

# TURKISH AK PARTY'S CENTRAL ASIA AND CAUCASUS POLICIES: CRITIQUES AND SUGGESTIONS

COMMENT BY

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## Abstract

*The AK Party's approaches to Central Asia and Caucasus are similar to those of previous governments. For the AK Party, Central Asia, and especially Eurasian geopolitics, are strategically very important; therefore, they have desired to improve Turkey's existing relations with the regional states and strongly supported inter-regional projects, such as the Baku-Tbilis-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, Baku-Tbilis-Kars railway and the Nabucco pipeline. For that reason, Turkish officials have paid various official visits to the regional states. With the assistance of these projects, the officials believe that regional integration attempts will be strengthened and welfare, stability and development will dominate regional affairs. But the Turkish policy makers have had to change their perspective about the region in favor of existing regional conditions, and they have formulated more realistic and rational policies, including a focus on more concrete projects.*

**Keywords:** *AK Party, Central Asia, Caucasus, Turkish Model, Energy.*

## Introduction

After the collapse of former Soviet Union, Turkish policy makers assumed that Turkey had lost its strategic importance in the eyes of the Western countries, especially the United States<sup>1</sup>; therefore, by having close relations with the newly independent Central Asian Turkic republics and Azerbaijan based on the understanding of “big brotherhood”, Turkey could again regain its strategic importance to its Western allies.<sup>2</sup> In that regard, Turkish policy makers shaped Turkey's

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<sup>1</sup> Baharçipek, Abdülkadir, “Soğuk Savaş'ın Sona Ermesinin Türk Dış Politikası üzerindeki Etkileri (The Effects of End of the Cold War upon the Turkish Foreign Policy)”, in İdris Bal (ed.) “21. Yüzyılda Türk Dış Politikası”, pp. 57-74. Ankara: Nobel Yayın Dağıtım, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Bal, İdris, “Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türk Dış Politikası İçin Türk Cumhuriyetlerinin Önemi (Importance of the Turkic Republics for the Turkish Foreign Policy After the Cold War)”, in İdris Bal (ed.) 21. Yüzyılda Türk Dış Politikası,

Central Asia policy based on the slogan of “Turkish World from the Chinese Wall to the Adriatic Sea”, and following that mentality, they defined the following points as Turkey’s foreign policy objectives regarding Central Asia and Caucasus: reshaping the regional economies, providing direct support to the nation-building and state-building efforts of the regional states, even being a model, and helping them integrate into the world system. In the course of time, they have clearly understood that these objectives were not realistic in view of the regional conditions.<sup>3</sup> Distracted by domestic political crises and Turkey’s membership negotiations to the EU, they again slowly lost their attention to the region as well as the regional affairs.

In 1997, when the European Union rejected Turkey’s application for full membership, Turkish officials, especially the nationalist groups and retired military officials, immediately rediscovered the Eastern Bloc option, consisting of China, Russia, Iran, Caucasian and Central Asia states, including India and Mongolia, within the framework of the concept of Eurasianism. But in reality that approach was not made operational, due to the *sui generis* conditions of the region and regional states.<sup>4</sup> In 1999, after the EU’s Helsinki decision about Turkey’s application to full membership, Turkey again put that proposal on a shelf. But after 2002, the AK Party government decided to pursue a more active foreign policy toward the region within the framework of its new understanding, called the strategic depth.

This study briefly puts forward the AK Party’s foreign policy objectives regarding Central Asia and Azerbaijan, as well as its concrete attempts. Secondly, its Central Asia policy will also be analyzed from a critical perspective. The paper argues that the AK Party’s policy is similar to the approaches of previous governments and thus its policy is unworkable as far as the region’s existing conditions and Turkey’s abilities are concerned. In this connection, Turkey should pursue such a policy that would view the regional states and Turkey as equal partners, address the needs and demands of the regional states, and take into account the attitudes and concerns of other. This new policy should contain more realistic objectives and project more concrete attempts.

## Background of Turkey’s Central Asia Policy

In 1987 Turkey applied to the European Community for full membership. But in 1989 that application was rejected by the Commission. Turkish officials were shocked. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union immediately after the military coup d’etat in August 1990 forced Turkey to think about its strategic position in world politics. As mentioned above, Turkey now

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pp. 365-378. Ankara: Nobel Yayın Dağıtım, 2004; Erol, Mehmet Seyfettin, “AB ve Türkiye’nin Avrasya Politikası” (EU and Turkey’s Eurasia Policies), in: Demokrasi Platformu, vol. 1:4, (Fall 2005), pp. 173-202.

