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Abstract

This policy brief studies Turkey's contributions to the resolution of the Afghan conflict by focusing on its regional approach. The brief puts forth the argument that Afghanistan provides a good show-case to demonstrate the elements of a new security culture Turkey has adopted in its post-Cold War transformation. Reflecting the growing power of civilians in the making of foreign policy, Turkey's security culture has evolved in ways that it has embraced many liberal elements, which can be grouped under the concept of cooperative security. After a review of Turkey's involvement in Afghanistan in the post-2001 period, the brief traces how the notions of Afghan ownership and regional participation, products of Turkey's civilian power security culture, have shaped its response to this conflict-ridden country. A special attention is placed on various efforts Turkey has undertaken to regionalize its objective of political stabilization, and social and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, as well as the question of how its Afghanistan policy figured in Ankara's relationship with the United States.

Turkey's Regional Approach in Afghanistan: A Civilian Power in Action

Şaban Kardaş

Turkey's regional approach to the Afghan conflict reflects the transformations its foreign policy has been going through in recent years. Reflecting the growing power of civilians in the making of foreign policy, Turkey's security culture has evolved in ways that it has embraced many liberal elements, which can be grouped under the concept of cooperative security. Likewise, Turkey increasingly utilizes soft power instruments to supplement the new activism in its external relations. Replicating the behavior of civilian powers, Turkey also has made significant strides in joining the nations that have been carrying out conflict resolution, preventive diplomacy, and peace-building projects in conflict zones. Like other civilian powers seeking prestige in international affairs, Turkey has endeavored to carve out a role as regional peace-broker, offering mediation services in regional disputes. At the same time, parallel to the growth of its economic power, Turkey is progressively taking its place in the list of new donors, as its official development aid figures have increased remarkably.

This article will put forth the argument that Afghanistan provides a good show-case to demonstrate the elements of this new security culture. After a review of Turkey's involvement in Afghanistan in the post-2001 period, the article will trace how the notions of Afghan ownership and regional participation, products of Turkey's civilian power security culture, have shaped its response to this conflict-ridden country. A special attention will be placed on various efforts Turkey has undertaken to regionalize its objective of political stabilization, and social and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, as well as the question of how its Afghanistan policy figured in Ankara's relationship with the United States.

Traditional Parameters of Turkey's Relations with Afghanistan

Despite the lack of any direct territorial borders, Turkey considers Afghanistan as a country with which it needs to forge close relations. At one level, Turkey's interest in Afghanistan issues is justified with reference to cultural and historical arguments. At another level, since Turkey deems Central Asia as an area of strategic importance, it follows closely the developments in the region, including Afghanistan, as part of its regional policies, which will be discussed in greater length below.

Overall, cultural arguments occupy a large share in the Turkish debate on Afghanistan. Almost any commentary by a Turkish official or analyst starts with a reference to the brotherly ties and deep friendship that exist between the two countries, and moves on to argue that Turkey is under a historic responsibility to assist Afghanistan in its difficult times. Indeed, following the signing of the first bilateral agreement at the time of Turkish War of Independence in 1921, the Turk-Afghan Eternal Friendship Agreement of 1928 underscored the spirit of the relations in subsequent decades.¹ Turkey supported the young Afghan state, by sending advisors and assisting the formation of state institutions. At the same time, the shared Islamic culture is another element that undergirds the bilateral relationship. The presence of ethnic Uzbek, Turkmen, and other Turkic communities in the country forms yet another dimension to the cultural affinity between the two nations.

Turkey's support for the Afghan resistance against Soviet invasion was partly a reflection of this sense of solidarity. During the civil war that erupted after the withdrawal of Soviet forces, Turkey



underscored the need for a national reconciliation. Despite closer ties with its ethnic-kin Uzbeks, Turkey refrained from taking a clear side in the civil war. Turkey's non-interference policy and the emphasis on national reconciliation earned it sympathy among the Afghan groups in subsequent years. Following the US intervention in 2001, Turkish leaders again justified their involvement in Afghanistan as a duty that flows from this sense of historic responsibility. Moreover, to the extent that the increasing international involvement in Afghanistan was conceived as a geopolitical struggle for influence over Central Asia, as an assertive regional power, Turkey also grew interested in Afghan affairs.²

The positive cultural affiliation, on the one hand, facilitates Turkeys' entry into Afghanistan, as the local people are said be more receptive to a Muslim nation operating as part of the international forces.³ The Turkish sources usually maintain that

Turkey limited its military contributions to the provision of non-combat forces and focused on the training and equipping of Afghan security personnel.

