

ISSUES IN TURKEY'S POST-SOVIET POLICY

Turkey may feel comfortable in its position of regional power. However, this rise requires that Ankara direct its attention to the post-Soviet area. Traditional rivalry with Russia and normalization of relations in the Caucasus region will present the most important obstacles for engagement with post-Soviet nations. This all comes at a time of significant change in regional dynamics, affecting neighboring states and their regional strategies. In order to reach out to the post-Soviet space, Turkey will have to direct economic resources and political commitments to the region, which is dominated by Russia and China. Nevertheless, with the involvement of Iran, India, and Pakistan in Central Asia, the cost of neglecting the regional participation will be high for Ankara.

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Turkey and Russia are rivals. They have historically been so, and there are only a handful of examples when the two cooperated. These instances were born more of necessity and rarely resulted in credible alignment. Geographic proximity and competitive ambitions ensure permanent balancing relations. The Black Sea was the point of contact during imperial times, the Cold War, and continues to be so in the latest round in the strategic narratives contest.

Marked coolness in the relationship between the two regional powers since late 2015 has highlighted the importance of the post-Soviet space where the two states have opposing views. Beyond Syria and the Balkans, there was never an agreement on how to deal with the conflicting issues of North and South Caucasus, Central Asia and now Ukraine.

In each of the cases, incompatible visions resulted in extending support to opposing factions. In Georgia, during its brief conflict with Russia in 2008, Ankara did not openly confront Moscow but indicated support for Tbilisi.¹ In the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh the choice has been consistent and vocal support for Baku.² In Ukraine, Kiev has been Turkey's organic choice. In all of these circumstances, Moscow was on the other side, directly or indirectly opposing Ankara.

An unspoken narrative that guides the politics of the two neighboring powers after the Cold War has been avoiding direct confrontation with each other and letting the economy do the rest. By building stable and interdependent economic relations, both states avoid a path of dangerous descent into the chaos of a strategic security standoff. Turkey and Russia fought numerous wars with each other while they were both empires.³ The most destructive of these wars were fought during times of major systemic shifts in the balance of power, be it transformations on the European continent or global changes.

There are many factors that can explain the viability of this logic, but the main one is perhaps the recognition of the importance of balance in relations. In essence, this is the mutual ability to undermine the interests of the other party. At times when this balance is broken, conflicts and crises dominate. This is a recognized fact in both capitals. However, while the two states can acknowledge each other's competing

¹ Esmira Jafarova, *Conflict Resolution in South Caucasus: Challenges to International Efforts* (Lexington Books, 2014), p. 89.

² "Foreign Minister Davutoğlu: Turkey and Azerbaijan are two brotherly countries from time immemorial," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/foreign-minister-davutoglu-turkey-and-azerbaijan-are-two-brotherly-countries-from-time-immemorial.en.mfa>

³ Series of wars which took place in 1676–81, 1687, 1689, 1695–96, 1710–12, 1735–39, 1768–74, 1787–91, 1806–12, 1828–29, 1853–56, and 1877–78.

interests and avoid direct confrontation, there is another source that has the potential to disrupt fragile equilibrium, namely external systemic or regional crises.

The Rise of Russia

Russia's assertive stance in the post-Soviet space first openly surfaced in the 2008 conflict with Georgia, and has since escalated into a strategic face off with the West, primarily the US. To be sure, the two most significant crises in the post-Soviet space – Georgia 2008 and Crimea 2014 – involved trade partners important to Turkey and took place in the Black Sea basin with Moscow as the opposing side to the conflicts.

Ankara was successful in maneuvering the political tumult between the EU, the US, and Russia. Turkey, a NATO member and an EU-associated state, managed to increase trade with Russia and significantly improve mutual political perceptions.⁴ But the simultaneous rise of Moscow and Ankara to positions as regional leaders was not without consequences. Strategically, the Russian objective is to dominate the post-Soviet space. Turkey, in turn, aspires to play the leading role in the Black Sea region. Both of these ambitions overlap in the Caucasus.

