

TOWARDS A NEW TURKEY-NATO PARTNERSHIP IN CENTRAL ASIA

[TURKISH POLICY QUARTERLY]

VOLUME 5, NO. 2

Summer 2006

This article discusses the altered strategic environment facing Turkey and its NATO allies since the Cold War. It reviews these countries' recent relationship with Russia and Central Asian states and recommends policies that could promote Turkey's transformation from strategic barrier to bridge in Eurasia.

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The general congruence of objectives between Russia, Turkey, and other NATO countries in Central Asia establishes the foundation for building a new geopolitical relationship to replace the obsolete Cold War framework. Although tensions will persist, Turkey, its NATO allies, and Russia all desire to promote peace and security in the region, ensure access to its energy supplies, pursue commercial relations with local businesses, and curb human and narcotics trafficking. A new partnership would help consummate Turkey's transformation from barrier to bridge between NATO and Eurasia.

The New Strategic Environment

During the Cold War, several factors integrated Turkey into the Western alliance. A pro-Western elite, which dominated the country's foreign and defense policies, viewed Turkey's affiliation with NATO as defining and ensuring its status as a core member of the Western camp. The alliance simultaneously defended Turkey against the Warsaw Pact and benefited from Ankara's efforts to deter Soviet adventurism. The episodic confrontations between Turkey and fellow alliance member Greece over Cyprus, the Aegean, and other issues actually served to underscore NATO's additional value in moderating differences between Athens and Ankara. Although firm Soviet control over Central Asia ensured political stability, it severely limited Turkey's contacts with the region.

The last decade has seen the collapse of these Cold War pillars. A number of societal actors - including ethnic lobbies, business associations, influential civilian politicians, a

resurgent religious establishment, as well as the general public - now exerts considerable influence on Turkish decision making. They have pushed for major departures from the status quo even in sensitive areas of Turkey's foreign and defense policy. NATO countries no longer worry about a possible military confrontation with Moscow. EU members have become preoccupied with organizational reform, economic restructuring, and integrating recent members. Efforts to develop a European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) distinct from NATO have presented challenges for Turkey due to its limited influence on EU decision making. In addition, many Europeans evince continued reluctance to consummate Turkey's long-discussed entry into the EU. They characterize the accession negotiations that formally began in October 2005 as a decade-long process that might not lead to full membership even if Turkey completes them successfully. Elsewhere, the war in Iraq has substantially weakened Turkish-American security ties. The Soviet Union's disintegration has created, if not a power vacuum, then at least an extremely fluid geopolitical environment in Central Asia.

Turkey and Central Asia

Turks have substantial cultural, historical, ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties with Central Asians, but the Cold War severely limited direct contact. After the USSR's collapse in the early 1990s, some Turks- animated by "Turanism" (Turanlýk), "pan-Turkism" (Türkçülük), and "Neo-Ottomanism"-believed they could exploit these connections, along with Turkey's proximity to Central Asia and its affiliation with Western institutions, to establish a leading presence in the region. Public officials and private groups, especially those espousing Islamist and nationalist ideologies, began to provide substantial technical assistance to the region. Important development mechanisms included the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (created in 1992 under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Foreign Economic Relations Board (an association of bilateral business councils), and other institutions. Turkey also established direct air flights and satellite broadcasts to Central Asian countries, offered thousands of scholarships for Central Asian students in Turkey, and took additional steps to broaden cultural ties. Furthermore, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, President Turgut Özal, and other influential Turks occasionally spoke of forming a commonwealth of Turkic peoples or an association of independent Turkic states.

It soon became apparent, however, that Turkey lacked the resources to compete for regional influence at the level of Russia or China. Although Americans and Europeans eagerly promoted Turkey as a model for Central Asia's newly independent states, Western governments provided little support for Turkish efforts. Central Asian leaders may have found it useful at times to declare their affinity with Turkey, but they dedicated most attention towards moving closer to foreign countries with greater international influence and resources, especially Russia, China, and the United States. As a result, the agenda of the annual "Turkic summits" soon came to be dominated by cultural issues rather than political or security questions. The Central Asian governments refused to take even largely symbolic steps such as recognizing the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus." After several frustrating years, Turkish leaders refocused their attention

elsewhere, especially towards their complex relations with the EU, the threatening situation in Iraq, and constructing a new Turkey-Russia relationship.

