

THE TURKISH MODEL AND TURKEY'S CENTRAL ASIAN POLICIES CONDITIONED BY WESTERN STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Levon HOVSEPYAN

*Fellow at the Institute of Political Studies
(Erevan, Armenia)*

Turkey's Foreign Policy and Western Strategic Interests

The post-Cold War geopolitical transformations forced the Turkish leaders to revise their foreign policy and national security/defense concepts. The Turkish military-political circles moved away from the narrow ideas of strategy and foreign policy of the former federal security conception to a wider approach of alternative foreign policies. Early in the 1990s Turkey perceived the Caucasus and Central Asia as an alternative foreign policy sphere. It used its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties with the Turkic-speaking Central Asian nations to assume a leading role and establish its influence in the region.

Turkey's geopolitical ambitions coincided with the foreign political strategies of the West, the United States in particular. This explains why in the early 1990s Ankara created a new Central Asian strategy: it did not want to miss the chance of becoming a post-Cold War regional power.

During the Cold War its NATO membership supplied Turkey with a clearly defined role on the Alliance's southern flank: it was expected to check the Soviet Union's infiltration into the

Mediterranean and the Middle East.¹ During the Cold War Turkey's foreign policy and national security conceptions perfectly fitted the military-political conception of NATO and the United States in particular. I have already mentioned that the end of the Cold War caused geopolitical transformations that created new foreign policy and security strategies for many countries. In the beginning Ankara was baffled by the vagueness of the new realities and spent some time trying to assess its future foreign and security policies and a new strategy. In the absence of the Soviet Union, Turkey's geostrategic importance, as seen from the West as whole and the U.S. in particular, became obscure.

The end of the Cold War also bred apprehensions among the Turkish political top crust about the country's security, which forced it to step up the country's involvement in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.² Indeed, the country could be deprived of its strategic importance for NATO, which made looking for a new foreign policy strategy oriented toward the newly independent Turkic-speaking Central Asian states indispensable.

A vast Ankara-led alliance of Turkic-speaking countries stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia would have hiked up Turkey's geopolitical price for the West. Turkic analyst S. Laçiner has written in this connection: "The strategy designed to set up a Turkic world of this kind was not an alternative to the European Union or the West as a whole but was rather aimed at strengthening the Western vector of Turkish policies. With the Turkic world behind it the country could have felt much stronger when dealing with the West."³ The Turkish leaders looked at Turkey's stronger political and economic influence in Central Asia as an instrument for restoring its regional and international status in particular and for developing into "an influential state."⁴ Prof. Zia Onis from Turkey has pointed out that the country's political leaders expected that the new regional role would force the West to revise its former ideas about the country's military-political importance and would strengthen its own security and economic position.⁵

The newly independent Turkic-speaking Central Asian countries could become a fairly attractive foreign policy alternative. Samuel Huntington has commented on this by saying: "Having rejected Mecca, and then being rejected by Brussels, where does Turkey look? Tashkent may be the answer. The end of the Soviet Union gives Turkey the opportunity to become the leader of a revived Turkic civilization."⁶

To ease its regional involvement and to confirm its strategic importance to the West, and the United States in particular, Turkey extended its military support to the U.S. during the first Gulf war. President Turgut Özal (1989-1993) did a lot to promote strategic cooperation between his country and the United States. Turkish assistance in the American war against Iraq in 1991 opened a new stage in Turkish-American relations.⁷ President Özal believed that with the end of the Cold War his country should become more active and show more initiative at the regional and international levels to boost its geostrategic importance for the U.S. and NATO allies.⁸

¹ See: S. Erguvenc, "Turkey's Security Perceptions," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 2, June-August 1998.

² See: I. Torbakov, "The Turkish Factor in the Geopolitics of the Post-Soviet Space," available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/2002>].

³ S. Laçiner, "Orta Asya ve Türkiye," available at [<http://www.usakgundem.com/yazarlar.php?id=43&type=3>].