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After the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow pursued a policy of institutionalized economic, political, and security integration of the region utilizing multilateral cooperation. The goal was to restore and increase its influence in its periphery. This required rebuilding old and establishing new relations. For Turkey, on the other hand, the dismantling of the Union presented an opportunity to connect with states that were traditionally part of Turkish interests. However, the existence of the Union had blocked Ankara from developing political relations without the involvement of Moscow. Baku served as an early testing ground for Ankara's relationship building in the post-Soviet region.

Apart from neighboring Georgia, which has been challenging Russia, and Armenia, which has overtly relied on Russia for security and economic development, Baku's role has been that of a relatively pragmatic actor.

⁴ Food, tourism, energy commodities and joint infrastructure projects all made up a significant portion of relations between 2010-2014. See “Factbox - Russia-Turkey Economic and Trade Relations,” *Reuters*, 24 November 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-ties-fac-idUKKBN0TD27A20151124>

Turkic nations of the post-Soviet space also include Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Beyond linguistic and cultural similarities, these nations are all Turkey's trading partners.⁵ However, with the exception of Turkmenistan, Ankara is nowhere close to building alignments with the Central Asian states.

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revealing a notable lack of political capital, which could be transformed into viable influence for Ankara.

Turkey is a stakeholder in the Caucasus due to various assets like the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline project (TANAP) and its participation in logistical projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. Further to the East, the number of joint ventures decreases noticeably,

Turkey's Policy in the Post-Soviet Space

There is another reason why it will be difficult for Ankara to craft any viable political engagement policy for Central Asia. For any effective cooperation, Ankara will have to deal with Russia. Moscow defines the post-Soviet space as a zone of its interests, a vision reflected in its foreign policy and security doctrines.⁶ Crises involving Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic States, and Central Asia (with respect to NATO's operation in Afghanistan), have all been a derivative of this strategic vision and the Kremlin's perception of interference from external actors in post-Soviet nations.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey has been one of the central actors in the region. Its involvement, however, did not go far beyond building economic relations with newly independent states. It occasionally spilled over into the political dimension as was the case with Uzbek-Turkish friendship in the late 1990s and Ankara's sponsoring of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization.

Ankara's reasons for being involved in dealing with the post-Soviet space were economic at first. Creating harmonized economic structures was central to recovery in the region. That also provided an opportunity for building a political alignment under Turkish leadership should the need arise. Ankara has had many advantages

⁵ “List of Importing Markets from Central Asian Republics for a Product Exported by Turkey,” *Trademark*, http://www.trademap.org/Country_SelProductCountry_TS.aspx

⁶ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 12 February 2013, http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389fec168189ed44257b2e0039b16d

on offer, from economic investments to the building of a secular and viable political society – the famous Turkish model. This was especially acute for the states of Central Asia faced with the threat of radical Islamism, and the Caucasus states consumed by violent nationalist conflicts. As a NATO member and a weapons exporter Turkey had enough expertise to help shape independent military force for the states in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

For the US, Ankara's geopolitical position presented a perfect opportunity to explore the Southern Energy Corridor delivering Caspian oil and gas to Europe, with the possibility of extending the Corridor's logistical capacity, bypassing Russia, into the Central Asian energy-reach region.⁷

That strategy proved functional while Turkey's traditional geopolitical rival Russia was consumed with managing the economic ruins and political chaos triggered by the Soviet collapse. Historically, if either state rises to power, the result has been confrontation. In 2008 Russia and Georgia fought a brief war out of which Moscow emerged victorious, and Georgian territory was de facto sliced up into smaller units. But more important was the message that Moscow sent to the US. It is able and willing to pursue its interests in the post-Soviet space, utilizing military means if necessary.

The Clash of Identities

With the rise of the AKP in Turkey and the inception of Ahmet Davutoğlu's powerful foreign policy concept of reaching out to the neighborhood, Turkey has set its interests on a collision course with those of Russia in the post-Soviet space.

The most important point is that Russia and Turkey have witnessed an almost simultaneous rise to the status of regional power. The rise was based on domestic hierarchy building, rapid economic growth, and formation of state policies that promoted integration around their respective neighborhoods, thereby maximizing influence.

While Russia and Turkey have experienced evolution in their post-Cold War transition, they both consider that each can assume the mantle of leadership in the region. Both states emphasize their past and delineate spaces that were once under Ottoman or Russian influence. The models that the two states advance are increasingly overlapping.