Turkish military and civilian personnel in Afghanistan receive warm welcome, thanks to such historical and cultural ties. Often, Afghan people express their contentment over the presence of Turkish troops in

the international coalition, which the Turkish authorities see as their greatest asset.

On the other hand, this affinity with the local people sets a major constraint on Turkey's involvement in the country. As Turkey does not want to come into military confrontation with another Muslim nation, it has deliberately based its military contributions on the premise that it will not use force in other Muslim lands. Starting with its involvement in the international operations in Afghanistan from 2001 on, Turkey limited its military contributions to the provision of non-combat forces and focused on the training and equipping of Afghan security personnel. Later, Turkey increasingly concentrated its efforts on civilian instruments for reconstruction and resisted calls for raising its troop levels or committing troops to combat operations against Taliban.

Turkey in Post-2001 Afghanistan: A Brief Overview

Turkey's most visible contribution in Afghanistan has been its participation in ISAF since the latter's establishment by the UN in 2001.⁴ Turkey extended its logistical support for the coalition operations that led to the toppling of Taliban-led government and dismantling of al-Qaeda formations. Later, Turkey's experience and capabilities in peace support operations and its being the only Muslim member of NATO positioned it in a unique role when the United Nations authorized an international peace operation in the country. While avoiding combat missions, Turkey has contributed to the training of a national Afghan police and military force, and provided military aid and equipment, as well as undertaking patrols in Kabul and its environs in the first phase of the operation.

Following intense diplomatic negotiations between Turkey, the US and the UK, Turkey agreed to take over the ISAF (II) command from the UK in June 2002, increasing its force level to around 1400. In subsequent years, the operation was transferred to NATO and its mandate was extended to the entirety of the country. A Turkish politician, Hikmet Çetin, was appointed as NATO Secretary General's Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan who served two terms until August 2006. Turkey continued to provide troops to ISAF operations, while its force levels fluctuated between a few hundred and a few thousand in response to the changes in its commitment to the operation.



Socio-Economic Reconstruction: From Development Assistance to Afghan Ownership

Over time, Turkey increasingly accentuated the need for moving beyond military instruments and instead focusing on civilian

instruments to help Afghanistan's reconstruction. In Turkish perceptions, a comprehensive approach would touch on security, governance and economic development issues simultaneously. Moving from that assumption, in November 2006, Turkey set up a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Wardak province in the vicinity of Kabul, headed by a civilian and protected by its military forces.⁵ Building on the model developed in Wardak, Turkey opened a second PRT in the northern province of Jowzjan.⁶ The Turkish unit dispatched to Mezar-i Sherif as part the election monitoring efforts formed the core of this new PRT in an area populated by ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks. The inauguration of this PRT in July 2010 coincided with the Kabul Conference, and Turkish authorities underlined that the project was initiated upon the invitation by Afghan authorities.⁷ At the same time, the launching of this project in a province where Taliban was resurgent provided Turkey with a useful argument to resist to US demands for larger military contributions. In its PRTs, Turkey has adopted a civilian-based approach and sought to ensure maximum degree of communication with the local communities and help build social trust.

Turkey increasingly accentuated the need for moving beyond military instruments and instead focusing on civilian instruments to help Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Official Development Assistance (ODA)

Another area where Turkey's contribution in Afghanistan became visible has been ODA provided through the Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA).⁸ TIKA opened its first program coordination office in Kabul in October 2004 and its operations officially started in January 2005. Today, it has three operational field offices in Kabul, Wardak and Mazar-i Sharif, which have been instrumental in streamlining the growing volume of Turkish aid flowing into this country. Parallel to Turkey's growing utilization of ODA as a soft power tool in its foreign policy toolkit, in Afghanistan, it has undertaken many projects for the provision of basic services and

creation of a functioning and stable system respectful of basic rights and freedoms to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. TIKA's activities were concentrated in such fields as education, medical services, water purification and transportation infrastructure, as well as projects aiming capacity building in public administration. Reflecting the importance Turkey places on this country, following the opening of the TIKA Office in that country in 2004, Afghanistan has emerged as Turkey's number one ODA recipient by 2007 and remained at the top three since then. Between 2005 and 2009, Turkey committed US \$ 400 million ODA to Afghanistan. In 2010, Turkey's assistance to Afghanistan amounted to US \$ 107 million, and one third of this figure was disbursed through TIKA. In 2011, that momentum continued and Turkey channeled over US \$ 130 million to Afghanistan.⁹ The number and type of projects carried out with Turkish funds, provided either by TIKA or nongovernmental sources, have multiplied in the same period. By 2012, over 600 projects have been carried out by the TIKA in various sectors, while more than 80 schools were built.¹⁰