⁴ *Türkiye — Türk Cumhuriyetleri İlişkileri Raporu Özeti, Dünyada Küreselleşme ve Bölgesel Entegrasyonlar (AT, NAFTA, PASİFİK) Ve Türkiye (AT, EFTA, KEİ, Türk. Cumhuriyetleri), Yedinci Beş Yıllık Kalkınma Planı*, T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı Müsteşarlığı, Yayın No: DPT: 2410-ÖİK:471, Kitab 5, Ağustos 1995, S. 110-116, available at [<http://www.ekutup.dpt.gov.tr/kuresell/oik471.pdf>].

⁵ See: Z. Onis, "Turkey and Post-Soviet States: Potentials and Limits of Regional Power Influence," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 2, June 2001.

⁶ S. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, p. 42.

⁷ See: O. Kodzhaman, *Yuzny Kavkaz v politike Turtsii i Rossii v postsovetskiy period*, Moscow, 2004, p. 84.

⁸ See: Sh. Hunter, "Bridge or Frontier? Turkey's Post-Cold War Geopolitical Posture," *The International Spectator*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, January-March 1999.

Turkey looked at the closer relations with the newly independent Central Asian and Caucasian states as a step toward the desired aim. Ethnic, linguistic, and religious affinity with the Central Asian states let Turkey position itself as an important bridge between them and the West.⁹ Foreign Minister of Turkey Ismail Cem pointed out in one of his articles that in the post-Cold War period his country assumed geopolitical and strategic leadership in the center of the vast expanse stretching from Central Asia to Europe.¹⁰ According to Süleyman Demirel, who served as Turkish prime minister in 1991-1993, in the post-Cold War period Turkey gained much international weight thanks to its strategically important role as a stable NATO member in an unstable region (meaning Central Asia and the Caucasus). The end of the Soviet Union re-confirmed Turkey's status as a regional economic force.¹¹

The West, and particularly the United States, supported Turkey's active involvement in the Turkic-speaking Central Asian countries because it decreased their dependence on Russia and created the possibility of opposing the rising Iranian and Chinese influence in the region.¹² Early in the 1990s, the U.S. Defense Department and CIA, fully aware of the importance of Turkey's stronger influence in the region, favored the idea of extending American aid to it. In December 1992, the then Supreme Allied Commander Europe and former U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig pointed out that Turkey's increasing authority is good for the region's future. Turkey was expected to create a favorable investment climate there.¹³ The American intelligence and analytical community were eagerly promoting pan-Turkism as a "cultural-civilizational example"¹⁴ rather than a geopolitical system. The American foreign policy planners created a strategy of Turkish influence in the region that would have allowed the United States, in pursuit of its own interests, to indirectly control the social and political transformations in Central Asia. The West on the whole and the United States in particular were extremely interested in planting the Turkish alternative of state, social and economic development in Central Asia.

The Turkish Model or the Turkish Development Alternative

The West was actively promoting the Turkish model as an ideal alternative for Central Asia. Why was it attractive? First of all, the Turkish model included three main components: a secular state order, a democratic government, and a free market. The West promoted this far from ideal model because it wanted economic and geopolitical changes in the region.

First, according to Western politicians the "Turkish model was put forward as an ideal Muslim democracy" opposed to "its revolutionary brand in Iran." It was feared "that a power vacuum was created

⁹ See: Y. Demirağ, "Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türkiyenin Orta Asya Siyasetinde Gelinek Nokta ve Gelecekte Bölgeye İlişkin İzlenmesi Gereken Dış politika Stratejisi," available at [http://www.jcepolitik.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=22&Itemid=28].

¹⁰ See: I. Cem, "Turkey: Setting Sail to the 21st Century," *Perceptions, Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. II, September-November 1997.

¹¹ See: S. Demirel, "Newly-emerging Centre," *Turkish Review*, Vol. 6, No. 30, Winter 1992, p. 9.

¹² See: Z. Chotoev, "The Turkish Factor in the Evolution of the Central Asian Republics," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003, p. 73.

¹³ See: *Turtsia mezhdü Evropoy i Aziey: Itogi evropeizatsii na iskhode XX veka*, ed. by N.G. Kireev, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, Institute of Israel and the Middle East, Moscow, 2001, p. 429.