Major Improvements in Turkish-Russian Relations

Partly thanks to skillful Turkish diplomacy, ties between Ankara and Moscow have strengthened considerably in recent years. Despite differences over Armenia, Chechnya, and other security issues, both governments have cooperated to combat terrorist threats and support post-conflict stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. Earlier this year, the Turkish and Russian navies agreed on a joint initiative (entitled "Operation Black Sea Harmony") to counter mutual maritime threats. Bilateral commerce and investment have soared due to Russia's role as Turkey's major energy supplier, the millions of Russian tourists who visit Turkey, and the extensive role of Turkish contractors in several sectors of the Russian economy, especially construction. With an annual volume of 15 billion dollars in 2005 (up from 1.5 billion dollars in 1991), Russia has become Turkey's second largest trading partner after Germany. When President Vladimir Putin visited Turkey in December 2004, he and Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer signed six cooperation agreements in the areas of energy, finance, and security.

In June 2006, Sezer met Putin again in Moscow. Their conversation centered on energy collaboration. Russia currently supplies more than half of Turkey's natural gas, as well as 20 percent of its oil. Most of the gas deliveries pass through a convoluted pipeline that traverses Moldova, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria. Starting in February 2003, the two countries began using a new direct "Blue Stream" dual pipeline, which runs under the Black Sea. At the November 2005 ceremony celebrating its official opening, Putin announced that Russia and Turkey would discuss extending Blue Stream to Greece, Italy, Israel, and possibly other countries. The Russian energy company Gazprom is now exploring with Turkish officials and firms the possibility of constructing large underground gas storage sites in Turkey and a liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminal at Ceyhan. This port already receives oil deliveries by pipeline from Iraq. While frictions have arisen between Turkey and Russia over which country should assume the lead role in supplying Central Asian gas to European importers, both countries have overlapping interests in expanding this market. For instance, the creation of a "South European Gas Ring" would enable Russia to deliver gas to Europe without having to traverse Ukrainian territory. From Ankara's perspective, it would provide Turkey with millions of dollars in transit fees, reduce tanker traffic through the congested Bosphorus Straits, and help transform the country from a conduit to an energy hub for the entire eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey and Russia also have parallel regional security interests. For instance, they share the belief that other NATO countries, particularly the United States, have paid insufficient attention to their concerns in Iraq and Iran. In Central Asia, Turkish and Russian interests converge more than they differ. Both countries seek to reduce terrorism (especially by sharing intelligence), increase oil and gas production, and curb human and narcotics trafficking. Unlike some more distant governments, Turkey and Russia also desire to limit disruptive political upheavals in Central Asia and neighboring regions

given the risks of such chaos spilling across their borders. Moreover, the independent policies Ankara has pursued towards Iraq and other issues presumably have lessened Moscow's concerns about Turkey serving as an anti-Russian stalking-horse for Western interests in the region.

Advancing NATO's Ties with Russia and Central Asia

Other NATO countries should encourage Turkey's leaders to avoid seeing their growing ties with Russia, Central Asia, and possibly Iran as a kind of "Eurasian strategic alternative." By helping sustain good relations between NATO and Russia, Turkish officials could also promote cooperation among all three parties. A recent example of such beneficial collaboration occurred in December 2005, when these governments agreed that the Turkish International Academy Against Drugs and Organized Crime would expand its training programs in Central Asia as part of a NATO-Russian initiative.

NATO began developing contacts with Central Asian governments in the mid-1990s, when most of them joined the alliance's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and its related Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. These institutions have enabled NATO and former Soviet bloc countries to undertake joint initiatives on a range of issues, including military interoperability, defense conversion and reform, Internet connectivity, as well as management of natural disasters and other emergencies. Two recent developments have augmented NATO's interests and activities in Central Asia. First, since the alliance has offered full membership to most East European countries, promoting military reform and cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus have become the main residual focus of the PfP program. Second, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan resulted in a substantial increase in NATO's regional military presence. Former NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson, who visited the region in 2003, said that the events of 9/11 have led the alliance to appreciate "that our security is linked closely to security in remote areas. Central Asia is now going to be very much part of NATO's agenda." When the alliance took charge of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in August 2003, NATO representatives negotiated military transit agreements and other supportive arrangements with neighboring Central Asian governments. At their June 2004 Istanbul summit, NATO governments designated Central Asia, along with the Caucasus, as an area of "special focus." They also decided to establish a Special Representative for Central Asia and station a permanent liaison officer in the region (Tugay Tuncer of Turkey).

During the last several years, however, the perceived involvement of NATO countries in promoting democratic "color" revolutions in the former Soviet Union has led Central Asian leaders to curtail the activities of Western-sponsored non-governmental organizations. Even the once popular Western military presence in Eurasia has become suspect. The alliance's surging military presence in the region after September 2001 reduced Turkey's intermediary role between Central Asia and the West. Now that NATO's relations with some local governments have deteriorated, Ankara's value for both sets of partners should rise accordingly.

