



ORIGINAL PAPER

Central Asian Policy of Turkey in the Post-Soviet Era: From Rhetoric to Rationality

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Abstract:

Turkey started to rebuild its relations with the Turkic states of the Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Turkish foreign policy regarding the Central Asia was mostly relying on a Pan-Turkism rhetoric and pragmatic basis at the beginning of the 1990s, yet it could only evolve into a rational one at the start of the new millennium thanks to increased commercial and economic relations paying great attention to the energy issue with the Central Asian countries. While assuming a 'model state' role for the kin states and competing with the Russian Federation and its near abroad policy, Turkey managed to become a strategic partner with Russia to cooperate in energy sector together with the Central Asian countries that have rich natural energy resources. This study aims to offer a descriptive approach to the Central Asian Policy of Turkey in the Post-Soviet Era and to demonstrate how it evolved from rhetoric to rationality. This study enjoys the historical analysis to assert this change in Turkish foreign policy within the region and consists of two main sections: one is dealing with the pragmatic policies formed on a rhetoric aiming a Turkish Union right after the collapse of the USSR and the other one is discussing the change of these policies in favor of rational ones.

Keywords: *Central Asia; Turkic States; Soviet Union; Post-Soviet Era; Turkey; Russia.*

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought along the end of the Cold War, terminating the ideology-based bipolar political system of the world. Central Asian countries that gained their independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union started to acquire different roles in the international system. Republic of Turkey that had considered the Western countries as a model since its foundation enjoying its NATO membership as an anti-communist country took different roles during this period. Turkey that had been seen as a 'bumper state' by the Western bloc started to lose her strategic importance in the eyes of the Western states owing to the loss of the communist threat with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Turkey's application to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1987 for a membership and its rejection in 1989 together with losing her strategic significance for the West pushed Turkey to look for an alternative to the Western bloc in foreign politics. The dissolution of the Soviet Union drew Turkey's attention to resettling relations with the newly-independent former Soviet Turkic states in the Central Asia.

This study deals with the development of Central Asian policy of Turkey in the post-Soviet era covering the first two decades until 2014. It consists of two main parts. The first part of this study examines the first years of Central Asian policy following the collapse of the Union in 1991 emphasizing the historical context of the relations under the communist regimes and the unorganized foreign policy of Turkey toward Central Asian Turkic states that navigating between pragmatic aims and rhetorical strategies with several ambiguities in hand. The first part covers the years between 1991 and 1995. The second part, however, deals with the evolution of Central Asian policy of Turkey into a rational one during the coalition government years between 1995 and 2002 and under one-party rule starting from 2002 when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power ensuring political stability for longer years.

Pragmatism and Rhetorical Discourse, 1991-1995

Turkey enjoyed the great help coming from the Bolsheviks during the Independence War and early years of foundation of the Republic of Turkey, yet depending on the communist threat coming from the Soviet Union after the Second World War, Turkey decided to take sides with the Western Bloc and started to lose her ties with the Muslim Turkic people living in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the relations between Ottoman Turkey and the Central Asian Turks began at the end of the 19th century with students coming to İstanbul from Turkistan and adopting pan-Turkist movements among Jeunes-Turcs (Mutlu, 2012: 128). After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Moscow tried to cut the relations between Ottoman Turkey and the Muslim Turks of the Soviet Union suspecting the pan-Turkist movements. Some representatives of the Turkic community in the Central Asia could make contacts with the Turks in the Balkans and the Asia Minor up until 1920, these relations were also cut between 1920 and 1989 for several reasons. Fidan asserts that the Soviet Russia's divide and rule policies together with forcing the regional people to use Cyrillic alphabet were some of these reasons (2010: 12). Mutlu points out that another reason for this cut could be Turkey's side during the Cold War and Turkey's non-provocative foreign policy (2012: 129). Another reason could be Turkey's turning her face to the West for modernization and accepting Moscow's control in the Central Asia starting from 1921. This non-involvement policy of Turkey almost lasted for seventy years and when the Red Army entered Baku in 1990 Ankara welcomed this as a matter of domestic affairs of the Soviet Union (Tellal, 2005:

50-51) and the then President Turgut Özal asserted that this move in Baku was a matter of domestic affairs of the Soviet Union and added that Iran should be interested since the Azerbaijanis are Shiites (Özkan, 2004: 405).

