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HOW TURKEY EXERCISES ITS NEW GRAND STRATEGY: AN OUTLINE

DAVID BATASHVILI

85

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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After centuries spent first as a great power and then as a secondary but still geostrategically active power, Turkey's defeat in World War I brought about its retirement from the role of an active player on the international stage. Throughout the remaining first half of the 20th century and then the Cold War, Turkey's strategy was mostly concerned with maintaining its own security. Isolated episodes like the Cyprus War of 1974 did not amount to a consistent effort to extend Turkey's influence beyond its borders.

With the conclusion of the Cold War, things began to change. The end of the tight superpower duel between the US and the USSR increased Turkey's strategic opportunities, including in the Middle East. The break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia allowed Ankara to reach out to the newly (re-)established nations and Turkey was reasonably prepared to take this opportunity – it was more modernized and had a stronger economy than it used to have in previous historical periods. By the time the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power 2002, Turkey's new active international stance had already been lively discussed by observers.¹

Under the AKP rule, Turkish foreign strategy became a more comprehensive and purposeful endeavor. An important role in its conceptual formulation belongs to Ahmet Davutoglu who was the Chief Advisor to the then Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, from 2003 to 2009, before becoming the Foreign Minister (2009-2014) and then the Prime Minister (2014-2016).

Davutoglu is a rare example of an academic strategic thinker who had an opportunity to actually try and implement some of his ideas in national policy. In his well-known book, *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position* (2001), Davutoglu argued that Turkey needs to become a geopolitical center like it used to be in the past and exert its influence in the regions around it, including the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus and in the Islamic world in general. Under the AKP government, Turkey has been working to do exactly that.

The conceptual basis for Turkey's new grand strategy has been reflected in the rhetoric of its leaders. In 2013, Davutoglu promised that Turkey would “again tie Sarajevo to Damascus, Benghazi to Erzurum to Batumi,” adding that “these may look like all different countries to you, but Yemen and Skopje were part of the same country 110 years ago, or Erzurum and Benghazi.”² In his post-local election speech in March 2014, Erdogan

thanked supporters not only in Turkey but also in Palestine and Egypt as well as “brothers in the Balkans, in Bosnia, in Macedonia, in Kosovo...”³ In his victory speech after the presidential election of 10 August 2014, Erdogan said that “not only Turkey, today also Islamabad, Erbil, Beirut, Sarajevo, Skopje, Hama, Homs, Ramallah, Gaza, Jerusalem, have all won.”⁴ There is little in common between these places except that in the past they (except Islamabad) used to be parts of the Ottoman Empire.

The Turkish geostrategic vision and ambition are definitely not limited to just political rhetoric. They are also implemented as practical foreign policy, specific examples of which are discussed below, with numerous concrete actions that involve spending considerable resources and, sometimes, taking serious risks.

Another important point to note is that the resignation of Davutoglu from the post of Prime Minister and, apparently, from active politics in May 2016 did not have any serious effect on the Turkish geostrategy. The course has been set, at least for the AKP government, and its basic essence no longer depends on the presence of specific individuals among decision-makers.

The Syrian Maelstrom

The most spectacular present example of Turkey’s new geostrategy is, of course, Syria. Regardless of the success or failure of Turkish policy in that country, events in Syria have involved some of the most robust actions by modern Turkey beyond its borders.

Prior to 2011, Turkey was content to exercise its active policy in the Levant region through relatively soft means. An important example of that policy was Ankara’s agreement to set up a free trade and travel zone with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, announced on 10 June 2010.⁵ At that time, Turkey pragmatically engaged with the Assad government, among other neighbors.

With the start of the rebellion in Syria in 2011, Turkey radically changed its stance, adopting hard power means for achieving its goals in the country and launching a political and covert effort to support the rebels against the regime.

Representing the Alawi sect – a branch of Shia Islam – Assad’s regime was (and remains) an ally of Iran. Most probably, no amount of diplomatic,

economic and soft power connections with Turkey would ever be enough to change that reality. But if the power in Syria were to pass to the hands of the Sunnis, who constitute the majority of the country's population and generally oppose Assad, the equation would change fundamentally. In that case, establishing firm and long-term Turkish influence in Syria would become realistic.

Thus, Ankara put its stakes on the expectation that Assad's regime would be unable to survive the resistance by a majority of Syrians and fall. Turkey went all in for the rebels, abandoning the option of having Assad as a partner ever again. Yet Iranian and Russian support to Assad, as well as bewildering disunity among the opposition, allowed the regime in Damascus to survive. Moreover, as Syria unraveled, Turkey had to face two new problems, besides the bitter enmity with the Syrian regime. One was the Kurdish take-over of territory in north-eastern and northern Syria. Another was the establishment of Daesh (the so-called "Islamic State" or ISIS) on the Turkish border.

