

WILL CENTRAL ASIA BECOME TURKEY'S SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

HEINZ KRAMER

The end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union drastically changed the international environment of Turkey's foreign and security policy. The Turkish government undertakes great efforts to adapt the country's foreign relations to the new situation. In the view of many analysts, these efforts are characterised by a greater assertiveness of Turkish foreign policy with regard to various regional political constellations. Self-constraint and a low profile no longer seem to be the hallmark of Turkey's foreign relations.¹ Among Turkish officials, the conviction re-emerged that Turkey "has a special role to play in international affairs."²

THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW WORLD

The development of Turkey's relations with the new republics in Central Asia³ is mentioned as a case in point. The unravelling of the Soviet Union, indeed, confronted Turkey and the Turks with a "new world" in Central Asia upon which they wanted to exert influence and from which they were confronted with certain demands.⁴ For the Turkish public and large parts of the country's elite the discovery of the "new cousins" in what is regarded as the original Turkish homelands was a very welcome development. Now, besides Turkey there are other sovereign states in which Turks are the dominant political group in which a related language is officially spoken and the culture of which has much in common with that of Anatolia. Turkey's relative isolation between, on the one side, Europe (to which Turkey and her people strongly want to belong but often have been rejected) and, on the other side, the Arab world (of which the Turks never really saw themselves as an integral part and which itself displayed an attitude of strong reserve towards Turkey) all of a sudden seemed to have come to an end.

Furthermore, the low level of economic and political development of the new republics conveyed to many Turks a general impression of superiority and offered the country an opportunity to take leadership and to be a role model.⁵ All these were experiences and hopes which Turkey could hardly ever expect to gain from her relations with her Western partners. Hence the psychological pre-conditions were given for high expectations and unrealistic imaginings by the Turkish public concerning the importance, dimension and scope of Turkey's relations with the republics of Central Asia.⁶

Such expectations were especially nurtured by certain nationalistic and religious circles like the pan-Turkish orientated Nationalist Action Party of Alparslan Türkeş and its followers or the religiously orientated dailies Zaman or Türkiye which also were the first Turkish newspapers to be distributed in the new republics. In these circles, there was open talk of the development of a bloc or union of Turkic nations under Turkey's leadership that eventually would become a powerful and recognised political actor in forging the new international order. These groups of advocates of a new bright future for Turkey differ only in their basic ideological approach. The former are characterised by a more ethnic-nationalistic leaning while the others prefer a more religious-nationalistic orientation. Hence, pan-Turkist groups advocate a new regional political bloc of international significance based on ethnicity whereas religious circles, including the Welfare Party, favour the creation of a Turkish-led Caucasus in the Islamic world in order to re-establish Turkey's primacy among Muslim nations.

However, mainstream Turkish politicians, too, were quick to grasp the opportunity to paint a bright picture of a new Turkic world stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Chinese borderlands with Turkey at its centre. And it was the late president Turgut Özal who told his countrymen and the world that the 21st century would be the "Turkish century"⁷ Turkish politicians, however, were encouraged in the propagation of such schemes by the Western media and Turkey's most important Western ally, the US. In early 1992, secretary of state James Baker, during a trip to various Central Asian capitals, recommended to the

political leaders of the new republics, the adoption of the Turkish model for their political and economic development.⁸ European politicians and media, too, voiced their opinion to that respect.

This coincidence of political outlooks of Turkey and her Western partners was, however, based on different motivations. For Turkey's political leaders, the new situation in the former Soviet Union offered another opportunity to restore the country's political and strategic importance for the West, which had faced the risk of a serious decline in the immediate wake of the end of the Cold War when the long-standing Soviet threat to the West evaporated almost over night and with it Turkey's role as a Western bulwark.⁹ Western politicians saw Turkey's new mission as an important part of a new containment policy against the new strategic threat of Islamic fundamentalism, especially in its Iranian-sponsored style. For them it was of great urgency to prevent the spreading of fundamentalist Islam into a politically highly unstable region in which there existed, moreover, the risk of an uncontrolled proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear missiles.