Turkey had not had a concrete Central Asian policy with strong basis depending on the Cold War time security policies until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Following the dissolution Turkey recognized the Central Asian Turkic countries and immediately started diplomatic relations by opening up diplomatic missions in the region and this move of Turkey was also interpreted that Turkey would follow an active foreign policy in the Central Asia (Aydın, 2006: 6). Turkish people, however, had considered the Central Asia as the homeland of the Turks and starting from the collapse of the Union in 1991, the political decision-makers and the people started to have greater interest into the region (Fidan, 2010: 111). Erşen points out the two factors behind this increasing interest: the first one is the psychological since the people and media had a great interest and the other one is geopolitical concerns aiming to revise the interests in the region (2013: 26). Goodarzi asserts that the trends within the Islamist and pan-Turkist movements, the interest of the religious groups and NGOs, and Turkey's existence in the region as a rival to Iran, Russia and China – this move was supported by the USA, Israel and some other Western states – together with the chaotic situation in which Russia was at the beginning of the 1990s were all related to the reason why Turkey was building her existence in the Central Asia (2013: 345-346).

Renewing relations with the kin-states after seventy years resulted in emotional reactions by the Turkish decision-makers and the people. Pan-Turkist movements flamed up even around the circles of the political leaders despite the fact that they denied the accusations regarding Turkism or Pan-Turkism. As Erşen claims, even though these activities were not called as Pan-Turkist movements, they had the symptoms of Turkism, which showed itself in political discourses of the statesmen (2013: 26). As a result, this emotional approach was reflected on an emotional but pragmatic foreign policy toward the Central Asia during the early years of post-Soviet era. An emotional, rhetorical discourse was dominating the Central Asian policy with statements like “Turkish speaking peoples from the China Wall to the Adriatic” and “A Turkish Century” (Aydın, 2006: 8). During this time, Turkey was taking the role of an ‘elder brother’ and a ‘modern secular state’ for the Turkic countries in the Central Asia. As Tellal mentions the then President Turgut Özal was mentioning that the Turks had the chance to become a regional leader for the first time and was uttering the statements like ‘big brother’ and ‘a model country’, which was later supported by the USA and EU and transformed into a duty by the West (2005: 56).

During these early years of rebuilding relations with the Central Asian Turkic countries, Turkey wanted to swiftly revise her foreign policy in the region without a rational plan considering the rejection by the EEC and the end of the Cold War security politics, mostly depending on pragmatic interests and rhetorical discourse glorifying kinship and nationalistic values. For this reason, Turkey had to follow daily policies here and was not able to read the demands of the regional countries from Turkey apart from offering some technical and cultural help. However, this was the first time Turkey was looking for a way to expand her zone of influence starting from 1923 owing to the loss of her strategic importance in the eyes of the Western bloc (Aras, 2000: 39). As a move to expand the zone of influence, Turkey had these objectives in the hand: to increase her geopolitical role in the region, to improve the land routes with the region, to gain big shares in the regional market, to promulgate pan-Turkist ideas to increase

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her power in the region, to reach out energy sources of the region and to become a bridge to transfer the energy to the international markets, to strengthen her position in international arena by increasing communication with the Central Asian Turkic states, to become a bridge between the West and the East, to introduce secularity to the regional states, to compete with Iran and to get Pakistan and India under her zone of influence (Goodarzi, 2013: 343). Strangely Turkey's emergence in the region for accomplishing these objectives as an 'elder brother' helped also the Central Asian countries to build relationships with the regional and international organizations of the West: the EU, the Council of Europe, NATO, OECD and IMF (Çaman and Akyurt, 2014).

Turkey's role as an 'elder brother' resulted in some ambiguity and some of the promises given by Turkey during this period were hardly kept, which were followed by disappointment at both sides and in exchange the Central Asian countries showed indifference to Turkish policies (Aydın, 2004: 154-155). For example, Turkey promised for a 1.1 billion US Dollars of a credit for export – that was way beyond the capacities of Turkey – and for a foreign aid and signed several cultural and economic cooperation protocols with the Central Asian governments in 1999. Besides, Turkey suggested these countries leave the Ruble zone challenging Russia as well and use Latin alphabet and offered them to transfer the oil and natural gas through Turkey (Aydın, 2006: 10-11). Therefore, Turkey was losing face among the Central Asian countries owing to this kind of empty promises and was annoying them when offering her suggestions as an elder brother. What is more, Turkey was openly following a foreign policy in the Central Asia to the contrary of Russia.

