition between these two approaches to social and political life will determine the future of the Islamic world and settle the regional leader issue.

The Westernized political elite initiated the Turkish project back in the 1920s on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire with the intention of bringing about social changes and carrying out radical reforms of the state and society to fit Western civilization, which the secularists regarded as modern and universal, some time in the future. The project was based on a policy designed to modernize and secularize all spheres of state and public life. Later, similar attempts were made in Algeria, Tunisia, and Iran; early in the 1990s, Turkey actively promoted this model in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

¹ See: H. Tincq, “Islam Democratique Contre Islamisme Radical,” *Le Monde*, 13 December, 2003.

The original configuration changed to a great extent under the pressure of social and cultural factors; in fact, internal contradictions born by political democratization and liberalization deprived the Turkish project of its anticipated viability. The sphere of Islam became a source of tension in the Islamic societies which had embraced the secular model: the proponents of spiritual conscience negatively responded to the intention to push religion away from public life. This moved large population groups into spiritual opposition to the basic principles of the dominating system and its norms, which were regarded as the worst of all the evils. This gave rise to the “paradox of democracy,” when Islamist forces used the liberalized regime to move to the political proscenium and cast doubt on the political model that allowed them to come forward. In Turkey, the crisis took the form of several military coups and a ban on the Islamists as the “last resort” of the state’s systemic defense.

The crisis ended in the late 1990s when moderate Islam somewhat fortified its position by promoting the ideas of Islamic democracy. After winning the parliamentary elections of 2002 and 2007 and the presidential election of 2007, the moderately Islamist Justice and Development Party became the dominant political force. Its leaders formulated and offered the nation a conception of conservative democracy, which the country’s Prime Minister R.T. Erdoğan described as the meeting place of civilizations and the people’s desire to embrace modern values: “A significant part of the Turkish society desires to adopt a concept of modernity that does not reject tradition, a belief of universalism that accepts localism, an understanding of rationalism that does not disregard the spiritual meaning of life. Our aim is to reproduce our system of local and deep-rooted values in harmony with the universal standards of political conservatism.”²

The new model blended, in an amazing way, the democratic social foundations with Islamic values and Turkey’s intention to join Europe with the state’s intention to strengthen its contacts with the Muslim world. It also helped to overcome the opposition of a-systemic forces inside the country by defusing their claims that the secular regime was guilty of persecuting Islam. These achievements, which allowed Turkey to overcome the economic crisis and stabilize the domestic situation, and the beginning of the process of Turkey’s joining the EU put the Turkish model into the center of the inter-civilizational discussion. The United States betrayed a great interest in the new conception: it is inclined to regard the Turkish Way as a good foundation for its Broader Middle East initiative and democratization of the Islamic region. The Turkish leaders are also actively promoting their model on the international scene in the hope that the other Islamic countries might use it in their interests. According to Prime Minister Erdoğan: “Turkey wants to see a more democratic, free, and peaceful Middle East” and “our country can ill afford not to address this problem. ... Turkey’s own interests require peaceful and stable neighbors that it can interact with positively at all levels.”³

Experts agree that Turkey has reached a level of economic and political development that potentially allows it to become a model for the rest of the Islamic world, which is waiting for democracy or expecting democratic developments. The events of 11 September and their aftermath demonstrated that Turkey could potentially avert a “clash of civilizations” and help the West and Islam to launch a dialog.⁴

By spreading its model, Ankara turned its attention to the Islamic countries of the Middle East and the Turkic republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus; it is seeking closer regional co-

² *Conservative Democracy and the Globalization of Freedom*, Speech delivered by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the American Enterprise Institute 29 January, 2004, available at [<http://www.aei.org/events/filter.all,eventID.735/transcript.asp>].

³ R.T. Erdoğan, “A Broad View of the ‘Broader Middle East’,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 4, 2004, available at [<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/8/587.html>].