"Afghan Ownership:" Inclusive Security Approach at Work

A defining feature of Turkey's approach has been the emphasis placed on broadbased solutions that involve all major actors in Afghan politics. In that regard, while Turkey recognized the urgent need for creating a strong and sustainable central authority, hence supported the Karzai-led government in Kabul, it also underscored the necessity of including all major forces, even Taliban, into political processes. When, the attention shifted to Taliban's opening an office abroad to facilitate peace talks with the international community in late 2011, Turkey was offered as a possible venue, but, that idea did not materialize. The possibility of opening a liaison office in Turkey was brought to fore again in late 2012, but eventually, Taliban reached an agreement with Qatar to discuss opening a liaison office there. Turkey operated on the assumption that the international community's prospects

for establishing a secure and stable order in the country will hinge on the extent to which major local stakeholders are given a legitimate voice in determining the future of the country.

In that context, Turkey repeatedly emphasized “Afghan ownership,” by which it meant economic reconstruction, creation of a national army with the inclusion of all ethnic groups and national reconciliation.¹¹ In one sense, “Afghan ownership” as a principle meant neutrality, so that Turkey paid attention to maintaining an equal distance to various Afghan groups. More importantly, Turkey did so by refraining from pursuing a policy that is centered exclusively on groups with which it shares ethnic or linguistic ties. The concept of “Afghan ownership” also served

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as a practical guide in Turkey’s support for development and infrastructure projects in the country, so that it would play an assisting role in Afghan authorities’ efforts, by helping capacity building at local level.

Turkey’s Regional Approach to Afghan Conflict

As an extension of its inclusive approach to national reconciliation, Turkey also worked to achieve greater regional participation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. In recent years, Turkey concentrated its efforts on facilitating cooperation among regional countries and building capacity for regionally-based solutions to address the situation in Afghanistan. While embarking on this project, Turkey, in fact, has had accumulated experience from a previous case: its spearheading of “the platform of countries neighboring Iraq,” through which it had hoped to forestall the intermingling of regional countries in Iraq’s domestic affairs and to dampen tensions in the Middle East, as part of a wider plan to prevent further destabilization of Iraq and the region.¹² Turkey’s regional approach has been one of the successful foreign policy initiatives in recent years and has earned it applauds in the region and the international community at large.

Turkey-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Process

A major component of Turkey's regional policy was its initiation of the trilateral process bringing together Afghan and Pakistani presidents under the patronage of Turkish President. With this process, Turkey wanted to allay the double-edged concerns that were shared by the Western community as well. Turkey acknowledged the crucial leverage Islamabad could exercise in Afghanistan's domestic affairs. By bringing a major player such as Pakistan on board, Turkey hoped to ensure Islamabad would play a more constructive role in the stabilization of Afghanistan. Turkey at the same time worked for closer security cooperation between the two neighbors, endeavored to address the concerns that violence in Afghanistan might spread to Pakistan, causing instability there. Ankara initiated the process to avoid Pakistan's isolation in the international community, since Turkey was concerned that Pakistan would become the next target of the international community on the grounds that it was becoming a hotbed of terrorism in the region.¹³

Starting with the first meeting in Ankara in April 2007, Turkey has hosted seven tripartite summits, which provided an important venue, to enable direct communication between the Afghan and Pakistani leaders.

Starting with the first meeting in Ankara in April 2007, Turkey has hosted seven tripartite summits, which provided an important venue, first and foremost, to enable direct communication between the Afghan and Pakistani leaders. For instance, the Ankara Declaration of 2007 expressing determination to maintain dialogue, respect each other's territorial integrity and make a commitment to refrain from interfering in domestic affairs was the first joint statement signed by the two leaders. Working groups were set up as part of this process to cope with contentious issues such as the return of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. Turkey discussed with each respective country its bilateral relations and ways to coordinate Turkey's assistance.