<sup>3</sup> Aydın, Mustafa, “Türkiye’nin Orta Asya Politikaları” (Turkey’s Central Asia Policies), in Mustafa Aydın and Çağrı Erhan (eds.) “Beş Deniz Havzasında Türkiye”, Ankara, 2006, pp. 3 -32; Aydın, Mustafa, “Türkiye’nin Orta Asya – Kafkaslar Politikası” (Turkey’s Central Asia – Caucasus Policy), in Aydın, Mustafa (ed.) “Küresel Politikada Orta Asya (Avrasya Üçlemesi I)”, Ankara, 2005, pp. 101-148.

<sup>4</sup> Aça, Mehmet, “Seeking Alliance by Russia and China against USA (NATO) and Its Implications to Turkey”, in Ertan Efeğil (ed.) “Geopolitics of Central Asia in the post – Cold War Era: A Systemic Analysis”, pp. 97 – 118. Haarlem: SOTA Research Centre for Turkestan and Azerbaijan, 2002.

was not the strategic or military buffer zone of the Western world against the Soviet threat. and on the contrary the Western world gave priority to the pro – Western Russian government as well as political and economic reforms in Russia.<sup>5</sup> Turkey started to occupy a marginal place in Western calculations.

However, that apprehension did not go on for a long time, because Turkey played an active role during the 1990 Gulf Crisis. As a result of this role, Turkey succeeded in displaying itself as a strategically important ally of the Western world. The West began to advocate the idea of the Turkish model as an alternative, for the Central Asian and Caucasian states, from communism or Iranian-style Islamism.<sup>6</sup> The Turkish model suggested a message to the regional countries about their future political and economic systems.

With the encouragement of the Western countries and their ideological concerns, Turkish officials supported the idea of a Turkish World from the Adriatic Sea to the Chinese Wall. They discussed the establishment of political and economic unions in this geographic space. Naturally Turkey would be the leader of any union, due to its cultural, ethnic, linguistic, historical and religious characteristics. As a model Turkey would be a bridge between the Western world and regional countries and the initiator of integration of these countries to the world community. Also with the assistance of Turkey, they would absorb Western values. In this manner, by acting as a regional leader, Turkey would affect global politics.<sup>7</sup>

## **AK Party's Foreign Policy Mentality and Central Asia**

The existing Turkish government in general terms has two main foreign policy objectives: a) Becoming a full member of the European Union, and b) bolstering security, stability, welfare, friendship and cooperation around Turkey, since it is located at the center of the Balkans, Caucasus, Black Sea, Middle East, Mediterranean, and Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, the AK

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<sup>5</sup> Bal, İdris, "Turkey's Relations with the West and the Turkic Republics: Rise and Fall of the Turkish Model", Aldershot, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Ataman, Muhittin, "Leadership Change: Ozal Leadership and Restructuring in Turkish Foreign Policy", in: *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, vol. 1:1, (Spring 2002); Uslu, Nasuh, "The Russian, Caucasian and Central Asian Aspects of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post Cold War Period", in: *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, vol. 2:3/4, (Fall and Winter 2003); Lesser, Ian O., "Turkey's Strategic Options", in: *The International Spectator*, vol XXXIV:1 (January – March 1999); Khosla, I. P., "Turkey: The Search for a Role", in: *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA*, vol. XXV:3, (June 2001); Hunter, Shireen, "Bridge or Frontier? Turkey's Post – Cold War Geopolitical Posture", in: *The International Spectator*, vol. XXXIV:1 (January – March 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Tosun, Hasan, "AK Parti'nin Kıbrıs Politikası, 2002 – 2005: Türk Dış Politikasında Gelenek ile Değişimin Mücadelesi", in Nejat Doğan and Mahir Nakip, (eds.) "Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Türk Siyasal Partileri", pp. 363 – 388. Ankara, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Kurt, Süleyman, "Köşk'ten dört ayaklı dış politika stratejisi", in: *Zaman Newspaper*, December 11, 2007; Ataman, Muhittin, "Soğuk Savaşın Günümüze Türk Dış Politikasında Yeni Eğilimler ve Hedefler", in Davut Dursun, Burhanettin Duran and Hamza Al (eds.) "Dönüşüm Sürecindeki Türkiye: Aktörler, Alanlar, Sorunlar", pp. 233-281. İstanbul: Alfa Yayınları, (2007); İnat, Kemal and Burhaneddin Duran, *AKP Dış Politikası: Teori ve Uygulama (AKP's Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice)*, in: *Demokrasi Platformu*, vol. 1:4, (2005), pp. 1-40; Gözen, Ramazan,

Party has supported the development of strategic cooperation at both bilateral and multilateral levels among regional states, and strengthening regional integration attempts in the fields of economy, society, politics, energy and culture. Separately, Turkish officials believe that the regional states have to make serious efforts in democratization, transition to a free market economy, and respect for human rights, as well as in finding peaceful solution to the regional frozen conflicts.<sup>9</sup> These Turkish encouragements aim to create a mutual dependency among the regional countries, resulting in regional stability, welfare and cooperation.