Before this background of political opinions, strategies and developments, it was a more or less foregone conclusion that Central Asia not only would but, moreover, should become Turkey's sphere of influence. Turkey was regarded as one of the new regional powers of the new international order with influence in Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Black Sea Region, the Balkans and the Middle East. ¹⁰

However, there existed some serious obstacles to the realisation of such ideas. On the one hand, Turkey did not seem to be the only contender for primacy in Central Asia. At least, Iran and Russia had to be reckoned with, the one as a likely contender with similar historic-cultural justifications for the establishment of a special relationship, and the latter as the heir to the former dominant power of the region with a continuous interest in keeping the new republics bound to the old relationship of economic and political dependency. And, then, there was the fundamental interest of the leaders of the Central Asian states in preventing the replacement of the former Russian 'big brother' by a new Turkish ağabey. What they wanted above all was to reap the fruits of their newly won political sovereignty by stabilising the political and economic independence of their countries as far as possible and, thus, stabilising at the same time, their own domestic position of undisputed leadership.

This was also realised by many Turkish analysts and politicians. They advocated a policy that, at the same time, should seek to bring Turkey into some type of privileged relationship with the new republics without, however, trying to establish Turkish domination over these states. As one of these analysts put it,

The principal objective of Turkish foreign policy towards the Turkish republics in Central Asia should be conceived as helping these countries to become pluralist, secular democracies, respectful of the rule of law, progressing towards a market economy, to adopt Turkey as a model on the basis of mutual advantage... . While pursuing these policy goals, Turkey should be careful to assure that her links with the Turkish Republics do not have pan-Turkist implications.¹¹

This two-pronged strategy, more or less, became the official line of Turkey's policy towards the new republics in Central Asia.

However, keeping the balance between still existing hopes of establishing a special relationship with some kind of a Turkish preferential position in the foreign relations of the Central Asian states, on the one hand, and, on the other, restricting Turkey's foreign policy towards Central Asia to good but normal foreign relations without any pretence of regional leadership, proved to be a difficult, almost impossible, task. At least, at the declaratory level, Turkish leaders hardly could prevent their words from sounding ambiguous and, thus, being misinterpreted. This happened since the early days of the new relations, for instance,

when in April 1992, the then prime minister Süleyman Demirel, during his visit to various Central Asian states, declared that Turkey did not have any intention of patronising the new republics but at the same time spoke of the possibility of establishing an association of a sovereign Turkic world in inter-national fora.¹² Political circles in Moscow and the Russian military elite took such language as proof of Turkey's intention to replace the Russian influence in the region. This view became even more prominent in Moscow the more the new concept of the 'near abroad' became a crucial element of Russian new foreign policy thinking.

TURKEY'S ACTIVITIES IN THE NEW CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS

Turkey's political activities towards the new republics, too, could be interpreted as efforts aiming at the establishment of a special relationship with a dominant position. In the very early days, Turkey could successfully take on the function of opening the doors of many Western international organisations for the Central Asian states, from the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe to the European Union to the NATO Cooperation Council. Turkey, in an even more general way, functioned as their gateway to the West. At the same time, Ankara offered substantial support for the economic development of the new republics and was also quick to provide technical assistance of various kind. The leaders of the Central Asian states, during their first visits to Turkey in December 1991, responded almost enthusiastically by declaring Turkey 'the morning star of Central Asia' or the model to follow in the development of their own country.¹³ Such rhetoric further bolstered the prevailing opinion of Turkey's public and her political leaders that a great international future for their country was in the offing.

Turkish politicians reacted accordingly. No other region has been travelled so often during the last five years by Turkish leaders and high ranking delegations than the new republics in Central Asia. As a result of these diplomatic activities, a broad pattern of political, economic and cultural relations has been developed that is embedded in a multitude of official declarations, treaties and agreements. Outstanding events in these respect have been the so-called 'Turkic Summits', i.e. meetings of the Turkish president with his counterparts from the Central Asian states, except Tajikistan but including Azerbaijan, that took place in 1992, 1994, and 1995 with the intention of making it a regular event.