Following the second summit in December 2008 in Istanbul, the parties decided to enhance security cooperation in military

matters including fighting against terrorism and drug trafficking. The Turkish Union of Chambers of Commerce and Commodities (TOBB), in partnership with its equivalent bodies from the two nations, formed the Istanbul Forum to bring together the representatives of business sector. The meetings among the representatives of the business communities continued during the subsequent summits. After the third summit in April 2009, the parties expressed determination to cooperate in intelligence sharing. The participation of Pakistani President, Army Chief and head of intelligence in an international meeting with their Afghan counterparts was seen as an achievement in and of itself.



At the fourth tripartite meeting in January 2010 in Istanbul, a consensus was reached to work on the establishment of a new mechanism to improve the cooperation between the two neighbors, as well as initiating dialogue between the education ministries of the three countries. Moreover, according to an agreement between Turkish Prime Minister and Afghan President, in particular, Turkish armed forces and police have started training Afghan security personnel in Turkey in order to enhance their capabilities in counter-terrorism.¹⁴ TIKA also committed to open new schools as part of an agreement to further cooperation in education. TOBB, too, decided

to undertake projects with its counterparts from Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to deepen economic exchanges between private sectors of the three countries, under which Turkey would provide training and assistance. Meanwhile, the bilateral trade volume between Turkey and Afghanistan stood at around US \$ 260 million in 2010, with Turkey ranking in Afghanistan's top ten foreign trade partners. Turkish constructors also undertook infrastructure projects in the country, the total value of which exceeded US \$ 3 billion in 2010.¹⁵

The fifth tripartite meeting was held in Ankara on the margins of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) summit in December 2010. As a concrete outcome of the decisions taken at the summit, in March 2011, Afghan and Pakistani infantry units participated in a joint military exercise with their Turkish colleagues in Istanbul. The drills focused on enhancing participating armies' cooperation and interoperability in urban warfare.¹⁶ Reflecting the institutionalization of that process, the sixth meeting was held in November 2011, while the seventh meeting took place in December 2012. During these meetings, consultations on cooperation in intelligence and security affairs continued. Since the seventh meeting took place soon after a life attempt against the Afghan spy chief, by a suicide attacker allegedly entered into the country from Pakistan, the tension between the two countries was heightened again. The summit helped dampen the tensions, as well as offering a platform for discussing how to proceed in conducting the talks with Taliban. At the same time, in order to contribute toward the improvement of regional trade, closer attention was paid in these meetings on how to enhance transportation infrastructure between the two countries.

Towards Regionalizing Afghanistan: Istanbul Process

At the fourth tripartite meeting, Turkey also undertook a major step in the direction of further “regionalizing” its diplomatic efforts at a broader platform. Turkey invited neighbors of Afghanistan to attend a conference, entitled, Istanbul Summit on Friendship and Cooperation in the “Heart of Asia,” held on the sidelines of the trilateral summit. Among others, the participants agreed to establish a minds platform bringing together experts, work towards capacity building programs in select areas, organize natural disaster response simulation exercises, and develop projects for job creation and infrastructure building.

Through this process, Turkey moved to generate greater synergy between its efforts and various other bilateral, trilateral or regional initiatives that have been launched to address the security situation

in Afghanistan on the one hand, and the bilateral disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the other. Continuing on the same path, Turkey actively supported the London Conference the same month and the Kabul Conference in July 2010. Similarly, Turkey's decision to hold the fifth tripartite meeting on the margins of the ECO's eleventh summit in Istanbul highlighted how Turkey endeavored to create a direct link between its projects and other regional processes to stimulate greater regional cooperation in trade, communication, transportation and energy towards the shared objective of the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Most remarkably, Turkey hosted the fourth meeting of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) in November 2010 in Istanbul. Of particular note, Turkey also organized a business meeting within the framework

of the Istanbul Forum and an academic platform on the outskirts of the RECCA IV, underscoring the importance it attaches to adopting a multidimensional approach for the resolution of the conflict. TOBB pledged to undertake major projects to develop transportation infrastructure through the construction and upgrade of roads and railways, the modernization of customs gates, and

the harmonization of legal transit regulations in line with global norms.¹⁷ Turkey hopes that such projects under the rubric of reviving the historic Silk Road could make a major contribution to regional cooperation in Central Asia, but the realization of such nascent ideas will require the establishment of security inside Afghanistan and the emergence of a mutual understanding among regional countries to work together towards a common objective.