⁴ See: K. Kirişçi, *Turkey’s Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times*, Paris, 2006, p. 26.

operation through the cultural, political, and economic ties it has already established with these regions; it is seeking political stabilization and wants to become a model for the region's Islamic countries. Ankara is obviously seeking the role of a regional leader; its new regional policy speaks of the same.

Turkey's New Regional Policy in the Islamic Middle East

After coming to power in 2002, the Islamist Justice and Development Party made relations with the Islamic world one of its foreign policy priorities. Despite the secular nature of its regime and its intention to join the EU, Turkey is seeking even greater influence and recognition in the Muslim world as one of the Islamic states for several political and economic reasons. In the political sphere, Turkey is drawing closer to the Islamic world to preserve its national security, territorial integrity, and political stability in the region as a whole. It also needs support of its foreign policy course. It is resolved to normalize relations with Syria and Iran, its neighbors, settle the Kurdish issue, and promote confessional solidarity in the Islamic world designed to support Turkey on the Cyprus issue. On a wider scale, it is looking for a new quality of regional consolidation and more balanced American and European policies. This process is intended to increase the import of energy resources, invite wider Arabic investments, and increase the volume of trade between Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries.

While pursuing strategic aims, Ankara seeks its greater regional role of a stabilizing center. Its past and unique geographic location make it possible for Turkey to hope to acquire the status of a political, economic, and cultural buffer between the Islamic regions (the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus) and the West as a whole.

To cope with these tasks, the Turkish Foreign Ministry readjusted its approaches to the regional problems in line with the new Middle Eastern policy. In the past, Turkey relied on force and confrontation; the Justice and Development Party relies on a dialog and mutually acceptable compromises to remove the problems that have accumulated in its relations with its neighbors. By launching the process to join the EU, the Turkish government earned additional dividends in the Islamic world. Turkey's position was also fortified by the fact that the country is ruled by the political party with obvious Islamic overtones, which means that democracy and Islam can live side by side. This is an important improvement: the country has moved away from its old image of a state controlled by confirmed secularists and the military.

During its five years at the helm, the Justice and Development Party has made great progress in realizing its regional policies; it normalized relations with Syria and Egypt and signed free trade agreements with them. Turkey is actively developing its cooperation with the Gulf states, which reciprocated by pouring more investments into the Turkish economy. The relations with Iran, an old regional rival, are better than ever. In the 1990s, Ankara and Tehran clashed in a war of ideologies (Iran could not keep out of Turkey's domestic affairs and interfered through political Islam and the Kurdish issue, which bred border conflicts). In recent years, the situation has changed dramatically: Ankara has reached a better mutual understanding and confidence in its relations with Tehran. It is importing oil and gas from Iran, while Turkish companies are involved in Iran's economic developments. Tehran reciprocated by taking a firm stance regarding the Kurdish fighters associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party and operating in the mountainous areas in southeastern Turkey next to Iran and Iraq.

Regional security is another concern: Ankara could not accept the possibility of the American military presence in Iraq spreading to Syria and Iran. Then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül parried all Israeli allegations that Syria was supporting terrorism by saying that the war should be limited to Iraq and went on to say that Syria and Iran were Turkey's neighbors with which Turkey would prefer to maintain good-neighborly relations. He pointed out that all the countries of the region, Israel included, needed stability in the region.⁵

Ankara wants a higher status at the peace talks; it is aspiring to help the West enter into a dialog with Syria and Iran, normalize relations of the Muslim states with Israel, and make its contribution to Palestinian settlement. In 2007, the country hosted numerous international conferences on the settlement of regional conflicts, at which it, as the sponsor, was represented by the highest officials. Turkish diplomacy went further than all the other foreign ministries and organized a meeting between the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan in Ankara. In March 2007, the Turkish capital hosted a meeting of the plenipotentiary representatives of EU and Iran (the corresponding delegations were headed by Javier Solana and Ali Larijani), who discussed the Iranian nuclear file.⁶ Ankara is prepared to talk to all the sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: in February 2006, Turkey received head of HAMAS Halid Mashal, turning a blind eye to Israel's and America's displeasure. In November 2007, Foreign Minister Gül organized a meeting between head of Israel Shimon Peres and head of Palestine Mahmud Abbas. They both spoke in the Turkish parliament, Shimon Peres thus becoming the first Israeli president to address the highest legislature of a Muslim country.⁷