The last two summits, however, have met with strong Russian criticism to the effect that their basic aim was the furthering of some type of pan-Turkish development in the region.¹⁴ The Central Asian leaders, but also Turkish politicians, were quick to deny any such intentions. The language of the political declarations commonly agreed upon at the meetings and, even more so, some of the accompanying Turkish declarations to the effect that Turkey's cooperation with the new republics was not directed against any other state and that, consequently, no other state had the right to interfere into the independent policies of the Central Asian states,¹⁵ however, could nurture suspicion in political circles in Moscow that are convinced of Turkey having second thoughts about her regional policy towards Central Asia.

Besides its bilateral diplomatic efforts, Turkey was also instrumental in the creation of regional economic and political links, especially as regards the revival and enlargement of the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO). Since 1992, the ECO included all Central Asian new republics, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan besides its original members Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. The ECO established an institutional set-up from the level of technical expert groups to the level of heads of state in order to promote concrete measures of multilateral cooperation among its members in economic, financial and technical fields. As many of these fields and even of the concrete projects are also part of Turkey's bilateral cooperation agreements with the various Central Asian states, Turkey may be faced with a choice between a more bilateral or a more multilateral approach in her relations with Central Asia.

With regard to concrete measures taken, however, the bilateral approach clearly dominates the relationship. Turkey was the first country to offer substantial economic assistance to the new republics after their independence. Turkish support was and is instrumental in developing market-orientated economic structures in these states. Besides offering the credit facilities of Turkey's EximBank to an amount of more than \$1bn, Turkey is active in establishing the telecommunications, infrastructure of the new republics and in developing the banking sector by the foundation of joint ventures between Turkish banks and Central Asian state-run banks. In addition to that, Turkish institutions are regularly engaged in the training of business and banking experts as well as of state officials from Central Asia in order to familiarise them with the working of market economy mechanisms.¹⁶

Turkish industry and business, too, discovered the new republics to be interesting markets. Construction firms are engaged in various projects like building modern hotels, airports or industrial plants. Other branches like the textile industry, too, try to benefit from developing business relations with Central Asian partners. Turkish trade with the region has shown a considerable growth over the last few years. However, Turkey is in no way in a position to outflank Russia as the main trading partner of Central Asia, and even among the non-CIS countries, Turkey not always ranks as the first trading partner of the various new republics. For Turkey, too, among the successor states of the former Soviet Union, Russia and the Ukraine are of greater importance as trading partners and general economic outlet than the Turkic republics.¹⁷

The main limiting factors in the development of economic relations between Turkey and the new republics are, on the one hand, the very slow diminution of the structural dependency of Central Asia's economies on economic links with Russia and other CIS countries and, on the other hand, Turkey's own shortage of economic and financial resources relative to the needs of the partners.¹⁸ Although, by Turkish standards, the country is doing a lot for and in the Turkic republics, Turkey is not really in a position to successfully deal with one of the main economic bottlenecks of those states, the fundamental shortage of hard currency, that prevents them from developing broader international economic activities. Turkey's capability for providing commercial loans and credit facilities is rather limited given the country's own foreign debt situation. This has also been realised by the Central Asian states and consequently led to a certain disappointment over Turkey and her leaders who proved to be unable to meet the high expectations raised by their rather optimistic declarations with regard to Turkish assistance during the 'honeymoon period' of the newly established relations.