Turkey is well-positioned to fulfill this bridging function between its NATO allies and Eurasia. Although many influential Turks recognize that Central Asia's authoritarian governments eventually should become more democratic, Ankara has taken a measured approach towards promoting political reforms in the region. During the 2005 disorders in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, for instance, the Turkish government called on all parties to uphold both civil liberties and public order. Central Asian leaders tend to view Turkey's activities more favorably than those of other Western countries seen as more directly promoting Eurasia's "colored" revolutions. Turks have also provided substantial advice, observers, and other assistance to Central Asian elections. Turkey's NATO ties, democratic regime, moderate Muslim population, and limited financial and other resources-which temper any ambitions of regional hegemony-further enhance its influence in Central Asia. These appealing attributes have enabled Turkey to become an influential participant in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). In late 2004, the OIC elected a Turkish national as its Secretary General for the first time. The value of this connection for NATO became evident in February 2002, when Istanbul hosted an unprecedented joint OIC-EU meeting. The 72 countries attending issued a communiqué affirming Turkey's "readiness to facilitate communication among the participating countries and organizations."

Turkey could even play a role in helping reconcile Uzbekistan (presumably under a different government) and other NATO countries. Ankara has had complex relations with Uzbekistan since its independence. After the USSR's collapse, Uzbekistan was the only Central Asian government to have Turkey, rather than Russia, represent its interests abroad. In the late 1990s, relations deteriorated after the main political opponent of Uzbek President Islam Karimov took refuge in Turkey. In December 2003, relations improved when the two governments signed an accord that deepened their economic ties and joint efforts against terrorism. Even after the Uzbek government's May 2005 crackdown at Andijan, Turkey has continued to provide training and equipment to its military and internal security forces

The military ties between Turkey and Central Asia could help promote peace both within the region and elsewhere. During the past two decades, the Turkish armed forces have participated in many peacekeeping missions conducted under the auspices of NATO, the OSCE, and the United Nations. Their contributions have included a 700-man battalion to the SFOR operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a 1,000-man battalion to the KFOR mission in Kosovo, and smaller contingents to missions in East Timor, Georgia, Macedonia, and Somalia. These diverse experiences have prepared the Turkish military to lead future peacekeeping missions in Central Asia-either to stop a conflict between two countries or a civil war within one. The Turkish armed forces can also help generate Central Asian support for peacekeeping operations and humanitarian interventions elsewhere, which would advance NATO's goal of strengthening Central Asian militaries' professionalism and effectiveness. Although Central Asian governments initially expressed interest in participating in such missions, the subsequent increase in local terrorism resulted in their concentrating national military resources at home to counter local threats.

Closer cooperation between NATO and Turkey in Eurasia could also help improve their own troubled ties. Ironically, while other alliance members have become increasingly concerned about promoting stability in Turkey's neighborhood, the end of the shared Soviet threat has raised doubts among Turks about NATO's continued commitment to their security. In 1990, Germany and several other allied governments evinced a clear reluctance to defend Turkey should Iraq attack it-calling into question the presumed (if not legally obligatory) strength of NATO's Article 5 collective security guarantee.

Despite these divergences, Turkey still contributes substantially to promoting Western security interests in Central Asia. The Turkish government has established bilateral assistance programs with most regional intelligence, defense, and law enforcement agencies. It also has become heavily involved in PfP projects in Central Asia. In Afghanistan, the Turkish military has twice assumed command of ISAF and has contributed over one thousand troops to the post-conflict stabilization mission. Turkish firms have been very active in the country's transportation and construction sectors (including helping build the new U.S. Embassy in Kabul). Turkey's assistance also helps limit the spread of terrorism and organized crime to Central Asia and other countries from Afghanistan.

Developing NATO-SCO Contacts

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as one of Central Asia's most important multilateral institutions. It presently includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as full members. India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan have observer status. Cooperation against "terrorism" (broadly defined) has become the institution's priority, centered on the Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. SCO members also have undertaken joint initiatives to combat narcotics trafficking and organized crime, including by establishing a joint working group with Afghanistan.

Opposition from Russia, China, and other SCO governments presently precludes Washington from obtaining formal membership or observer status in the organization. In contrast, SCO members might allow Turkey to join because of its long-standing ties to Central Asia, dramatically improved relations with Russia, and growing contacts with China. Ankara has expressed interest in developing ties with the SCO given its problematic relations with Brussels and Washington. Turkey's entry into the SCO would make Ankara the only member of both the SCO and NATO, reaffirming its role as a geopolitical bridge. It also could help prevent the organization's transformation into an anti-American bloc or a concert of hostile anti-democratic states. For example, the Turkish government could invite U.S. and other NATO observers to attend any session it sponsors. This practice would follow the precedent set at the July 2005 SCO summit in Astana, when host Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, then SCO chairman, invited senior officials from India, Iran, and Pakistan to participate as "guests of the chairman." Although these countries became formal SCO observers at the summit, Afghan representatives have participated in several SCO meetings (e.g., President Hamid Karzai attended the June 2004 summit in Tashkent) without gaining such status.