The Muslim world approves of Ankara's peacekeeping activities; its integration into Europe is now accepted as a positive factor that could promote the region's political and economic advance. The Islamic states no longer regard Turkey's potential EU membership as joining the Christian Club. They interpret it as an element of the inter-cultural dialog and a chance to avoid a "clash of civilizations."

On the whole, Turkey can be described as an ambitious regional force with close cultural, economic, and political contacts in the Islamic Middle East, which is pursuing its own national interests by working toward stability and international cooperation in the region. Ankara, which wholeheartedly supports the idea of reforms and democracy in the Muslim world, expects to play the role of a stabilizing center in the Middle East.

The expert community has pointed out that Turkey's steadily growing influence in the region, its mediation between the Islamic states and the West, its involvement in the Middle Eastern developments, and its obvious desire to remain an impartial arbiter when dealing with the critically important regional issues have erased the former mistrust of the region's states and have earned it recognition of its leadership in building a productive regional political order. This is confirmed by the election of a Turk to the post of OIC Secretary General (for the first time in the organization's history), the invitation of the prime minister of Turkey to the summit of the League of Arab States with a "permanent guest" status, and the Forum of the Countries-Neighbors of Iraq⁸ convened on Ankara's initiative. The country's new image was further confirmed by the Istanbul Declaration adopted on Turkey's initiative in June 2004 at the OIC summit, which called on the Islamic world to promote democracy.

⁵ See: *Hurriet*, 15 April, 2003.

⁶ See: O. Sanberk, "Vneshniaia politika v obstanovke neopredelennosti," *Radikal*, 26 July, 2007, available at [<http://www.inosmi.ru/translation/235756.html>].

⁷ See: *Turkiye*, 15 November, 2007.

⁸ See: N. Mkhitarian, "The Process of Regional Integration in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Post-Bipolar World Period," *Achievements of World Politics*, Issue 38, Kiev, 2007, pp. 211-212 (in Ukrainian).

Evolution of Turkey's Foreign Policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus

Central Asia and the Caucasus are very important for the regional policies of Turkey, which began displaying its interest in the two vast regions in the early 1990s. It was a time when the end of the Soviet Union suggested to most Western political analysts the “end of history” and the era of triumph of Western democracy. Turkey, which found itself in the camp of the victors, was euphoric. It is no wonder that in December 1991 *The Economist* described it as the “Star of Islam” and offered it, a democratic country with a secular government and market economy, as a pattern for the newly independent post-Soviet states.⁹ Supported by the West, relying on its considerable political, military, and economic potential and using its common history and ethno-linguistic kinship as a trump card, Turkey moved into Central Asia and the Caucasus.

At that time, Ankara never tired of explaining to the newly independent countries of the two regions that Turkey was strategically important for them as the only (in the new historical conditions) bridge between Europe and Asia. It offered its help in planting the Turkish development model (a secular democratic regime with a market economy and pro-Western orientation) and promised active economic and cultural support. Süleyman Demirel, the then prime minister and later president of Turkey, has written: “And it was a time to embrace and assist them in the daunting challenge of their process of political and economic transition from communism to democracy and from a centrally planned to a free market economy. We shared our experience and insight as to how to cultivate a culture of democracy, build democratic institutions, and realize structural reforms.”¹⁰

Ankara extended humanitarian and economic aid to these countries by allocating about \$1 billion in loans in 1992; it provided material and technical assistance to their armed forces, education, and culture. To extend its assistance to the Central Asian republics, Turkey set up the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA), which implemented projects in education, health, transportation, and management for a total of over \$100 million. To promote multisided cooperation with the Central Asian countries, Turkey initiated summits of Turkic-speaking countries, the first meeting of which took place in 1992 in Ankara.