As far as Central Asia, or in more general terms Eurasian geopolitics, is concerned, the AK Party has pursued similar approaches to those of previous governments. The Party's officials have viewed Eurasia as a geopolitical area, directly affecting the post-Cold War international system, and described the Caspian Sea Basin as the touchstone of Eurasia. Meanwhile Turkey and Azerbaijan have formed the backbone of Eurasian geopolitics.<sup>10</sup> For the Turkish government, the region is strategically important because of its vast energy resources and for the security of energy supply to the world market. By using its geopolitical advantage, located at the center of East – West, North – South and South – North energy corridors, Turkey desires to become an important energy transit country, energy terminal and the fourth energy source of the European Union, after North Sea, Russia and the Middle East.

From this perspective, the AK Party's official foreign policy objectives regarding Central Asia and Azerbaijan can be summarized as follows:

- Developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the fields of energy, economy, commerce, culture, society, politics, etc.
- Assisting them to find a peaceful solution to the frozen regional conflicts.
- Serving as an energy terminal.
- Providing assistance to the regional states in their nation- and state-building processes.
- Helping them develop and maintain close relations with the other countries.<sup>11</sup>

Turkey therefore desires to refresh its mutual relations, based on economy, literature and culture, with the regional states, and views this process as a historical obligation. For them, the relations have been developed on the basis of concepts of brotherhood, common language, common belief and common (Turkic) race. They mention that “one nation and two state mentality” dominates the relations, based on mutual trust and respect.<sup>12</sup> Consequently the AK Party provides technical

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“Türk Dış Politikası’nda Vizyon ve Revizyon” (Vision and Revision in Turkish Foreign Policy), in: *Demokrasi Platformu*, vol. 1:4, (2005), pp. 41-58.

<sup>9</sup> Robins, Philip, “Turkish Foreign Policy since 2002: between a ‘post-Islamist’ government and a Kemalist state”, in: *International Affairs*, vol. 83:1, (2007), pp. 289-304.

<sup>10</sup> Davutoğlu, Ahmet, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, in: *Insight Turkey*, vol. 10:1, (2008), pp. 77-96; Aras, Bulent, “Türkiye’nin Orta Asya Politikası: Köprüden Cazibe Merkezine” (Turkey’s Central Asia Policy: From Bridge to Centre of Attraction), in: *Zaman Newspaper*, December 7, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey, *Synopsis of the Turkish Foreign Policy*, [www.mfa.gov.tr](http://www.mfa.gov.tr).

<sup>12</sup> “Berdimuhammedov: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Başarılarına Seviniyoruz”, in: *Anatolian Agency*, December 6, 2007; Nahçıvan Buluşmasından Çifte Mesaj Çıktı, in: *Cihan News Agency*, June 4, 2008.

assistance, scholarships, training of representatives of civil society, military cooperation and military training to the regional states.

Turkey has advocated the completion of the Baku-Tbilis-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilis-Erzurum natural gas pipeline and Baku-Tbilis-Kars railway project, and invested significant energy for the realization of the construction of Nabucco and South Europe Gas Ring projects. In line with these energy projects, the Hopa seaport has been repaired.

Turkey has also made serious efforts for the establishment of a Turkish–Kazakh Commercial Council, Turkish–Azerbaijan Mixed Economic Commission, and an Intergovernmental Economic Commission between Turkey and Turkmenistan. Recently, President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid official visits to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. They proposed a most-favored-nation trade agreement with Azerbaijan, suggested that Kazakhstan pump Kazakh oil to the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and signed several agreements with Turkmenistan on the subjects of economic cooperation, partnership and cooperation, education, science, youth, sport, family, women and children.<sup>13</sup>

In Turkey’s view, for the exploitation and exportation of the regional natural resources to the world market, multilateral cooperation among the regional and non-regional countries is inevitably necessary. To that end, Turkey has proposed the followings subjects on which to develop the mutual relations.

