



Feature Article
February 15, 2022

The Dawn of Turan: Eurasian Opportunity and Challenge for Turkey

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Turkey is eager to exploit the opportunity to enhance its influence among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, and sees the “emergence of a new geostrategic force in the heart of Eurasia.” But it wants to avoid provoking a reaction from Russia, preferring to advance pan-Turkism without the grandiose rhetoric of the 1990s, and professing a faith in Eurasian multilateralism that in appearance defers to Russia. Yet this may change. Ultimately, how assertive Turkey will become in Central Asia depends on how wounded Russia will emerge from the Ukraine war.

The rediscovery, more than a century ago, of Central Asia, also known as Turkestan, provided the new nation of Turkey with a foundational identity. In fact, the Ottomans had sought to maintain their relationship with Turkestan. In the 16th century, the empire established a western-eastern axis with the Uzbek khanates against the common enemy, Safavid Persia. The Ottomans



*Flags of the Members of the Organization of Turkic States.
Courtesy of the Organization of Turkic States.*

provided the Uzbeks with military support. Ottoman admiral Seydi Ali Reis, on return from India and battles against the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, took the way over Central Asia; in his memoirs he related how the Janissaries that had

been sent to the Uzbeks had distinguished themselves. Uzbek emissaries to Constantinople pleaded for a continuation of the military

cooperation, but the Ottoman interest remained limited to times of war with Persia. In any case, the Russian advance into the Caucasus severed the Ottoman link to Central Asia. It was not until three hundred years later that Ottoman military officers reappeared in Central Asia, this time to counter Russia. The Ottomans took Yakup Beg and his short-lived East Turkestan state under their wings. In the 1870s, Ottoman military instructors were sent to his service. But the Ottomans also saw Central Asia as the solution to their own existential crisis.

As the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, the historical heartland of the empire, the Balkans – from where most of its elite hailed – was irrevocably lost. The intellectual and political elite – dominated by ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, and Bosnians – in its existential agony turned its gaze toward the east, discovering or rather inventing a new, imperial-national allegiance for itself. Turkestan was the heart of a new-old Turkish homeland, Turan, which spanned Eurasia from Crimea and Kazan, birthplaces of pan-Turkism, to China. The Caucasus was its gateway. “The fatherland was Turan, not the Ottoman Empire,” wrote Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, a leading intellectual during the early years of the Turkish republic. Aydemir described how as a young student he, like many others in his generation at the beginning of the 20th century, was swept along by the allure of Turan, which was so much more expansive than the crumbling Ottoman state. “The Turkish nation did not begin with the Ottoman state,”

adolescents like Aydemir were taught, with the implication that neither was it destined to disappear with the Ottomans.

The dream of Turan as an empire of substitution nonetheless proved short-lived. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, always the political realist, shut the door to imperial adventures, concentrating on building a smaller but secure nation-state in Anatolia. Yet Atatürk the intellectual never lost sight of Central Asia, the cradle – according to him, not only of the Turkish nation and of its forerunners in Anatolia like the Hittites, but of civilization. His rival, the adventurist former Ottoman war minister Enver Pasha nevertheless pursued the dream of Turan to its bitter end: undeterred by the Ottoman failure to expel Russia from the Caucasus, he charged on toward Central Asia, meeting his death in Tajikistan 1922 in a Red Army ambush. The idea of Turan was briefly revived during the Second World War, when for a while it seemed that Nazi Germany was going to defeat the Soviet Union, opening up a new possibility for Turkey to link up with Turan. That moment arrived when the Soviet empire disintegrated 1991, and it was fitting that Turkey became the first country to recognize the independence of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states.

“Having rejected Mecca, and being rejected by Brussels, Turkey seized the opportunity opened up by the dissolution of the Soviet Union to turn toward Tashkent,” wrote Samuel Huntington.¹ President Turgut Özal and his successor

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72 no. 3, 1993, p. 42.

Süleyman Demirel held out the vision of a community of Turkic peoples stretching “from the Adriatic to the Wall of China.” Yet as Huntington pointed out, this was not merely a romantic dream but it also spoke of a desire to counter Iran and Saudi Arabia from expanding their influence and promoting Islamic radicalism in the region. And furthermore, Turkey hoped to contain the resurgence of Russian influence. But ultimately it was not Tashkent but Brussels that beckoned for Ankara: at the end of the day, its opening to Central Asia was intended to bolster Turkey’s bid for EU membership, by demonstrating that Turkey could serve as a bridge between the West and former Soviet lands to the east, and be an antidote to religious radicalism there. Today, Turkish analysts agree that the 1990s was a “romantic” phase during which Turkey both overestimated its own resources and underestimated Russia’s staying power in a region with which it in fact had little if any familiarity. Once again, the dream of Turan had proved to be a mirage.