¹⁴ See: I. Muradian, *Regional'nye problemy turetsko-amerikanskikh otnosheniy*, Erevan, 2004, p. 76.

in Central Asia, and if nothing was done, this vacuum could be filled by an anti-Western and revolutionary kind of Iranian Islam.”¹⁵ British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher looked at Turkey as an outpost against aggressive Islamic fundamentalism. It should be said that the “democratic” definition related not only to Turkey’s secular state of affairs but also to a multi-party system and “Europeanization” policy.

The Turkic-speaking newly independent states, in turn, were facing the fairly difficult task of moving away from the Soviet-type state-regulated economy to a free market, which meant that they could learn a lot from Turkey’s experience of economic reform. In the 1980s the reforms carried out thanks to Özal decreased the state’s share in it and created the basis for more reforms. The cultural and linguistic affinity made the Turkish model more attractive.¹⁶ At the early stages this attraction was increased by the Central Asian states’ desire to “cleanse” themselves of the Soviet legacy and revive national awareness.

In February 1992 in Washington President George W. Bush, when talking to Prime Minister Demirel, described Turkey as a secular and democratic state, the experience of which could be borrowed by the newly independent Central Asian states. In June 1992, Mme. Catherine Lalumiere, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, visited the Central Asian republics. During her visit, she declared that “Turkey provided a valid model of development for many a newly-independent country in Asia.”¹⁷ Early in 1992, Secretary of State James Baker, during a trip to various Central Asian capitals, recommended that the political leaders of the new republics adopt the Turkish model for their political and economic development.¹⁸ At one time, speaking at the Assembly of the Turko-American Business Council, Foreign Minister of Turkey Hikmet Çetin mentioned the Turkish model: the Turkish and American approaches to the tasks of the new period are similar; the same applies to their interests. Turkey is an island of stability in an unstable region, its stability resting on its democratic order and free economic model. Its experience and its results serve as an example for the newly independent states.¹⁹

The new Turkic-speaking countries believed that it was important for them to be included in the international political and economic system while “Turkey could successfully take on the function of opening the doors of many Western international organizations for the Central Asian states.”²⁰ In the spring of 1992, while traveling around the region, Hikmet Çetin announced that his country was prepared to represent the Turkic-speaking states in international organizations. Ankara actively supported the local countries’ membership in all sorts of international structures,²¹ thus boosting its authority among the local leaders.

The Turkic-speaking countries treated the Turkish initiatives with a lot of trust and sympathy. Their leaders repeatedly stated that they were prepared to follow the Turkish model. During his visit to Turkey, President of Uzbekistan Karimov declared that his country considered Turkey a good exam-

¹⁵ İ. Bal, “The Turkish Model and the Turkic Republics,” *Perceptions, Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. III, No. 3, September-November 1998.

¹⁶ See: Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ See: H. Kramer, “Will Central Asia Become Turkey’s Sphere of Influence,” *Perceptions, Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. I, No. 1, March-May 1996.

¹⁹ See: “The Full Text of Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin’s Speech at the Assembly of Turko-American Business Council, Istanbul,” *Turkish Review*, Vol. 6, No. 30, Winter 1992.

²⁰ H. Kramer, op. cit.

²¹ Turkish diplomacy helped these countries to join the OSCE, OIC, OECD, etc. Turkey used its diplomatic contacts to help the Turkic-speaking states to establish themselves on the international arena. The Protocol on Diplomatic Relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan said, in particular, that “if the foreign policy department of Uzbekistan asks Turkey, the Turkish embassies should represent and defend its interests in the corresponding country” (A. Khalmukhamedov, “Uzbekistansko-turetskie otnoshenia,” in: *Uzbekistan: obretenie novogo oblika*, ed. by E. Kozhokin, Vol. 2, Moscow, 1998, p. 373).

ple to be followed. President of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akaev said in a speech, “Turkey is a morning star that shows the true path for other Turks.” Nursultan Nazarbaev and Saparmurad Niyazov, the president of Turkmenistan, made similar statements.²²

This warmth was heated by several considerations. Turkey’s market economy was fairly developed, which meant that Turkish investments could be expected. The prospect was obviously tempting. The Central Asian republics expected Turkey to help them establish contacts with the West and hoped that this would invite American and European investments via Turkey to their countries.²³ Strategically, Turkish influence in the region was expected to alleviate the danger of Islamic fundamentalism and detach the local countries from Russia.