When the defeat of Daesh at the hands of the Kurds opened up the perspective for a de facto independent Syrian Kurdistan along what is still formally called the Turkish-Syrian border, Ankara made the decision to escalate its involvement in Syria from political and covert activities to direct military action. In August 2016, Turkey launched its operation in northern Syria. Most of the infantry consisted of the Turkish-backed Syrian rebels but the special forces, armor and air force that took part in the offensive belonged to the Turkish military.

Turkey achieved the main initial objective of that military operation – preventing the unification of the westernmost Kurdish enclave with the bulk of the Kurdish-controlled territory. Moreover, there is now a Turkish zone of control in northern Syria.

Nonetheless, Turkey's position in the country remains difficult.

The Syrian Kurds now govern a considerable part of Syria and their leading political force – the PYD – is closely aligned with the Kurdish PKK rebels in Turkey that are waging an insurgency against the Turkish government. Ankara's only practical option that would change this state of affairs would be a direct military attack against the Syrian Kurds. As of May 2017, such a potential move is blocked by the Americans who are engaged with the Kurds in a joint operation against Daesh. Even if the US withdrew its

support of the Syrian Kurds, a large-scale military operation against them would be a difficult and bloody affair for Turkey.

The Assad regime remains Ankara's enemy while the Syrian rebels' military position as of May 2017 is pretty much catastrophic. On the fringes of Turkey's zone of control in northern Syria, the Turkish-backed rebels now face off with the Russian-backed Assad forces. It is not very clear how that situation is going to play out in the future.

To summarize, so far Turkish involvement in Syria has not paid off. Instead of a Sunni government offering opportunities to steadily increase Turkey's clout in the country, Ankara has one huge problem on its southern border without any obvious solutions.

At the same time, Turkey has demonstrated in Syria that it is willing to conduct robust military and covert activities beyond its borders when it deems such moves necessary or advantageous.

Iraq: A Kurdish Partner and the Mosul Question

As a Shia-majority nation, the post-Saddam Iraq is destined to have a closer connection to Iran than to Turkey. This, however, concerns the central government in Baghdad as well as the Shia areas in the south and center of the country. Its northern regions have Kurdish and Sunni Arab majorities and that is where Turkey has been making an effort to build influence.

Iraqi Kurdistan is now in effect an independent entity with only nominal confederate ties to Baghdad. It is also a close partner of Ankara. The relationship goes back to the years after the Gulf War of 1991 when Turkey intervened in the Kurdish region's civil war on the side of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which ended up in control of Iraqi Kurdistan's government. Turkey also conducted operations against the PKK insurgents operating on the Iraqi side of the border. Ankara's cooperation with the KDP resulted in the establishment of permanent Turkish military bases that have existed in Iraqi Kurdistan since the 1990s.⁶

Overall, Ankara and the Iraqi Kurd leadership have been consistently engaged in a political and economic cooperation, including the export of oil from Iraqi Kurdistan through Turkish territory against the expressed will of the Baghdad government.

After Daesh conquered the Sunni-majority areas of northern Iraq, including their major city of Mosul, in 2014, it was obvious that sooner or later those territories were going to be taken back from the jihadists. Turkey decided it needed to have a stake in this process in order to gain influence in the region around Mosul after it was liberated from Daesh.

The Turkish military established its presence at the Bashiqa base, about 15 kilometers north-east of the city of Mosul, training Iraqi Kurdish forces and local Sunni Arab armed groups⁷ and supporting them in the fight against Daesh.⁸

Iraqi government protests against the Turkish military presence on its territory have been in vain⁹ despite Baghdad's statements that the presence of Turkish troops might cause "a regional war."¹⁰

President Erdogan responded to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's demands to withdraw Turkish troops from his country by saying: "You are not at my level. You are not my equivalent. You are not of the same quality as me," adding that "screaming and shouting in Iraq" was of no importance to Ankara. Erdogan also said that after the liberation of Mosul from Daesh, "only Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Sunni Kurds should remain there."¹¹ Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said Turkey would be "at the table" in the operation to take Mosul from Daesh and trying to ignore it would mean making "big mistakes."¹²

As a matter of fact, the leading role in the operation to retake Mosul, launched in the fall of 2016, has been taken by Baghdad government forces. As of May 2017, it remains unclear to what extent Turkey will be able to gain influence in the Mosul area after the final defeat of Daesh. Regardless of the outcome of the Mosul issue, however, Turkey's activities there clearly demonstrate that its robust actions in Syria are far from being just an isolated case.