Cultural, linguistic and religious ties were in essence the triggering issues for the Turkish-Central Asian relations, yet Turkey's foreign policy toward the Central Asia were based on economic and political interests more than simple nationalist expressions and emotional concerns (Aydın, 2004: 4). The collapse of communism in the region also created a remote market for Turkey, hence Turkish small and medium sized enterprises swiftly reached this market (Şen, 2007: 140-141). The region was considered a new market for the growing Turkish industry and state sponsored private sector could benefit from the economic opportunities of the region thanks to Turkish state's close relations with the regional Turkic governments (Aydın, 2004: 4). Turkey's experience in industrialization and technical know-how was important for these countries to have multiple and special relations with Turkey, for this reason agreements were signed for land and air transportation depending on the importance of communication and transportation in economic and commercial relations (Alagöz et. al. 2004: 62). Turkey signed more than 500 bilateral and multilateral agreements with the Turkic states in Central Asia in order to increase and institutionalize the relations, hence Turkey also organized training programs in the region to improve small and medium sized enterprises and industrialization (Alagöz et. al. 2004: 69).

For these objectives, the Summit of the Heads of Turkic Speaking States was held in Ankara in 1992 to institutionalize the relations like the Arab League or the Commonwealth of Nations (Çaman, 2013: 142) and during this summit concrete steps were taken to deepen the relations with a network of communication and transportation by establishing direct flights between Ankara, İstanbul and the regional capitals beside opening Turkish Cultural Centers and Turkish schools, and Turkish national television channel broadcasting in the Central Asia to widen cultural ties. In line with the cultural policies, TÜRKSOY (International Organization of Turkic Culture) project was

launched with the ministries of culture of the Central Asia in 1993 (Aydın, 2006: 11). In addition to the cultural relations, Turkey also paid special importance on education and reintroducing the Islam faith to the region after communism on contrary to the radical Islamic movements led by the Saudi Arabia and Iran and the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs constructed mosques and facilitated opening faculties of theological studies. Regarding education, Turkey offered scholarships for secondary and higher education and founded a Turkish-Kazakh University in Kazakhstan in 1991 (Tellal, 2005: 58-59).

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) also played an important role in the region with different kinds of projects. The TİKA established to offer governmental aid to the newly independent Turkic states in the Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992 (Wheeler, 2011: 35) contributed into the transformation process of these states and offered technical aid for them to maintain their independency (Hasan, 2012). The main role of the TİKA was to coordinate the cooperation between Turkey and the Central Asian Turkic states in the fields of economics, education, culture, arts, history, research, language, alphabet, ethnography, tourism, governance, security, communication, environment, science and technology (Fidan, 2010: 113). Together with the development aids offered by the TİKA, Turkey aimed to strengthen the regional states, to protect the political and economic stability of the region, to support political and economic reforms, to help regional efforts for integration into the European and Atlantic institutions, to develop mutual relations for mutual gains on a win-win basis and to transfer regional energy sources without any obstacles (Mutlu, 2012: 135). Turkey was using different mechanisms to reach her pragmatic objectives during this term.

Rationality on the Scene, 1995-2014

Turkey experienced political and economic instabilities between 1995 and 2002, mostly as a result of several coalition governments. The instabilities also influenced Turkish foreign policy on the Central Asia, which was formed with great hopes and efforts a couple years ago. During these years of instability, Turkey had to leave the region with disappointment owing to the unkept promises because of economic and fiscal problems at home and reemergence of Russia and the USA in the 'New Big Game'. Nevertheless, the general elections in 2002 resulted in one-party rule ending the coalition period in Turkish political history. Starting from 2002 until 2014, it seems that the AKP rule managed to transform the Central Asian policy of Turkey from a pragmatic and rhetorical one to a rational one. This part consists of two sections. The first section below deals with the need for a revise in the Central Asian policy starting from 1995 to 2002. The second section reflects the period when AKP rule transformed the Central Asian policy into a rational one.

Years of Coalition Governments and Instabilities, 1995-2002

Before 1995, it had been necessary to revise the Central Asian policy of Turkey because of some reasons like the mutual disappointment over the expectancies, pan-Turkism accusations toward Turkey, indifference of the Central Asian Turkic states over the Turkish demands, hardships of democratization in the region, postponement of the Summit of Turkic States planned to be held in Baku in 1994 owing to the reaction of Russia after the death of Turkish President Özal, a stronger Russia in the region and ill-timed rivalry with Iran in the region (Aydın, 2006: 17-24).