Yet it was not only Russia’s reassertion of its influence, its application of pressure and inducements that pushed Central Asia to the background in Turkish foreign policy. While the Central Asians were attentive to Russia and generally swung back to their former imperial master, stressing the need for “balanced” relationships, Turkey itself increasingly turned its attention to the West – in its case Brussels – obtaining candidate status with the EU 1999. And after the Islamic conservative Justice and Development

Party (AKP) rose to power 2002, Turkey followed a dual track, pursuing first the EU membership goal and later the role of Sunni leadership in the Middle East. Both goals were to prove elusive, and with the latter abandoned altogether, the conclusion seems foregone that Turkey now seeks to compensate by seeking influence and economic gains in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. The “Islamic card and talk of Muslim unity no longer work” and are being replaced by Turkish nationalism, remarks Hüseyin Bağcı, head of Ankara-based Foreign Policy Institute.²

Indeed, in terms of ideology Turkey’s pivot to Central Asia is underpinned by the ascent of nationalists in the state establishment. Obviously, these have always been preeminent in the Turkish state, but their grip has become even stronger since President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2015 turned to the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and its leader Devlet Bahçeli as an ally. Fresh *ülküçü* cadres (right-wing nationalists) have filled the void after the Islamist Gülenists, on whom Erdoğan first relied to exercise power – but who were purged from the state after their 2016 attempt to overthrow Erdoğan. Erdoğan also relies on *ulusalcı* (left-wing nationalist) cadres that are particularly strong in the military. Both *ülküçü* and *ulusalcı* nationalists have an emotional attachment to Turkic unity and to Central Asia as the cradle of Turkish culture and civilization. Yet in contrast to the 1990s when pan-Turkic emotions ran high, Turkish officials and analysts today make a point of avoiding

² Stefan Hedlund, “Turkey’s Push for Greater Influence in Central Asia,” GIS Reports, April 9, 2021.

(<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/turkey-central-asia/>)

romanticism and illusions; they point out that Turkic unity is still hampered by important divisions between the Turkic states in Central Asia, that very little headway has until recently been made in terms of political cooperation and above all that the potential for economic cooperation, great as it is, nonetheless remains seriously underdeveloped. It is still Russia and of course China that enjoy the upper hand in Central Asia. A case in point is the customs union that Russia has established within the Eurasian Economic Union with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Armenia and which has put Turkey in an even more disadvantaged position. As Cengiz Buyar, historian at the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University remarks, Turkey has lost market shares in to Russia in these countries after increases of up to forty percent in customs duties.³ Developing trade is Turkey's highest priority. Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu emphasizes that the opportunity that the Middle Corridor offers must be used to remove the obstacles to transportation and trade.⁴

The gateway to Central Asia is Azerbaijan, the Turkic country with which Turkey has developed the deepest relationship. Ultimately, it is Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war 2020 that makes a Turkish new opening to Central Asia viable in the first place with the projected Nakhichevan-Zangezur

corridor. Indeed, Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan is not only the key to Central Asia; it also provides a model for how Turkey's future relations with the Turkic states of Central Asia may evolve when mutual economic interests and security needs of the latter converge to create a Turkic cooperative synergy. While the countries of Turan offer Turkey economic opportunities, Turkey has in turn demonstrated that it has the capacity to attend to their security needs. Moreover, the dynamic of the Turkish-Azerbaijani relationship illustrates how other Turkic countries' needs and empowerment affect Turkey's own foreign policy. A particularly telling case in point was when Turkey's courting of Armenia in 2008-10, which clashed with the interests of Azerbaijan, was subsequently abandoned. Indeed, the impact that the rise of Azerbaijan as a Turkic mid-size power has had on Turkey's foreign policy identity should not be underestimated. Just as the notion of Turkic unity did not originate in Ottoman Turkey but in Tsarist Russia (in Kazan, Crimea and Azerbaijan,) similarly the political-intellectual groundwork for Turkic cooperation, into which Turkey is effectively being pulled, has been laid outside Turkey. Indeed, the Turks do not pretend otherwise; they recognize Nursultan Nazarbayev as the "father of Turkic unity" as well as the crucial role played by Heydar Aliyev, who coined "one nation, two states" as the foundational principle of the relationship between

³ Cengiz Buyar, "Yükselen bir değer olarak Asya ve Türkiye'nin rolü," *Anadolu Ajansı*, April 14, 2021.