The West encouraged Turkey's active involvement in Central Asia to keep potential Iranian influence in check and to push Russia out of the region. By the mid-1990s, the local countries lost an interest in the Turkish model. Bayram Sinkaya of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara has written that several years were more than enough to realize that both the Turkish model and the alternative Iranian models could not help Central Asian states cope with their urgent problems. Each of them began developing its own models.¹¹ They lost interest in Turkey because its economic aid proved inadequate and failed to create economic prosperity and integration with Western economic institutions. The Turkish establishment, in turn, realized that the business climate in the region was hardly favorable: Turkish businessmen were scared away by the high level of corruption and the very low level of business competence. As a result, business contacts with Turkey receded to the margins of Central Asian economic activities.¹²

Ankara had to abandon its original plans for Central Asia, but persisted in its efforts to use the cultural and ethnic affinity with the regions' countries to its own advantage. Caspian oil and gas were

⁹ See: K. Kirişçi, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁰ S. Demirel, “Changing Central Asia in the New World Order,” *Turkish Daily News*, 19 September, 2007.

¹¹ See: B. Sinkaya, “Turkey-Iran Relations in the 1990s and the Role of Ideology,” *Perceptions*, Vol. X, No. 1, Spring 2005, p. 12.

¹² See: S.A. Khan, “Iran's Relations with Central Asia—A Strategic Analysis,” *Perceptions*, Vol. IX, March-May 2004, p. 56.

the main attractions—there was enough of them to cover Turkey’s needs for energy resources and to bring additional economic and political advantages in the form of re-orientating hydrocarbon transportation routes to Europe across Turkey. The import of energy resources is one of Turkey’s priorities: today the republic imports about 90 percent of oil and practically 100 percent of gas (70 percent of which arrives from Russia). Today, Turkey covers merely 13 percent of its energy production by means of gas, but it is thought that in the future the growing Turkish industry will need more gas.¹³

The first agreement on the transportation of Caspian oil across Turkey was signed in November 1999 in Istanbul; the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline was commissioned in June 2006. Later Kazakhstan joined the project and intends to link its oil fields to the pipeline. The Baku-Erzurum gas pipeline was commissioned in 2007. These two pipelines, the related infrastructure, and the planned Baku-Kars railway (the project was signed in February 2007) are important economic initiatives within the regional cooperation framework.¹⁴

The commissioned Asia-Europe energy fuels transportation projects made Turkey the key country in moving energy resources to the European markets; it has become the region’s energy center. The established energy corridor will connect Central Asia and the Caucasus with Europe, thus moving them closer to the West. On the other hand, the projects will open a new page in Turkey’s cooperation with the EU and increase its integration chances.

Recently, Turkey has extended its contacts with the region’s states from the energy sphere to other economic branches. Turkey’s economy has become stronger and is continuing to grow: the volume of its foreign trade increased from \$57.3 billion in 1995 to \$190 billion in 2005.¹⁵ Central Asia still looms large in the system of Ankara’s regional economic interests. “Turkish investments are in excess of 4 billion US dollars and projects undertaken by Turkish contractors are currently valued in the range of \$15 billion. There are some 1,000 large and small-sized Turkish firms operating in the region. Turkey’s trade volume with the region last year stood at \$3 billion.”¹⁶

After strengthening its economic ties, Turkey revived its earlier projects aimed at forming a single Turkic entity in Central Asia under its own leadership. Turkish politicians are very positive about President Nazarbaev’s initiative to set up a Union of Central Asian States inspired by the EU model. It envisages a common market that will unite about 60 million through economic integration.