In 2011, Turkey undertook new steps to institutionalize its regional efforts towards Afghanistan. In close partnership with the UN, Turkey hosted the inaugural meeting of the Regional Cooperation Working Group on Afghanistan in June 2011 to study the best practices pertaining to regional cooperation,



which brought together representatives from five international organizations and 31 countries. The Working Group also prepared the groundwork for “Istanbul Conference for Afghanistan” held in November 2011, at the outskirts of which the sixth tripartite meeting also took place. The Istanbul Conference worked to make contributions to the Bonn Conference (II) in December 2011.¹⁸

By that time, “Istanbul process” came to be recognized by the international community as one of the major mechanisms to address the security situation in Afghanistan. To reflect that growing acceptance, “Istanbul process” became a label to describe subsequent meetings where the regional countries agreed on the lowest common denominator: the adoption of a series of confidence building measures. In many ways, those measures were building on the areas of cooperation Turkey, and for that matter other countries, developed vis-à-vis Afghanistan in their bilateral policies. In the subsequent meetings efforts were made to materialize at least some of these measures through

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closer multilateral cooperation. For instance, in the foreign ministerial meeting held in Kabul in June 2012 as part of the Istanbul process, specific steps to develop confidence building measures in such areas as fighting narcotics trafficking, as well as cooperation in education, infrastructure, disaster management, terrorism and other fields.

Though its immediate focus was to address the situation in Afghanistan, by bringing together the regional actors from such a wide geography, the Istanbul process also served as a major platform to facilitate intra-regional dialogue and consultations. As it worked to introduce those confidence building measures, the Istanbul process interestingly facilitated the coordination between different regional organizations, with an eye to ensure greater harmonization among various efforts focused on Afghanistan. Especially after the announcement of the withdrawal

of international forces from the country by 2014, that mechanism became another venue to address the future of Afghanistan at the regional level. It, however, needs to be noted that in addition to Turkey's initiatives, other regional organizations have initiated different processes to address the challenges of Afghan transition, while other bilateral or trilateral mechanisms were also attempted by other neighbors and regional actors.

Main Themes Underpinning Turkey's Regional Approach

A major theme that underpins Turkey's recent initiatives is the notion of indivisibility of regional security. Based on this notion,

To turn the vicious circle of instability and underdevelopment into a virtuous circle of peace and prosperity, Turkey has underlined the need to address the security gap in Afghanistan.

Turkey tends to perceive the stability of Afghanistan directly linked to the security and stability of the wider region. Therefore, Turkey's emphasis on "cooperation in the heart of Asia" to describe the Istanbul process underscores the centrality of Afghanistan for broader

regional security. To turn the vicious circle of instability and underdevelopment into a virtuous circle of peace and prosperity, Turkey has underlined the need to address the security gap in Afghanistan. If unattended, the security vacuum in Afghanistan poses the risk of spreading to Afghanistan's neighbors and beyond, considering the cross-boundary nature of the situation in the country. For its part, despite the absence of direct borders with this country, Turkey deals with threats from terrorism, narcotics and arms trafficking originating from Afghanistan, and seeks to address them through joint programs with Afghan security forces.

The following section from the final statement of the Istanbul Summit summarizes Turkey's emphasis on the indivisibility of security:

The success of one regional country in standing up against challenges positively reverberates in neighbouring countries, while shortcomings also afflict the neighbours. We are convinced that our region as a whole should take determined and coordinated action to address the complex challenges that characterise the contemporary regional environment.¹⁹

A second theme shaping Turkey's approach is regional ownership. For Turkey, the starting point was to bridge the wide gap in the approaches of Afghanistan's neighbors.²⁰ Turkish authorities underscored that one factor that worsened the already alarming situation in Afghanistan was different and at times conflicting policies pursued by Afghanistan's neighbors. What Turkey does not want to see is regional powers jockeying for influence in Afghanistan, where each player is acting with its individual agenda. Just as Turkey refrained from manipulating Afghan domestic politics by capitalizing on its ties with ethnic kin, it has moved to initiate mechanisms in an effort to ensure that other regional powers are restrained from pursuing damaging unilateral policies.



