

# Turkish Policy toward Central Asia

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Turkey was among the first countries to recognize the Central Asian republics immediately upon their independence in the early 1990s. The emergence of sister states, sometimes called the “Turkic republics” including Tajikistan, precipitated an outbreak of excitement in almost all political wings in Turkey. A Turkish world from the Adriatic to the Chinese wall became a new topic of discussion in Turkish policy circles and the media. The shift from enthusiastic and sentimental policy attitudes to a more realistic and constructive policy line toward Central Asia, however, has not been smooth and easy and still has a long way to go.

## Background

Apart from the excitement, there were other reasons for the interest caused by reunion with Central Asian peoples, from whom Anatolian Turks had long been separated. After the dissolution of Soviet Union, the immediate perception of Turkish policy makers was that Turkey’s strategic value was in decline for the U.S. Moreover, Turkey’s full membership application to the EU had been rejected. There was a search for a new foreign policy. The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and renewed focus on Economic Cooperation Organization were part of Turkey’s new identity search.

In the mean time, the idea that the collapse of the Soviet Union brought about a “power gap” on former Soviet territories -- an idea given credence by U.S. think tanks – gained immediate worldwide recognition. This school of thought

## Summary

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a Turkish world from the “Adriatic Sea to the Chinese Wall” became a new topic of discussion in Turkish policy circles. While Turkey tried to develop close political, economic and cultural relations with the newly independent Central Asian Republics, the mid and late 1990s witnessed a steady decline in the relations and failed to produce any concrete results. With its new foreign policy outlook, Turkey is seeking to increase its field of sphere in Central Asia by revitalizing its efforts to reconnect with the sister Turkish states. Security, economic cooperation, energy and civil society initiatives are the new dynamics of the Turkish-Central Asian relations

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argued that Iran was going to fill in this power gap in Central Asia, thereby becoming a regional center of power. The idea that there would be a major power struggle between the Russian Federation, Iran and Turkey began to circulate from research reports to comments by state officials.

As an attempt to counter Iranian role, the new “Turkish Model” was presented to the Central Asian states. The idea behind the promotion of this model was that Turkey’s secular and democratic political structure and its free market economy would set an example for the newly emerging republics. Thanks to the late President Turgut Özal’s dynamic approach to Turkey’s foreign policy, political and economic relations were established with the Central Asian Republics. The West’s offer of Turkey as a new model meant the recognition of Turkey’s Western identity in the aftermath of the Cold War era. The great enthusiasm generated by the feeling of proximity to these sister states led to promises which Turkey would not be able to keep in due course. The economic crises in the country in the 1990s and in 2001 prevented Turkey from deepening its economic ties in the region. Turkey’s interest in Central Asian countries also saw a rapid decline from the second half of the 1990s.

These years, namely the second half of the 1990s, when Turkey turned into itself, emerged as years of loss in the country’s foreign policy. Central Asia, a meaningful zone of security in the minds of Turkish foreign policy makers, ended up as a region getting farther from Turkey. The only successful initiatives launched in these years were made by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and civil society organizations.

### **Turkey’s New Policy**

The role designed for Turkey as a model and bridge country ended in failure. The circles that had put forward the thesis of a power gap this time began to say that the Russian Federation was the only country with real influence in the region. Particularly because Turkey’s agenda was filled with EU-related issues and because of its increasingly intense relations with the EU, some began commenting that Central Asia had been forgotten. However, Turkey saw positive change in the EU process with additional momentum in 1999. The major developments were the political and legal reforms and economic stability. These gains generated a highly self-confident approach to foreign policy. The geographical imaginations and aspirations of the country changed.

Turkish foreign policymakers began to see the regions, once perceived as centers of chaos and instability, as new areas of opportunity. Today, the Turkish policy makers are making serious evaluations of regional and global problems, which they once avoided. They even offer alternative ways for problems which have occupied a central place in regional and international politics. Both the rhetoric and practices in Turkish foreign policy have changed and, in result, a self-confident, active, dynamic and multi-dimensional foreign policy line emerged.

The zero-problem with neighboring countries policy followed over the last five years fixed, to a considerable extent, the problems with Turkey’s bordering neighbors. Turkey’s new

policy attitude put former bad neighborhood atmosphere aside and changed Turkey's regional profile for a more active role in neighboring areas. Namely, good neighborhood policy, which is similar to appropriation of EU's neighborhood policy, also facilitated Turkey's reaching beyond its immediate border regions. Turkey's borders remained same but the newly generated self confidence created a momentum in extending Turkey's sphere of influence, among others, in the Middle East, Gulf region and Central Asia. In the process, Turkey gained a strategic depth, and through his new vision in foreign policy, started acting with its new identity of a "central country", leaving behind the rhetoric of a "bridge country."

As Turkey makes progress on the EU road, its relations with other regions gain depth and influence. While moving towards the West, it is generating a sphere of influence in the East. With its new geographical aspiration, it has started following a foreign policy that validates regional and international legitimacy and aims to reconcile ethical principals with strategic interests. Within the context of this new strategy, the Central Asian region and the Caspian Basin stand out as a potential sphere of influence, in which Turkey seeks an active role. In a sense, Central Asia expanded the borders of the Middle East northward, introduced a new sense of depth for southern Asia, and connected the peoples of both West Asia and East Asia to the Eurasian region.