The 11th Congress of the Turkic Countries that took place in Baku on 17-19 November, 2007 was a very important event in this respect. The forum, which was attended by President of Azerbaijan Aliev and Prime Minister of Turkey Erdoğan, discussed issues of common interest for all the Turkic states. At the opening session, the Turkish prime minister said that there were no longer any obstacles that disunited the Turkic nations and countries. He went on to say that the Turkic nations should take advantage of this historic opportunity, which would determine the nations’ common future and their common aims. He then pointed out that the unity of the Turkic states could become the most constructive tool to be used to defuse international tension in the region, in particular in Iraq, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Northern Cyprus.¹⁷

Some of the numerous suggestions voiced by the congress’ commissions (a visa free regime, closer cooperation among the business communities, a single customs system, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Turkic states, joint NGO associations and municipalities, a common structure for women organizations, a common language, a joint TV channel, and a Turkic Union patterned on the European Union) were purely declarative, but they demonstrated that Ankara’s intentions should not be treated lightly.

¹³ See: *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁴ See: S. Demirel, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ See: K. Kirişçi, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ S. Demirel, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ See: ANS-PRESS, 17 November, 2007.

To achieve regional security Turkey is actively exploiting its NATO membership, something that the other heavyweights (Russia, China, and Iran) treat negatively. Ankara's persistent promotion of NATO's interests in the region made the regional rivalry ever more bitter. In fact, regional security is a much more prominent issue than economic rivalry. Since the mid-1990s Turkey has been pushing Azerbaijan and Georgia to join NATO. In 1998, Turkey signed an agreement with Georgia on strategic military partnership, under which Georgia received \$5.5 million from Ankara to modernize its armed forces. In 1999, Turkey signed a similar agreement with Azerbaijan and allocated \$3.5 million to the modernization of its armed forces. Turkey, however, discovered that it did not have enough resources to ensure region-wide economic support and develop the corresponding infrastructure. Seen from Russia, this policy looks like the threat of increased American presence in the region.

The events of 9/11 changed the political context in Central Asia. The new threats caused by the confrontation between the international community and terrorism turned the region into one of the links of global security. The United States assumed responsibility for regional security and military cooperation with the local countries. Other important actors (the EU, Russia, China, Japan, and India) also turned their attention to the region. While the EU was more concerned with its energy security, Russia and China were more alarmed with the security threats, which pushed them into closer cooperation within the SCO.

On the whole, its great geopolitical importance allows Turkey to play a multidimensional and far from simple role in Central Asia. On the one hand, Turkey concluded agreements on cooperation in the sphere of security with the Turkic republics and is still in the center of NATO's activities in the region, which cannot but cause conflicts with Russia. On the other, Ankara is out to exploit its advantages created by the transportation of energy resources to maintain economic cooperation with all the regional players.

Today and Tomorrow

While Turkey's EU membership remains vague, it is looking for a suitable place in the Islamic world as a state claiming regional leadership and serving as a model of democratic society for others. With this aim in view, Ankara is busy developing political and economic cooperation with the local states and is actively involved as a mediator in settling regional conflicts. Having established political, economic, and cultural ties with the Central Asian and Caucasian countries, Turkey is working hard to bring the Turkic-speaking countries closer together within a single economic and political expanse. It seems that Ankara does not have enough resources today to realize its plans to set up an integrated regional structure. In the future however, in view of Turkey's growing economy and international prestige, it might be able to implement these plans.

At the same time, Ankara's newly found orientation in the Islamic world does not clash with its pro-Western bias. Its Western allies can still count on Turkey as a bridge between the West and the East. Some analysts believe that in the future its position in the West will depend on the level of its influence in the East. Recent events confirmed this conclusion.¹⁸ After gaining leadership in the Islamic East, Turkey will become even more valuable to the EU and America.

¹⁸ See: N. Mkhitarian, *op. cit.*, p. 207.