Taken together with the first theme, i. e., the tight interdependence between the regional and Afghan security, Turkey treats policy coordination at the regional level as an essential element of peace and stability in the wider region. If the idea of regional ownership takes hold in this volatile corner of the world and trust among the neighboring countries can be established, it might offer the best way to tackle the many destabilizing forces that are all trans-boundary and require regional responses, such as terrorism, drug and human trafficking and organized crime. The final declaration of the RECCA IV platform captured very-well Turkey's emphasis on regional ownership, when the participants

Stressed that regional cooperation with Afghanistan begins with the support of regional neighbors, bears

great potential and is effective when it is regionally owned, steered and governed in a sincere, transparent and constructive manner.²¹

A related theme informing Turkey's approach is the tight coupling between security and development. In that regard, during his address at the fifth tripartite summit, Turkish President Abdullah Gül underlined clearly that Turkey sees a direct link between security and economic development and therefore works on concrete projects to ensure Afghanistan and Pakistan have functioning economic systems.²² Turkey sees the creation of a secure environment as a precondition for regional cooperation in different issue areas. While many other parts of the world have reaped the benefits of regionalization, political instability in Central Asia has plagued the regional countries. Turkey has underscored that if regional countries could manage to develop joint trade, transportation or energy projects, such as Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, they could prosper together and solve regional conflicts such as Afghanistan.

Last but not the least, Turkey has also appreciated the value of incrementalism in its approach towards Afghanistan. Both in its own involvement in Afghan reconstruction and its regional approach Turkey warned against hasty steps or expectation of immediate results. It emphasized the value of regional countries' having a shared vision and mutual trust about the future of Afghanistan, but also noted that it could come through gradual steps such as the confidence building measures emphasized earlier. As Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Prof. Dr. Davutoğlu argued, Turkey acted on the assumption that "the implementation of these confidence building measures should not be rushed and a sustained and incremental approach in implementation should be maintained."²³

Factors Behind Turkey's Regional Approach

For Turkey, the growing engagement in the resolution of the Afghan conflict and its attempts to solve the disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan are partly related with the historical

and cultural factors. But more importantly, Turkey's approach to Afghanistan is an extension of the transformation of Turkish foreign policy in recent decades. Turkey, one of the rising powers with aspirations for regional leadership, has worked to gain greater international clout through its assertive involvement in various neighboring regions simultaneously. Sometimes self-referencing their country as a central-country to accentuate its multi-regional identity, Turkish leaders have worked to render it an effective player in the economic and political affairs of neighboring regions. Moreover, in order to supplement its pursuit of "zero problems with neighbors," Turkey has been working to create a peaceful environment in areas beyond its immediate neighborhoods.

To realize its regional ambitions, Turkey mainly eschewed power politics and relied heavily on soft power instruments, which led some analysts to call it a benign regional power.²⁴

From its own experience, Turkey realizes that achieving a peaceful and prosperous regional order depends on the existence of stable and functioning states. In its immediate regions of the Middle East and Balkans,

Turkey has gone through a process of normalizing its relations with its neighbors and assumed a leadership role to promote regional integration. Turkey, in many ways, replicates the civilian powers which seek to gain influence through non-coercive instruments such as diplomacy, development and peace-building.²⁵

In the case of Afghanistan, Turkey projects this rather liberal security culture onto Central Asia and South Asia and seeks to stimulate a similar regional process in the region as a means to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. Turkish leaders believe their main asset in this endeavor is Turkey's positive bilateral relations with Afghanistan and many of its neighbors, and Ankara could use its relatively neutral position to generate a broad-based regional participation. The trilateral process and accompanying broad-based regional initiatives, in return, could complement

Turkey, one of the rising powers with aspirations for regional leadership, has worked to gain greater international clout through its assertive involvement in various neighboring regions simultaneously.

Turkey's policy of building strategic partnerships with new actors beyond its immediate neighborhood. At the same time, such proactive involvement in regional affairs relying on civilian power attributes is seen as part of Turkey's overall drive for becoming a more assertive actor in global politics. Turkey sought to use especially the momentum generated by its term as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2009–2010) to augment its efforts on Afghanistan. Similarly, as Afghanistan occupies a major place in NATO's agenda, Turkey also used its role in that organization and contributions to Afghanistan to gain a larger say in the transatlantic security agenda, as was reflected in NATO's Chicago Summit in May 2012.