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Apart from these reasons for a revise of the policies, domestic and foreign factors were also effective for a revise. Russia declared a new foreign policy for the Central Asian region regarding the former Soviet zone of influence starting from 1993. Russia called this policy as 'Near Abroad' in 1995. Turkey did not want to engage Russia and avoided an armed conflict with Russia in the region. The economic crisis of 1994 in the region was another reason and the regional states could not pay back their credits to Turkey, which Turkey had offered them through the Eximbank. Besides, Turkey could not keep the promises for offering development aids between 1991 and 1993 since these promises were way beyond the economic capacity of Turkey and no more than empty ones (Ayдын, 17-26). However, starting from 1995, under the administration of coalition governments Turkey began to notice the reality and had the necessity to make some revisions on her Central Asian policies.

Despite the economic and political difficulties of the period, Turkey became aware of her own potential and started to take concrete and deliberate steps in foreign policy taking strategic decisions regarding the importance of the region especially in terms of the energy issues. The construction of new pipelines for the regional oil and natural gas transfer by the USA and Russia was effective in Turkey's changing her policies in the region. Russia was trying to take control of the energy transfer lines, yet the USA supported Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline construction putting emphasis on Turkey's geostrategic importance. The then President Süleyman Demirel and the Minister of the Foreign Affairs İsmail Cem were also emphasizing Turkey's geostrategic importance and introducing Turkey as a bridge and a terminal country for the energy transfer from the Central Asia to Europe (Erşen, 2013 :30). Despite these developments on the Turkish part that gave importance to the energy transfer issue from the region, Turkey laid aside the previously formed 'unrealistic' strategies regarding the Central Asia when her membership candidacy for the EU was announced in Helsinki in 1999 (Efegil, 2014).

After seventy years of a break, Turkey resumed the relations with the Central Asian states starting from 1991 without losing time. Mutual relations brought along mutual expectations, yet Turkey's attempts did not yield the expected results since Turkey lacked a well-planned Central Asian policy and enjoyed the pragmatic ones designed without any rational preparations with an aim to form an alternative foreign policy. The first period right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union between the years of 1991 and 2002 had seemingly failures and mistakes in the Central Asian policy of Turkey. Behind these failures and mistakes there stand internal and external factor. Among the internal factors, political and economic developments of the 1980s were the major ones. Turkey stepped into a liberal economy at the beginning of the 1980s and this transition caused pain and difficulties for the people and in the economy. The intensive activities of the terrorist organization, PKK was weakening the political and economic stability of the country. The EEC had already rejected Turkey's application. Therefore, Turkish government was almost assuring stability at home with still a weak democracy at the beginning of the 1990s and was not having the economic and political potential to keep the promises given to the Central Asian countries (Mutlu, 2012: 133). It is obvious that Turkey could not analyze her own potential and foreign policy tools together with the global and regional balance of powers in forming strategies related to the Central Asia (Çaman and Akyurt, 2014: 156).

External factors can be divided into two. Firstly, the region including Russia was far from Turkey and transportation options were limited then (Çaman and Akyurt,

2014: 150). Besides, domestic and ethnic-based conflicts in the region were creating instabilities and an insecure environment. Regional states were standing close to Russia (Mutlu, 2012: 133). Secondly, external powers like the USA and EU was on the scene and the USA especially after 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 for the global war on terrorism intensifying the zone of influence within the region. Actually, the USA had already been in the region before 9/11 aiming to build an energy channel between the East and the West, to strengthen regional economic and political mechanisms, to support American business sector, to contain Iran, to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and drug trafficking from Afghanistan to the West through the Central Asian countries (Aydın, 2007: 159).

Turkey benefitted from the power gap in the region enjoying pan-Turkist discourses when Russia was losing influence over the former members of the Soviet Union. Turkey, however, neglected Russian factor when resettling relations with the Turkic states in the region and could only be able to set economic and cultural relations let alone the military cooperation (Mutlu: 2012: 134). Despite economic relations, the economies of the newly independent ex-communist states were not in good condition and their economic and political dependency on Russia was still active (Mutlu, 2012: 130) since these states were governed by former decision-makers and elites of the Communist Party (Aydın, 2004: 6). Starting from the end of 1992 the Eurosianists began acquiring power in Russia, which later on created the new doctrine of 'near abroad' by Russia opposing the Islamic movements of Iran and Turkist movements of Turkey (Aydın, 2004: 6). Along with the Russian factor, ethnic conflicts and radical Islamic movements supported by Saudi Arabia and Iran, high unemployment rates and conflicts over power caused political instability in the region (Akçalı, 2012: 70-80 and Efeğil, 2003: 77-78). Secular authoritarian regimes now succeeding the former communist regime were not so effective in creating rational solutions for the instability in the region and this resulted in alienation of the people to the state and pushed opposition in extremity (Aydın, 2004: 150-151). This regional political scene also resulted in unhealthy implementation of Turkish policies and Turkish demands were unanswered due to the regional domestic problems.