⁴ "Mevlüt Cavusoglu: "Geopolitical problems create new opportunities for the Middle Corridor,"

Azreport.az, August 2, 2022. (<https://report.az/en/infrastructure/mevlut-cavusoglu-geopolitical-problems-create-new-opportunities-for-the-middle-corridor/>)

Azerbaijan and Turkey. Today, this principle has been expanded to “one nation, two states acting as one state,” demonstrated during the Second Karabakh war and subsequently enshrined in the strategic alliance of Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Similarly, the strategic partnership between Kazakhstan and Turkey, which was concluded in 2022, speaks of the deepening relationship between the two states. While Kazakh-Turkish relations have for long remained strikingly underdeveloped in terms of trade and investments, there is now a strong commitment to develop the political-strategic dimension, which has economic implications, with the co-production of drones.

Former president Nursultan Nazarbayev is held in particular esteem in Turkey for two reasons. First, the initiative that Nazarbayev took in 2015 to defuse the crisis between Russia and Turkey that followed on Turkey’s downing of a Russian fighter jet on the Turkish-Syrian border is recognized as having been crucial in averting a threatening escalation.⁵ Second, Nazarbayev’s demonstration of solidarity with the Turkish government after the 2016 coup attempt – when Turkey’s Western allies conspicuously withheld any such expressions of solidarity – earned Ankara’s lasting gratitude.

Turkey attaches a particular value to developing its relationship with Uzbekistan, which was

deep-frozen during the presidency of Islam Karimov, who distrusted Turkey ideologically. This is the case not least because of the central place that Uzbekistan occupies in the history of Turkic civilization. Turkey anticipates that the relationship is set to evolve further with the realization of the middle corridor, which will offer Uzbekistan a new route to Western markets. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are also, alongside Kazakhstan, becoming markets for Turkish military technology. Indeed, the military dimension in Turkey’s commitment to Central Asia at a time of great geopolitical upheaval in Eurasia has potentially far-reaching implications for Turkey’s Eurasian strategy and orientations. It raises the question whether and to what extent Turkey can reconcile its advances and initiatives in Central Asia with its overarching Eurasian strategy.

As the academic Mehmet Yüce euphemistically notes in a recent report from the Turkish pro-government think-tank SETA, Russia’s “new foreign policy that is being displayed in Ukraine” is one reason that has impelled Kazakhstan to seek strategic partnership and deeper relations with Turkey.⁶ However, its failure in Central Asia in the 1990s taught Turkey not to disregard Russia. With this failure in mind, success in the region is deemed possible only with Moscow’s tacit acquiescence. This was mostly true before the Ukraine war, which changed balances and perceptions on

⁵ See Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Kazakhstan’s Role in International Mediation under First President Nursultan Nazarbayev*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, November 2020.

(<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13397>)

⁶ Mehmet Yüce, *Türkiye’nin Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Üyeleriyle İkili İlişkileri*, SETA, 2022, p. 16. (<https://www.setav.org/rapor-turkiyenin-turk-devletleri-teskilati-uyeleriyle-ikili-iliskileri/>)

how much one must defer to Moscow. But Burhanettin Duran, director of SETA and an advisor to President Erdoğan, still argues that “Turkey and Azerbaijan stand to benefit from pursuing a balanced policy in the competition between the West and Russia.”⁷ Russia’s stance during the Second Karabakh war represented an “interesting example of the harmony between the Turkish and Russian worlds,” states Fırat Purtaş, the author of another recent report from SETA.⁸ Ankara, writes Purtaş, “has not pursued a strategy in its relations with the Turkic states that challenges Moscow.” This is manifestly not accurate when it comes to Azerbaijan. For Turkey to militarily insert itself in the Caucasus definitely challenged Moscow, just as it did in Syria and Libya, but it did so in a way that would offer Moscow a way to accept Turkey’s presence. In this context, the fact that Turkey, while a member of NATO, is overtly acting in a way that opposes Western hegemony is the major change that allows Moscow to accept, though reluctantly, a Turkish presence. Today, Turkish presence in the Caucasus or Central Asia is not an extension of Western presence, and this is what makes it acceptable to Russia – which is also why Russia does not want to worsen its relationship with Ankara even though it encroaches on Russian interests.