Afghanistan as an Item in Turkish-American Relations



both sides have taken courageous steps to revitalize the bilateral relations, given the parties' overlapping interests in joint action in various issues in the Middle East, Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia. Despite occasional quarrels with its Western partners, overall, Turkey prioritized its membership into the transatlantic community, as a result of which it did not risk completely deviating from the decisions taken by the Alliance and continued to coordinate its Afghanistan policy with NATO and the United States.

Turkey's involvement in Afghanistan has increasingly emerged as an item in its relations with the United States and NATO. Turkey's increasing assertiveness in regional affairs occasionally put it at odds with its traditional ally United States during the Bush administration, which even led to questions as to whether Ankara was still committed to the Atlantic Alliance. With the election of Barack Obama as the president,

Initially, as the new period of Turkey's regionally-driven activism corresponded to AfPak Strategy developed by the new US President, Turkey's potential contribution to Afghanistan came to be considered as a means to revive the US-Turkish strategic partnership and act in partnership with the West. However, by that time Turkey had made clear its position that the solution to the Afghan conflict would rest on the utilization of non-military instruments and inclusion of all Afghan groups in political processes. While agreeing with Obama's AfPak strategy in principle, Turkey, thus, rebuked the demand for greater military contribution. Instead, both in the context of Afghanistan and Pakistan, Turkey drew attention to the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in these countries and argued for more effective utilization of civilian instruments. As it subscribed to a non-military and inclusive approach, Turkey offered mediation services to promote dialogue between Afghan factions on the one hand, and Afghanistan and its neighbors, on the other. Thus, this reference to a non-military approach to the conflict had an instrumental value: while it eased Turkey's task of distancing itself from the American policies and carving space as an independent-minded civilian power in global politics, it also enabled Turkey to maintain cooperation with the United States.

Both in the context of Afghanistan and Pakistan, Turkey drew attention to the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in these countries and argued for more effective utilization of civilian instruments.

In particular, through 2009, Turkey resisted to the demands coming from the United States for increasing the number of Turkish military personnel as part of "troop surge," and expanding the Kabul command's mandate towards the South, where the Taliban was resurgent, fearing that it might force Turkey to carry out combat operations. Previously, Turkey had been confronted with a similar situation during the Bush administration. In 2006, it gave a cold shoulder to US requests for combat forces, as Chief of General Staff said that no single Turkish soldier would go there for such a mission.²⁶ While the United States reportedly requested 1000 additional Turkish troops following the April 2009 NATO

Summit, Turkey insisted that with the 1750 troops deployed in the country, it was already making a crucial contribution.²⁷ Since Turkey also objected to the selection of Anders Fogh Rasmussen as new NATO chief, Afghanistan-related disagreements were particularly visible in its relationship with the transatlantic community. Turkey emphasized that its military contributions will be limited to ensuring security in its area of responsibility, providing logistical assistance to other international forces, while continuing the training and equipping of Afghan security forces.

Turkey managed to find a common ground with the United States and developed a working relationship with the Alliance in Afghanistan, having removed his objections to Rasmussen's election. Initially, the deployment of the American forces withdrawn from Iraq to Afghanistan reduced the urgency of the demands from Turkey. Over time, Turkey's emphasis on training

of Afghan police and army was acknowledged by the United States as a valuable contribution, especially in the context of the scheduled withdrawal of international forces by 2014 and handing the security to local forces.²⁸

Turkish leaders made it clear that they will remain committed to Afghanistan's reconstruction even beyond 2014.

In return, Turkey also responded positively to NATO's requests for greater contribution, as reflected by Ankara's extension of its Kabul command for another year by November 2011 and announcement of this decision symbolically on the eve of Rasmussen's visit to Ankara.²⁹ Turkish leaders made it clear that they will remain committed to Afghanistan's reconstruction even beyond 2014. They justified this policy with reference to Turkey's historic responsibility toward Afghanistan as well as its role perception as a major regional power.³⁰

What also worked to Turkey's advantage was perhaps a similar transformation in the Western powers' policies in the wake of Obama's announcement of a new Afghanistan strategy and Karzai's reelection, which increasingly came to recognize the necessity of national reconciliation, if possible through the inclusion of Taliban into political processes.³¹ At this juncture,

Turkey claimed credit for having advocated broad-based national dialogue and accelerated regional dialogue, which, in Turkish perspective, facilitated the wider international community's task of developing a new strategy.³² For instance, the growing convergence between Turkey's and other Western powers' positions was instrumental in paving the way for the London conference in late January 2010, which was held only a few days after the regional meeting in Istanbul. While Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu worked in close coordination with his British counterpart David Milliband to ensure the success of the meeting, some themes discussed in the conference, such as the integration of moderate elements of Taliban into political processes, resonated well with Turkey's position. A similar coordinated action was observed in 2011, as the Istanbul meeting ahead of the Bonn conference provided a platform for discussion of the issues on the agenda.