Justice and Development Party Rule and Rationality Back, 2002-2014

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) that came into power after the general elections in 2002 was in favor of a Central Asian policy that was formed not only by the Eurosianist approach but also by the 'strategic depth doctrine', which was a popular one during the first years of foreign policy (Efeğil, 2014: 356). For this reason, when compared to the former foreign policies of the coalition governments, the AKP was more decisive in its original foreign policy (Erşen, 2013: 33). The one-party rule of the AKP brought back the stability in politics and so helped Turkey to make important reforms on the way for an EU membership and democratization and to create an economic boom in the history of Republican Era, which also changed the perception of the international community (Çaman and Akyurt, 2014: 154). The Central Asian policy was considered as one of the core issues of the foreign policy designed by the AKP rule in its early years and the main objective was to improve the bilateral relations with the Central Asian states and to gain a strategic depth for Turkey (Ekşi, 2014: 404).

The Central Asian policy between 2002 and 2014 could be summed up as to support the Central Asian states as countries welcomed democratic values and integrated with the international community, in cooperation with the neighboring states

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and within the region and enjoying political and economic stability (MFA, 2014). By paying attention to the integration of the regional countries with the rest of the world and giving an emphasis on the democratic values for economic and political stability, it seems clear that the AKP government revised and changed the policies inherited from the 1990s. Now the principles for relationship were more than behaving like the ‘elder brother’ or a bridge between the East and the West or a model country mostly fueled with rhetorical discourse and these principles were underlining equality, mutual respect, mutual gain and the transformation of the countries into centers of attraction (Ekşi, 2014: 405-406). In addition to the emphasis now given to the equality and mutual gain; avoiding destructive competition, a comprehensive approach for cooperation and balancing the regional interests with the EU membership process and the transatlantic relations were also among the main concerns of the new Central Asian policy (Çaman and Akyurt, 2014: 156). The AKP rule continued developing economic relations through the mechanisms like TÜRKSÖY, TİKA and Summit of the Heads of Turkic Speaking States, for example TİKA increased the number of projects during this term (Ekşi, 2014: 405).

Turkey and Russia, a regional great power, came closer especially after the 9/11 during the global war on terrorism campaign and the Iraqi occupation during the AKP rule. Turkey started to consider Russia as a partner more than a rival in the region and bilateral visits between Erdogan and Putin were organized to develop relations and bilateral agreements for energy, transportation and agriculture were signed (Ercan, 2011: 134-140). Regarding the energy sources of the region, Turkey that had been aiming to become an energy hub included Russia into the projects like the Blue Stream (Bilgin and Bilgiç, 2011: 187). The AKP rule has been supporting energy projects to transfer the Central Asian natural gas and oil to the European markets and mostly cooperating with Russia (Larrabee, 2011: 110-114), however, both Russia and Turkey have been competing for the Central Asian energy sources – Russia wants to control the energy distribution and exportation while Turkey is much more interested in transferring the Central Asian energy to the Western markets and is willing to become an energy hub for Europe (Larrabee, 2010: 169). The similarity to the Soviet era is interesting since Russia emerged as one of the important factor in determining and calculating policies regarding the Central Asia.

Conclusion

Starting from an extemporaneous foreign policy toward the Central Asian states enjoying unilateral pragmatic aims and rhetorical discourse that was welcomed by the domestic public opinion and pan-Turkist movements right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey noticed the need for a revise, which started to give its fruit in the end of the 1990s, yet it is obvious that Turkey could only tuned in more rational policies lately emphasizing democratic values, mutual gain, economic and political stability under the AKP administration. Turkey left unilateral approach and gave importance to mutual gain on equality basis especially for transferring and marketing energy sources. The Central Asian policy evolved from rhetoric to rationality. Despite more concrete steps taken for rational objectives in the region, especially under the ministry of Davutoglu between 2009 and 2014, the Central Asian policy did not get much attention while creating policies regarding the peoples (Çaman and Akyurt, 2014: 158). Yet, the Central Asian policy of today falls behind the Balkans and Middle Eastern policies. It seems that Turkey considering rational aims in the region follows policies depending on

reactions given over the dynamics of the region. Following the Crimean annexation by Russia in 2014 and the Western sanctions thereof, Turkey continued strategic partnership with Russia for her increasing energy need. Today, after the Ukrainian invasion Russia confronted with additional Western sanctions. Considering the sanctions on Russia, Turkey needs to revise her energy strategies and should take concrete steps to further increase her relations with the Central Asian countries for new energy transfer routes.

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