Furthermore, Turkey, to the present, has tried without much success to solve another crucial problem of the economic development of some of the new republics, namely a more profitable utilisation of their mineral resources, especially oil and gas, by bringing them to the world market and thus creating substantial hard currency income. If there is a new 'Great Game' about to be played in the region, it is characterised by the rivalry of certain external actors concerning access to and transport of Central Asian oil and gas. The main players are the US and Russia, and in the second row we find Turkey and Iran plus some international energy consortia, whereas the countries of the region, mainly Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, do not play a very important role as independent actors in this game.¹⁹ Although finding almost unrestricted American support, Turkey has not been able to finally determine the transport routes of oil or gas. Up to the present, at least Russia has been able to keep its interests respected by the producer countries and the other players. Given the enormous business prospects of and the high politico-strategic stakes involved in the gas and oil issue of Central Asia²⁰, it is very unlikely that a quick result of the game will occur as long as the main players view it in terms of a zero-sum non-cooperative game.

Turkish political and economic efforts to establish itself as a dominant actor in the Central Asian region show, at best, mixed results so far. This is different as regards the area of cultural relations and influence. From the very beginning, Turkey, time and again, stressed its common ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural roots with the peoples of Central Asia. An indeed, it is in this area that one can speak of a potential basis for a special relationship between Turkey and the new republics. Turkey invested a lot in these types of relations. It

established a special television program, Avrasya, that since 1992, has been distributed to all Central Asian countries via satellite -since 1994 one of Turkish production- with the aim of contributing to the creation of some kind of common modern Turkish culture. The main problem with this approach is that, to the present, the programme reaches only a small part of the people in the new republics due to the lack of satellite dishes in many regions.

Besides this, Turkey undertook great efforts to make the new republics change their official script from the Cyrillic to a common Turkish version of the Latin alphabet. Although an agreement in principle to that effect was reached in 1993, the change is progressing rather slowly, which is due to the resistance of the Russian part of the population that lives in greater or lesser number in all new republics and still constitutes an important element of their technical and business elite. As long as even the political leaders of those states prefer to communicate with each other in Russian than in their Turkish mother tongues, 21 prospects for quick and extensive language reform in Central Asia remain dim.

These problems notwithstanding, Turkey has been able to establish herself as the main external cultural power in the region. Apart from the issues already mentioned, the distribution of Turkish print media, the large number of Turks that constantly visit the region, the considerable efforts concerning technical assistance of all kinds, also, in the field of education, the intake of about 10,000 students from the Turkish republics into Turkish universities over the last five years and the activity of important Turkish non-governmental actors, all contribute to that result.²²

As regards the latter, the various ethnically orientated organisations and foundations that try to gather the interests of Turkish citizen of Central Asian origin, several religious orders (tarikatarlar) and the activity of the Turkic States and Turkic Peoples' Friendship and Cooperation Groups deserve special mentioning. Whereas the first ones try to establish themselves as special representatives of relations with the various Central Asian states within Turkey, the latter two due to their more Islamic fundamentalist and pan-Turkish leanings are examples of a Turkish influence in the new republics that may cause headaches for the political leaders of these states.²³

SPECIAL RELATIONS, BUT NO POLITICALLY DOMINANT ROLE

All these activities put Turkey in a special position as regards cultural and scientific relations with the Turkic republics. She is only second to Russia in this respect. The result is the gradual establishment of a network of personal links between Turkey and the new republics that over time will create a sound basis for spreading Turkey's cultural and civilising influence in Central Asia. This, however, will not automatically translate itself into a position of special political prominence as can be seen, for instance, by the examples of Spain and Portugal and their respective relations with the Latin American states. Although cultural bonds and relations are not dissociated from political and economic relations, gaining a politically dominant position in a certain region depends on more and different factors. Unfortunately, in the Turkish case these are rather underdeveloped concerning Turkey's relations with the new republics.

Creating a sphere of influence means more than just being active in and having interests in some region. Although the concept of influence is not really well-defined, it implies at least that the interests and activities of a certain political actor are regarded as parameters for other actors' definition of interest and/or their activities. The notion 'sphere of influence', moreover, has an implicit connotation to the effect that a political actor enjoys some kind of singular influential position concerning a certain issue area or geographic region or both. In this sense, it comes fairly close to the concept of power which, in its classical definition, means that an actor is able to reach his goals against resistance or that he is able to prevent others from reaching their goals against his resistance. This, too, seemed to have been the conceptual mind frame of many analysts and politicians who have spoken of Turkey as being or as becoming a regional power or a role model concerning her relations with her new international environment.