Conclusion

Turkey believes that it has managed to develop a genuine, Ankara-centered approach and plan of action for the solution of the conflict, based on Afghan ownership and regional participation. It has emphasized that comprehensive peace-building rests on the integration of all groups into political processes, along with the utilization of civilian instruments.

Turkey hopes to assist the resolution of the problem with a helping hand model, by creating a more conducive regional environment in which Afghan political actors can work towards national reconciliation. However, the regional approach has yet to produce concrete outcomes, as far as pacification of Afghanistan is concerned, which is a must for economic development and political stabilization.

The major challenge before the success of the regional approach is the dim prospects of the Afghan actors' ability to achieve



national reconciliation. A lasting solution to the Afghan conflict lies inside the country and it will be up to the local political actors to decide on the fate of their country. As the resurgence of violence attests, despite the growing recognition of the principle of regional ownership in the region and beyond, there is no clear breakthrough in sight. The new strategy of integrating the Taliban into Afghan political life, supported by the regional countries and the broader international community, has failed to produce a negotiated settlement inside the country, as the withdrawal of international forces is slowly underway.

That said, a related challenge before regional vision is the poor condition of the existing regional institutional architecture, both in terms of physical infrastructure and legal regulations.³³ The countries in the region have lagged behind other parts of the world that have come a long way towards setting up effective multilateral mechanisms and regional organizations. In an

environment where many of the regional countries are beset with political and economic crises of their own or still share different views regarding Afghanistan and the Western presence in the country, there are grounds to maintain skepticism towards the prospects of regional

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countries' ability to instigate a process of conflict transformation inside Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the dialogue among the Afghanistan's neighbors and other key actors on the situation in Afghanistan interestingly stimulated greater awareness about the intrinsic value of regional cooperation in addressing such challenges as Afghanistan.

At the same time, the evolution of the domestic conditions in Afghanistan is hard to predict. As the withdrawal of international forces is in horizon, Afghanistan has not achieved a stable public order and nationally recognized political structures. Afghanistan is still far from having functioning and selfsustaining economic structures, for foreign aid flowing into the country accounts for a

large part of the country's economic activity. As Turkey's emphasis on incrementalism underscores, progress in these realms will be contingent on time. However, the weak security environment in the country is working against the reconstruction process, and as such rendering the direction of the transition beyond 2014 uncertain.

For its part, the civilian power Turkey is committed to promote the regionally-focused solutions and the continuation of the regional approach in tandem with the assistance of the international community. Especially, Turkey has played an instrumental role in helping build confidence among the regional countries through the Istanbul process, as well as the trilateral mechanism. Despite Turkey's relative achievement in promoting regional cooperation in its immediate neighborhood in recent years, given its physical distance to Afghanistan, its own limitations and the complexity of the conflict, Turkey alone has fewer instruments to change the situation on the ground. The regional approach can only succeed if other regional countries, too, rise to the challenge and subscribe to the notion of regional ownership. Even then, regional approach is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition, and it will be up to Afghan political actors to break the vicious cycle of conflict.

Endnotes

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- 3 In the literature on intrastate peacekeeping operations, the ethnic cultural affinity between peacekeepers and conflict parties is usually seen a positive factor contributing success, while others question it. See: Paul F. Diehl, *International Peacekeeping*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, pp.124-129.
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- 5 See the official website of the Wardak PRT, at <http://www.vardakprt.org/>.
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 - 14 Turkey later signed a protocol with Japan to jointly train Afghan police in Turkey. The first cohort of Afghan police started receiving their training in July 2011. "Afgan Polisleri Eğitim İçin Sivas'ta", *Doğan Haber Ajansı*, 14 July 2011.
 - 15 See, Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK), *Afganistan Ülke Bülteni*, June 2011.
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