The newly emerging northern tier of the Middle East changed the Eurasian geopolitics and influenced neighboring regions. For example, the oil reserves of the Gulf cannot be thought apart from the resources of the Caspian Basin. As a result, the instable elements of the Middle East and south Asia find their way into Eurasia. The global tensions caused by the Iraq and Afghanistan crises impact this region, and the loose cooperation between Russia and China is not willing to leave out the Central Asian countries. The struggle of "color revolutions" and counter-color moves between Russia and the U.S. make Central Asian countries a battleground for global competition for power.

Turkey's policy toward Central Asia reflects the new characteristics of foreign policy line. Turkey pays serious attention to preserve good neighborhood policies with Iran and Russia, while attempting to prevent their policies that may harm the peace and stability in the region. Turkey's other priority in its policy on Central Asia is to make sure that these new states acquire the necessary abilities to establish stability and security at home. In this way, they may develop the capability of effectively coping with regional and domestic problems. In this regard, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TİKA) has played a crucial role. Turkey has provided funds to Central Asian countries since their independence. The funds are comparable to those allocated by European countries. TİKA's role has changed under the premises of new foreign policy vision. TİKA's diverse activities in various fields and substantial development aid are important in terms of demonstrating Turkey's vision of sharing its gains with the "relative" states and communities.

Turkey's new policy is also backed by civil societal activities. The impact of the new policy can be seen in the total performance of civil and official activities in Central Asia. Turkish businessmen, contractors and civil society organizations launched considerable number of

initiatives and projects in Central Asian states. President Abdullah Gül, for instance, was accompanied by the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB) and high number of businessmen during his visit to Turkmenistan in December 2007. Businessmen and civil society organizations are seen essential for Turkey's commitment to the stability and welfare of the region.

Turkey gained self-confidence to develop a more durable and constructive policy toward the Central Asia. Turkish policy makers see this new policy line in a wider framework of following balanced relations with regional countries like Russia, Iran, Pakistan, India and China and maintaining good relations with the U.S. and the European Union. Turkey facilitates good relations with regional and international actors to gain strategic depth in Central Asia through bilateral relations with the countries in the region. It is also pursuing a multi-dimensional policy line to become a key political and economical partner in the region.

Turkey's other priority is to transport energy resources of the region to world markets via its own territory. Turkish policy makers aim to make Turkey an energy hub to transport the rich energy reserves in the neighboring regions to world market. This new policy aims to secure and diversify oil and gas transportation to Europe. Turkey is an important actor for materializing the "East-West Energy Corridor", which has championed by the U.S. and later appropriated by the European Union. This project aims to connect Caspian region to the Mediterranean, bypassing Russian territory. The U.S. supported the alternate route to support Azerbaijan and Georgia for economic development and independence from Russian sphere of influence. The major development in this project has been the 1768 km long Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which was signed after long years of negotiation and rivalry between Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey and multi-national companies. BTC has a capacity of 1 million barrel per day and 50 million tones of oil per year. Turkey has ambitious gas pipeline projects, like Nabucco and Trans-Adriatic pipeline, for transporting Caspian and other gas reserves around the country to European markets. During his visit to India in February 2008, the Turkish foreign minister Ali Babacan offered a project of transporting oil from Turkey to India via Israel. There are agreements and ongoing feasibility studies for transportation oil and gas reserves of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to world markets.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Turkey's current policy toward Central Asia is more realistic and has reachable goals. It aims to create an environment of cooperation and eliminate regional power constellations. While Turkey's achievements are carried to the region by means of the state and civil society organizations, it prioritizes economic development and political stability in the Central Asian states. Marred by many factors of instability such as growing nuclear activities, international terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal immigration as well as international competition for domination, Turkey's policy towards Central Asia seeks to contribute to peace and stability. The recently growing number of mutual visits and the diversity of activities designed for the region are strong signs that Turkey's contributions to the region will continue. The following points should be kept in mind in Turkey's new policy toward the region.

- 1- Turkey should expect and facilitate investments from Central Asian countries to Turkey. For example, Kazakh businessmen looking for business opportunities in Turkey should be encouraged.
- 2- Turkey should develop a constructive dialog between Turkey, Central Asian states, the U.S. and Europe for political and economic reforms in Central Asia. This is a delicate issue and requires a long term strategy and planning.
- 3- Turkey's development aid should target the underdeveloped parts of the region, and TIKA should put more focus on joint cultural and educational projects in the developed areas.
- 4- The environmental and security concerns have made the long distance and cross-border pipelines a preferred option for oil and gas transportation. Turkey should take advantage of its geopolitical position to diversify and secure the transportation of Caspian energy reserves to world markets.
- 5- The major problem for Turkey's energy transport policy is to secure oil and gas supply. The BTC pipeline is currently operating at about 20 percent of its capacity. Turkey will need reserves to fill the projected pipelines and trans-Caspian pipeline projects for guaranteeing the flow of Kazak and Turkmen reserves.
- 6- For security and stability of the Central Asian region, regional cooperation and economic interdependence in the wider Eurasian region is a necessity. The ambitious pipeline projects should be planned as inclusive as possible to prevent sense of isolation in any major regional actor in the region.
- 7- Turkey should continue to avoid involving in any destructive rivalry. Turkish policy of minimizing problems with neighboring countries provides a constructive framework for developing relations with Russia and Iran, while competing with them in a number of areas.
- 8- Turkey should point out the strategic value of Turkey to the energy security of the EU. Turkey's policy of securing and diversifying transportation of the energy reserves to the EU should generate support within the EU for Turkey's membership process.