At the early stages, cultural and linguistic affinity and the lavish promises of the Turkish leaders bred a lot of sympathy in the Central Asian countries. Disillusionment came some time later when it became clear that Turkey’s ambitious political and economic project did not match its real potential. The Turkish model, which Ankara continued to promote, was gradually losing its former gloss in the eyes of the Central Asian leaders.

Why did this happen? First, its secular nature proved to be vulnerable: when Islamic forces came to power in Turkey, it became clear that the Turkish model was hardly an acceptable example. In the latter half of 1996, when the Cabinet of Necmettin Erbakan of the Welfare (Refah) Party came to power in Turkey, relations between Ankara and the Central Asian republics became cooler. The secular leaders of the Central Asian countries were left with the negative impression that Turkey, which had earlier offered the Central Asian republics a secular development model, was confronted with a similar problem. Prime Minister Erbakan chose Iran, Libya, and Pakistan, three Islamic countries, rather than the Central Asian republics for his first visits abroad.²⁴

The prestige of the Turkish model was shattered by the victory of the Islamists. At that time the Central Asian countries were concerned with the rising wave of Islamism that was especially obvious in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. This also came as an unpleasant surprise for the Uzbek leaders, who were on the frontline of struggle against Islamic fundamentalism.²⁵ When asked about possible Turkic-European JVs in the republic, President Karimov gave a very apt answer to a Turkish correspondent: “If I correctly interpreted your question you meant to say that Uzbekistan should build up its relations with Europe through Turkey. We can cope without intermediaries.”

Turkey’s real economic potential was grossly overestimated—it did not match Central Asia’s expectations. Turkey, in turn, realized that the Central Asian republics expected much more assistance in the security and economic spheres than it could provide. Ankara lacked the resources necessary to unite these Turkic-speaking countries under its wing.²⁶ The special commission for relations between Ankara and the Turkic-speaking countries of the Department for State Planning of Turkey presented a report (within the eighth five-year plan starting in 2000) that said: “To boost the confidence of these countries in Turkey we should fulfill what was promised and refrain from promising something that cannot be done.”²⁷

²² See: İ Bal, op. cit.

²³ See: N. Uslu, “The Russian, Caucasian and Central Asian Aspects of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post Cold War Period,” *Alternatives. Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 3&4, Fall&Winter 2003, p. 182.

²⁴ See: G. Winrow, “Turkey and Central Asia,” in: *Central Asian Security. The New International Context*, ed. by R. Allison, L. Jonson, Brookings Institution Press, London, Washington, 2001, p. 202.

²⁵ The Turkish domestic political context strongly affected the leaders of Uzbekistan who feared an “Islamic revival” in Turkey. This was regarded as one of the serious threats to Uzbekistan’s national security. In the 1990s, the Islamic Gülen movement was active in Central Asia and certain other post-Soviet states (for more detail, see: N. Kireev, “Turkey in Search of a National Strategy of Eurasian Cooperation,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (13), 2002).

²⁶ See: N. Uslu, op. cit.

²⁷ *Türkiye ile Türk Cumhuriyetleri İlişkileri ve Bölge Ülkeleri İlişkileri Özel İhtisas Komisyonu Raporu*, Sekizinci Beş Yıllık Kalkınma Planı, T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı Müşterarlığı, Yayın No: DPT: 2511-ÖİK:528, Ankara, 2000, S. 32-57, available at [<http://www.ekutup.dpt.gov.tr/disekono/oik528.pdf>].

The Central Asian leaders finally realized that the Turkey's promises and economic programs did not match the country's potential. On top of this, Turkey was no longer regarded as a bridge to the West.

Later, when Russia started building up its military-political influence in Central Asia, when the United States established direct contacts with the local countries, and when other powers (Iran and China) stepped up their regional involvement, Turkey's role inevitably diminished.