Deepening Turkey-EU Cooperation Through Central Asia

From the perspective of Turkey-EU relations, enhanced Turkish-NATO cooperation in Central Asia would highlight Ankara's ability to promote Western interests in the region. Turkey's pivotal geographic location already makes it an important pro-European force in Central Asia. It lies at the crossroads of Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, making it a pathway for sharing products and ideas between these regions. For instance, accelerating the Nabucco pipeline project represents the most plausible way for the EU to diversify its source of natural gas imports. According to current plans, this proposed pipeline will begin carrying gas from the Middle East and Central Asia through Turkey in 2011. Expanding Blue Stream could also help overcome future disruptions in the Russian-controlled gas pipeline traversing Ukraine. Furthermore, geography requires EU countries to work closely with Ankara to counter the illicit flow of narcotics and people from Central Asia into Europe. Broader cooperation with Turkey in Central Asia would effectively extend the reach of the EU's European Neighborhood Policy, which currently excludes the region.

Turkey's formal entry into the EU would enable the institution's current members to become more influential strategic players in the region. Despite EU members' heightened interest in countering Central Asian terrorism after the 9/11 attacks, which engendered a tremendous increase in European bilateral and multilateral development aid to the region, the European Union has remained a marginal actor in Central Asian security affairs. Its stated objectives include eliminating sources of conflict and terrorism such as environmental degradation, economic underdevelopment, and disputes over water and other natural resources. The EU also seeks to counter illicit trafficking in narcotics, weapons, and people. But the organization's main focus remains developing the region's energy and transportation routes, expanding opportunities for trade and investment, and promoting political, economic, and social reforms.

The EU's futile campaign last year to persuade the Uzbek government to permit an independent investigation of the Andijan events has made clear its limited influence in Central Asia. In addition, the governments of Russia and Central Asia hesitate to cooperate with the EU even on antiterrorism because they accuse its members of employing "double standards." They feel more comfortable working with Turkey because of Ankara's broader interpretation of terrorist threats. If the EU were to participate in peacekeeping missions in Central Asia, the Turkish armed forces would probably assume a major role given their large size relative to other EU militaries, substantial experience participating in international peacekeeping missions, and Turkey's proximity and extensive security interests in the region.

Promoting Regional Prosperity

Turkey's status as a major hub for NATO-Central Asian commerce is most evident in the energy sector. To diversify the country's sources of supply, Turkish officials have sought to increase purchases of oil and natural gas from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan-primarily by constructing additional energy pipelines that bypass Russia.

Central Asian governments, hoping to reduce their own dependence on Russian-controlled pipelines, have supported this endeavor, which has been heavily backed by Azerbaijan and the United States. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (which officially opened in May 2005), the South Caucasus Pipeline (which will ship natural gas from Baku through Tbilisi to Erzurum once completed later this year), and other pipelines could substantially expand the range of energy flows reaching Turkey and other European countries in the future. The Turkish economic slowdown in the early 2000s has delayed some expansion efforts, but the recent surge in world energy prices, if sustained, should reaffirm Turkey's status as a "natural energy bridge" between the supplier countries to its east and international energy markets.

Turkey's small businesses and merchants have developed a substantial presence in other sectors of the Central Asian economy, especially banking, construction, telecommunications, trade, and textiles. Turkey's citizens have invested approximately 3.5 billion dollars in the region. In Kyrgyzstan, Turkish investors supply the second largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI), with a heavy presence in construction (including at the coalition air base at Manas International Airport), banking, and food processing. Western companies are increasingly using Turkey as a regional hub for operations in Central Asia. Working with Turkish subsidiaries has enabled these firms to reduce their costs while leveraging Turkey's valuable human resources, including Turkish managers' linguistic, cultural, and other expertise.

Conclusion

Eurasia's current geopolitical environment presents both challenges and opportunities for Turkey and its NATO allies. Many of the old pillars that provided the foundation for the Cold War alliance among these countries have weakened or collapsed. Yet, the new situation in Central Asia could enable Turkey to play a crucial role in helping NATO promote peace and prosperity in an increasingly important region. A restructured alliance partnership would help consummate Turkey's transformation from a barrier to a bridge between NATO and Eurasia. In particular, Turkey could help sustain ties between NATO and the other institutions and countries (especially Russia) active in Central Asia, highlight Turkey's value as a potential EU member by promoting EU goals in the region, and contribute to the welfare of the people of Central Asia, Europe, and Turkey itself.

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