- Establishment of a Secretariat of Presidential Summits of the Turkish Republics;
- Creation of an institution like OPEC, focused on regional gas suppliers;
- Common alphabet based on the Latin script;
- Joint TV channel;
- Establishment of Academy of Science of the Turkish World, and Science Museum of the Turkish World;
- Publication of books on the common history, literature, culture, and religion of the Turkic states;
- Creation of political and economic union.<sup>14</sup>

## **Evaluation and Conclusion**

When the AK Party’s policy toward the region is analyzed, it can be said that its policy is not realistic, due to the fact that this policy does not take into account the regional realities and conditions, and it does not put on the table more concrete proposals. Instead, it mostly supports abstract projects which are usually advocated by the nationalist parties and groups in Turkey. For example, Turkish universities have tried to define a new common Latin alphabet for all Turkish

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<sup>13</sup> “Orta Asya ile köprüler yeniden kuruluyor”, in: Zaman Newspaper, December 7, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan’s speech held at 11. Turkish States and Nations Assembly, Baku, Azerbaijan, November 17, 2007; Suleyman Kurt, “Orta Asya ile 34 harfli, ortak alfabe çalışması başlatılıyor”, in: Zaman Newspaper, December 9, 2007.

people in the world since 1991. For that aim, Marmara University Institute of Turkish Studies organized several international conferences. But so far, it has been unsuccessful. In the meantime, Kazakh officials stated that they did not feel any necessity to immediately adopt a Latin alphabet. Additionally, the Central Asian states have desired to complete their own nation-and state-building processes; therefore, they have pursued more nationalistic policies that reflect their own local values and characteristics. Such things, such as common language, common history, and/or common culture will remove them from their national/local approaches in state, foreign, cultural and social policies; therefore, from the beginning they did not prefer to see Turkey as a model for themselves.

Due to dealing with practically impossible projects and formulating its regional policies based on incorrect perceptions, Turkey has not realized its economic, energy, and commercial interests. Therefore, the AK Party has to pursue more realistic national interests that reflect the demands of the regional states. In the course of time it has to regularly update its interests to account for the changing regional conditions, and determine suitable foreign policy actions which are relevant to Turkey's power and interests.

For instance, the Turkish government should establish independent, private research centers in both Turkey and regional countries in order to collect reliable information about state systems, politics, and social conditions in the regional states as well as regional affairs. In the meantime, Turkey has to encourage foundations and/or state institutions to establish new universities in these countries, and ensure that they are under the direction and management of Turkish professors. Turkish Cultural Centers must become operational in all these states. Some state institutions such as ministries concerned with foreign trade, and some private and/or semi-private foundations, such as Chambers of Business, have to open their own comprehensive departments/bureaus in these states in order to collect information about economic, commercial and political affairs as well as to provide daily, effective data to businessmen and academicians. These bureaus can be under the administrative coordination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and/or Turkish Cooperation and Development Administration. For example, while analyzing the needs of the region, they may have to determine Kyrgyzstan's need for a water institution and with this information, Turkish universities may be obliged to create such an institution in this country, collectively acting with the Kyrgyz universities. Both upper and lower level Turkish officials have to have close and cooperative relations with their counterparts.

Turkey has to change its perspective toward the region and Turkish officials have to accept that these regional countries are equal partners, and that close relations with the regional states are based on their mutual interests. They have to refrain from sentiments such as those in the following sentences in their speeches: "This project will change history. It will radically reshape the regional economy. It will create a common economic area". These sentences reflect to a great extent the romanticism of the Turkish foreign policy.<sup>15</sup> The Baku-Tbilis-Erzurum natural gas pipeline or the Baku-Tbilis-Kars railway will naturally encourage the regional states to improve mutual economic and commercial relations amongst themselves. This is a natural process. But it

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<sup>15</sup> "Erdogan: Modernizasyon çalışmaları, İpek Yolu'nu yeniden canlandıracak", in: Cihan News Agency, December 9, 2007.

does not mean that it will change a historical process. For example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline has not changed Eurasian geopolitics and/or structure of the international system. Russia and China still, in spite of the US and Turkey's attempts, have a considerable influence upon the regional states.

Turkey has overstated the importance of the projects and/or official visits of the leaders to the regional states. Turkish officials have also exaggerated the Turkish business activities in the region. Turkish firms have not dominated the regional economies, and their activities are not even significantly more noticeable than those of other firms.

Consequently, Turkey has to accept that Azerbaijan, the Central Asian republics and Turkey are equal partners and that relations among them are based on mutual interests. Historical ties can only help them to have close relations, and no more. Historical ties cannot control all of Turkey's relations with other countries and/or vice versa. With this perspective, the AK party has to improve its perceptions about the region according to the actual regional conditions. They should not make speeches that aim at solving fundamental problems of the regional states, which are much bigger issues than Turkey, which lacks enough capability to solve them alone. Simultaneously, the regional states do not see Turkey as a savior, or big brother. In this respect, Turkey has to define more short- and medium-term objectives, and focus on more concrete projects rather than vague ones.