Political developments over the last five years have shown that, at present, Turkey is a long way from living up to such expectations. There are various reasons for this conclusion.²⁴ As regards the relations with the new republics of Central Asia, the main factor can be seen in Turkey's objective inability to prevent Russia from starting a new and "sustained neo-imperial offensive despite its current domestic crises."²⁵ This is even more the case, as Turkey is engaged in a complex and complicated bilateral relationship with Russia. On the one hand, there is fierce competition between the two sides concerning the issue of transport routes for Caspian and Central Asian oil and gas that is very much connected to the problem of how and by whom to best secure peace and stability in the Caucasus region including military-strategic spill-overs of this problem to the issue of keeping or transforming the CFE regime.²⁶ On the other hand, there is a certain necessity of non-conflictual relations between Ankara and Moscow in order to continue a vast range of cooperative economic cooperation activities that are beneficial for both sides plus a common interest in solving maritime issues with respect to the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits. All this contributes to Turkey's reluctance to engage herself in a real power competition with Russia over Central Asian affairs.

Furthermore, Turkey has had to recognise that the leaders of the new republics themselves are not very interested in directing their foreign relations exclusively towards Ankara. They have come to realise that there are many other international actors that can be instrumental in the political and economic development of their countries that are willing to engage themselves in that task without using Turkey as a liaison. In this respect, one can mention at least Iran, China, the European Union, Israel, the US, South Korea, Germany and some international financial organisation like the IMF and the World Bank.²⁷ Hence, Central Asian leaders try to diversify their external relations as another means for pursuing the process of gradually distancing their countries from the Russian grip. This further limits Turkey's influence in the region given her restricted national resources to outbid any potential competitor. However, Ankara will remain of special importance to the new republics as long as some of the other actors are interested in or capable of developing their relations with Central Asia on such a broad scale as Turkey continues to do, notwithstanding the country's lasting inability to meet its partners needs and expectations.

This may over time lead to a situation where Russia also, due to lasting domestic political and economic constrains, will face serious difficulties in upholding its dominant position in Central Asia and where no other international actor, for similar reason, will be able to replace the Russians. Such a situation could lead to enhanced regional instabilities given the high intra-regional potential for crises and conflicts.²⁸ Turkey could become instrumental in preventing such a situation, not by trying to occupy Russia's place in the region, but by concentrating her political efforts on the gradual establishment of a network of regional functional regimes that would inextricably link the various Central Asian states to each other and to important extra-regional political actors and institutions, thus reducing the incentives for violent approaches to conflict resolution. Potential instruments for such a move are already in place with the ECO and the hundreds of multilateral and bilateral agreements that have been concluded between the new republics and most of their neighbours. This myriad of agreements is basically characterised by a high degree of redundancy and non-operationality. It would be a worthwhile task to try to structure and convert this from well-sounding declarations of good intentions into operating functional regimes covering issue areas from transportation system to communication networks to scientific cooperation to environmental rehabilitation, etc.

For this to happen, however, Turkey would have to change the philosophy of her approach to the new republics from trying to establish a special sphere of Turkish influence with Anatolia as its centre -an approach that will not work- to the role of a catalytic agent in the establishment of regional regimes. For this purpose Turkish and the international discourse about the conduct of relations with the new republics would have to stop stressing the issue of ethno-linguistic nearness to Turkic cousins and, instead, adopt an approach that is more guided by a contemporary philosophy of world problem management in the post-Cold War era. Sticking to geopolitics and Realpolitik will only continue to reveal Turkey's severe limitations in that respect whereas an alternative approach could even convince Ankara's

Western allies that the country needs more support for her Central Asian policy than it has actually got during the last few years. In this way, Turkey may also be able to turn the continuous Western political rhetoric about her high strategic importance for forging a new and stable order in the region south of the Russian Federation into real international cooperative efforts to the benefit of Central Asia.