Changes in Turkey's Central Asian Policies

These factors forced Ankara to revise its Central Asian approaches; it placed higher stakes on more realistic projects and abandoned its excessively ambitious plans. B. Aras, a prominent Turkish analyst, has written that there was a "shift from enthusiastic and sentimental policy attitudes to a more realistic and constructive policy line toward Central Asia." Since the late 1990s, "Turkish policy makers have been seeing this new policy line in a wider framework of following balanced relations with regional countries" rather than in being involved in the struggle for having the influence in the region.²⁸

New features and new trends in Ankara's foreign policy became especially prominent in 2002 when the Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power. Under Prime Minister Erdoğan its foreign policy became more active and more varied at the global and regional levels. The new elite based its approaches on the country's real interests and real possibilities. Director of the Center for International Strategic Analysis in Ankara Laçiner has pointed out that the JDP's foreign policy had moved far from the previous traditional approaches. Erdoğan's government, said he, having realized that the country's history and geography could not be ignored, revised the old foreign policy course.²⁹

Ahmed Davutoğlu, the chief advisor to Prime Minister Erdoğan on foreign policy, is believed to be the architect of the country's foreign policy course. His conception suggested that to ensure its security and stability Turkey should become more actively involved in creating conditions conducive to stability and security along its borders. This means that its regional policy should be multi-vectoral and active. The country's geographic location allows it to be involved in several regions.

Turkey should increase its presence in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.³⁰

This strategy is consistently realized through the so-called military-political substructures: Turkey's relations with NATO, the EU, and the U.S. allowed Ankara to be active in the Balkans during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Kosovo crisis. In the same way, Turkey increased its influence in the Caucasus: as a NATO member it is actively involved in several cooperation programs and gained serious positions in the military-political sphere of Georgia and Azerbaijan, especially by contributing to the reform of their armed forces.

²⁸ See: B. Aras, "Turkish Policy toward Central Asia," *Policy Brief*, No. 12. April 2008, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research.

²⁹ See: S. Laçiner, "Turkey-Middle East Relations in a New Era," *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 18 February, 2009.

³⁰ See: A. Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2008, pp. 77-96.

The country has tapped historical and civilizational resources (Islamic solidarity and Turkic unity) to increase its influence in the Middle East and Central Asia.

On the whole, while the JDP remained in power the trend toward closer cooperation with the Turkic-speaking Central Asian states was revived and new foundations were found. Prime Minister Erdoğan called on the political establishment to regain the lost positions. Today, Turkey, which has removed, at least partially, certain domestic obstacles, is applying its new conception of Turkic unity, efforts in which external factors are also important.

The far from easy relations with the United States and European Union revived the Turkic and Mid-Eastern trends as foreign policy priorities. The Turkish leaders are convinced that relations with the post-Soviet Central Asian countries, which were short of neglected under President Ahmed Necdet Sezer, should be revised and revived.

The Turkish analyst community believes that the country's mounting might will force it to revise its foreign policy course; it will concentrate on the East and, while securing its aims there, will gradually move the U.S. and the West out of the "sphere of its interests." Before that the country will have to maneuver between the interests of its strategic partners—America, Europe, and Russia. Today, Ankara is gaining independence in its foreign policy; this is best illustrated by its developing cooperation with Iran in the energy sphere in disregard of American warnings.

Today, the country is pursuing two foreign policy aims.

- First, it wants to join the European Union. Historically, geographically, and economically Turkey is a European country. It seems that it stands a good chance of succeeding when the talks that started on 3 October 2005 end. The very beginning of the talks brought the strategic aim closer. Turkey is bringing European standards of democracy, secular power, market economy, and regional cooperation to the Middle East and other Eurasian regions.

EU membership is one of the foreign policy priorities, however it is not an alternative to Turkey's strategic cooperation with the United States. It is believed in Turkey that the two vectors are mutually complementary.

- Second, wedged between Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Black Sea basin, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Central Asia Turkey needs security, stability, prosperity, friendship, and cooperation in the adjacent countries which play an important role in Turkey's foreign policy.³¹

³¹ See: "Synopsis of the Turkish Foreign Policy," available at [<http://www.mfa.gov.tr>].