Turkish pro-government academics are eager to reassure that Turkey “is sensitive to Russia’s

interests” and that it “acts in harmony with the multi-dimensional foreign policy strategies of the Turkic states.” This is an inversion of what transpired in the 1990s: what then proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to Turkey’s ambitions – the fact that the Central Asian states privileged maintaining their close relations with Russia – is now viewed as something that on the contrary makes it possible for Turkey to become involved in Central Asia, and to reconcile its Turkic and larger Eurasian ambitions. The academic Yüce notes that the sensitive military, political and economic projects that are envisioned within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States “have the potential to draw the attention or provoke the reaction of third parties.”⁹ He suggests that the reactions of third parties will be mitigated if these projects are instead launched bi- or trilaterally among the Turkic states, and appropriated by the Organization of Turkic states at a later stage.

What has fundamentally changed since the 1990s is that the nationalist Turkish state establishment has increasingly come to see Russia as a balancing factor against the West, if not as a geopolitical partner. While it may still be a rival – in Eurasia, the Middle East and North Africa – Russia is no longer seen as an enemy. Since the end of the Cold War, the idea of a strategic realignment has gained considerable traction among the Turkish

⁷ Burhanettin Duran, “Yeni Jeopolitikte Ankara ve Bakü’nün imkânları,” *Sabah*, October 21, 2022.

⁸ Fırat Purtaş, *Krizleri Fırsata Dönüştüren İş Birliği: Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı*, SETA, 2022, p. 21. (Krizleri Fırsata Dönüştüren İş Birliği: Türk Devletleri)

⁹ Mehmet Yüce, *Türkiye’nin Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Üyeleriyle İkili İlişkileri*, SETA, 2022, p. 34. (<https://www.setav.org/rapor-turkiyenin-turk-devletleri-teskilati-uyeleriyle-ikili-iliskileri/>)

state elite. The secularist-progressive nationalists in particular have since the early 2000s seen Russia as a partner in resisting Western global hegemony. The right-wing nationalists on the other hand have traditionally feared and resented Russia. But the perception of a manifest hostility of the United States toward Turkey – with the U.S. supporting the Kurdish militants in Syria that are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, (PKK) which has waged an insurgency against Turkey since 1984 – has changed the geopolitical perceptions also of the right-wing nationalists. But under the shadow of a war in Ukraine to which no end is in sight, “balancing” Russian interests against Central Asian interests that no longer by definition align with those of Russia, is an unexpected, and likely difficult, challenge for Turkey.

Having acted on the assumption that its increased involvement in Central Asia could and should be carried out in harmony with Russia, the fact that Russia's “big brother attitude” has become cause for growing concern for the Turkic states – in particular for Kazakhstan – is vexing for Turkey. The analyses of pro-government Turkish academics suggests that Turkey, although it will help bolster the defenses of the Central Asian states, does not envision pan-Turkic political cooperation taking on a pro-Western, and certainly not anti-Russian role. “The Turkic states defend multi-polarity against the global hegemony of the United States, give priority to strengthening their own sovereignties and seek to prevent global and regional conflicts from spreading to them,” writes the academic Firat Purtaş of SETA. But this makes no sense –

Western hegemony is not an issue for these states, who want more, not less, western presence to counterbalance Russia and China. Nonetheless, this line of reasoning does suggest that the ideologues of the Turkish regime perceive Turkey's relationship to Central Asia in the same light as its relationship with Russia: as a strategic diversification, an antidote to Western hegemony. This, of course, represents a dramatic shift compared to the 1990s, when Turkey promoted the idea of itself as Central Asia's bridge to the West.

Meanwhile, there is a keen awareness that the strategic environment of the Central Asian states is fraught with dangers that make a closer Turkic cooperation – and importantly, equidistance to the rival great powers – imperative. Listing the threats to Central Asia's stability, Purtaş observes that “Russia's aggressive policies, the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, Iran's expansionist Shiite geopolitics, China's increasing influence in also the western part of Turkestan after Eastern Turkestan and the ambition of the United States to turn the Turkic world into a new frontline in the confrontation with Russia and China impel the member states of the Organization of Turkic States to closer political and security cooperation.” Inevitably, this will require a serious and lasting commitment to Central Asia by Turkey.

Turkey is eager to exploit the opportunity to enhance its influence among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, and sees the “emergence of a new geostrategic force in the heart of Eurasia.” But it wants to avoid provoking a reaction from Russia, preferring to advance pan-Turkism without the

grandiose rhetoric of the 1990s, and professing a faith in Eurasian multilateralism that in appearance defers to Russia. Yet this may change. Ultimately, how assertive Turkey will become in Central Asia depends on how wounded Russia will emerge from the Ukraine war.

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