⁷ Mamuka Tsereteli, "The Southern Energy Corridor: A Strategic Priority for the U.S.?" *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 27 May 2015, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13218-the-southern-energy-corridor-a-strategic-priority-for-the-us?.html>

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Russia has been trying to put together a viable alternative to the West that would consolidate its most important foreign policy goals. This is shaped by the concept of a “Russian world” - public diplomacy strategy rooted in the principles of Russian foreign policy. In sum, it blends language, orthodox Christianity, and politically conservative values. Beyond the post-Soviet space, this policy is aimed mostly at Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, and the Central and Eastern European region. A pan-Slavic element reinforces the vision of Russia’s place in the region. This is an informal position of civilizational leadership which includes religious and political aspects.

Turkey, on the other hand, represents a modern, politically secular Islamic power. The Turkish model of development for an economically advanced regional powerhouse blends capitalism with Islamic traditions. A major aspect of its approach to foreign policy is based on restoring traditional influence in areas where the Ottoman Empire was strong and claiming a leading civilization role in the Muslim world, a position Turkey last held in 1914.

In this respect, sovereignty and borders do not matter as much as overlapping spaces. The important provision is that ethnicity does not play a significant role either. It is not necessary to be ethnically Russian. Language is more important. Russian speakers and those who support this imperative of Russian civilizational and geopolitical leadership, are part of this space. Similar linguistic and cultural attributes are present in the Turkish approach.

The rise of Turkey and Russia in the region is inextricably linked to their leading role in their respective global religious communities, adding to civilizational leadership and giving power to Moscow and Ankara for constructing alignments. Thus, Turkey is politically focused on the fate of the rights of the Turkmen population in Syria, the Crimean Tatar in Ukraine, and the Uighur population in Western China. Russia is politically involved with the rights of Russian-speaking minorities in the former Soviet Union and Russians living in Ukraine, the Caucasus, Baltic States and Central Asia.

There is a geographical element to these overlapping ideological stances. The Black Sea basin has been a traditional region where competing interests converged. Unlike

the Baltic Sea, which has been an arena for cooperation facilitating significant integration momentum between Nordic and Baltic States, the defining feature of the Black Sea is fragmentation. To the West, Balkan and Eastern European regions have a history of political division. To the East, there is the Caucasus that is infamous for its extreme political segmentation.

Concluding Observations

Turkey's proximity to Europe, the Middle East and the post-Soviet space requires that it be involved in the affairs of those regions. But there are limitations that will keep Ankara's moves in the post-Soviet space curbed.

Politically, Turkish interests in the post-Soviet area will inevitably have to deal with two acute issues. The first is how to lessen its energy dependence on Russia.⁸ The lifting of international sanctions on Iran allows Tehran to modernize its energy infrastructure. This will have a positive effect on Turkey, offering an alternative to Russian energy. For Russia, freeing up Iran's export potential brings competition to the Turkish energy market by weakening its monopoly.

The second issue is finding a way to effectively normalize relations with Armenia without compromising its relations with Azerbaijan. Unblocking the Caucasus should allow Turkey to project its interests further beyond the Caspian Sea into Central Asia. Both tasks will have direct implications for Ankara and will influence its regional stance.

Neither Turkey nor Russia are interested in the destabilization of the region, nor in long-term strained bilateral relations. But a broader, extensive regional alignment between two states is unlikely due to the incompatibility of their strategic interests in almost all dimensions.

For any viable advantage, Turkey will have to be more proactive in Central Asia, especially on the level of multilateral institutionalized cooperation. It will need to reassess its diplomatic efforts in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in view of the Iranian, Russian, and Chinese stance in the bloc.

Involvement in stabilizing efforts in the post-Soviet space will allow Turkey to manage its internal problems while maintaining the leadership role it aspires to.

⁸ 65 percent of gas in 2014 was exported to Turkey from Russia. See "Turkey Plan to Reduce Energy Dependence on Russia," Natural Gas Europe, 9 December 2015, <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/turkey-works-on-plan-to-reduce-energy-dependence-on-russia-27017>