Reaching to the South of the Levant

In the south-western part of the Fertile Crescent, Ankara's policy has been softer as compared to its other lands closer to the Turkish border.

The most important actor that Turkey supports in that region is Hamas. The organization, presently in control of the Gaza Strip, is affiliated with the international Muslim Brotherhood network – a collection of political

forces in various countries of the Sunni Muslim world with a broadly similar ideological agenda. The Turkish ruling AKP party is close to the Brotherhood.

Prior to the Syrian War, Hamas' most important partner was Iran due to their shared enmity with Israel. However, the sectarian flavor of the war made it difficult for Hamas, which is a Sunni organization with Sunni supporters, to remain an ally of Iran – a Shia power battling against the Sunnis of Syria.

This change of circumstances gave Turkey an opportunity to increase its clout in Gaza. Turkey “has provided a valuable safe haven for Hamas' cadres who have had the chance to meet in the country as well as had a direct link with the Turkish government.”¹³

Besides the political connection, Turkey is also working to widen its economic and aid presence in the Gaza Strip. It appears that Ankara has used its latest improvement of relations with Israel to win from it preferential rights in this regard. On 26 December 2015, the Turkish Minister of Customs and Trade, Bulent Tufekci, said that “the talks with Israel resulted in allowing Turkish goods to enter the Gaza Strip without obstructions” and that “all the humanitarian aid will enter the Gaza Strip through Turkish institutions until the blockade is lifted on Gaza.”¹⁴

Hamas and Gaza are not the only points of Turkey's interest in the Levant beyond Syria. It has a “wide network of Turkish NGOs and expanding investment interests in the West Bank”¹⁵ including projects like the Jenin industrial estate that has reportedly created 15,000 jobs.¹⁶ Turkey shows particular interest in Jerusalem, competing with traditional Jordanian influence in the Palestinian part of the city.¹⁷

In Lebanon, Turkish influence has been limited, although it “has gained some cultural influence among Lebanese Sunnis and the Lebanese Turkmen community through the provision of different social, cultural and economic assistance.”¹⁸

Unlike Syria and Iraq, in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, both the strategic interests and the practical capabilities of Turkey are relatively limited. Thus, we do not see a lot of Turkish hard power there beyond diplomatic activities. At this stage at least, the main instruments of Turkish geostrategy in the southern parts of the Levant are investments, aid and soft power.

At the same time, it is now a matter of fact that Turkey has become the primary foreign Sunni power in Gaza, instead of the neighboring Egypt, and is gaining influence in the West Bank at the expense of Jordan.

North Africa and the Brotherhood

The AKP government's connection to the Muslim Brotherhood has had a huge impact on Turkish policy in North Africa. Egypt is a very vivid example.

When the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood came to power in the wake of the revolution of 2011 – a process that was completed with the victory of Mohamed Morsi in the presidential election in June 2012 – Turkey's strategic perspectives appeared to be very promising. The Morsi government was close to Turkey, bringing the most populous country in the Middle East into Turkey's geopolitical camp with one of the region's strongest armies and considerable international influence. Turkish support to Morsi's Egypt included a USD 1 billion loan.¹⁹

That state of affairs did not last, however. After enormous protest rallies confronted Morsi's conservative agenda, the Egyptian army overthrew him on 3 July 2013. Saudi Arabia, which is opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in the region, immediately stepped in to support the new regime led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

Turkey was furious with these developments, challenging legitimacy of el-Sisi's government. The Egyptian government reciprocated, criticizing Turkey for its support of the Muslim Brotherhood. The process eventually led to Egypt expelling the Turkish ambassador and recalling its own ambassador to Ankara in November 2013.²⁰ Turkish-Egyptian relations have remained confrontational since. Adding to the tensions between the two sides is Egypt's opposition to the Turkish influence in Gaza.²¹

In Libya, Turkey also supports political forces affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood's international network such as the Justice and Construction Party (JCP).²²

During the internal fighting that engulfed Libya in the years since the fall of the Gaddafi regime, several Middle Eastern countries divided in two camps, engaging in a proxy struggle for influence in that country. From one side, Turkey and Qatar supported forces affiliated with the Brotherhood and largely based in western Libya. From the other, Egypt, the United Arab

Emirates and Saudi Arabia supported a different faction mostly based in the east of the country.

Presently, the situation in Libya remains both volatile and violent. It is unclear when the country will become unified under a single effective government and what the political balance there will look like at that point.

Ankara also has a connection²³ with the Ennahda party in Tunisia – a local version of the Brotherhood. These ties, however, are a much “softer” version of Turkey’s foreign policy than its approach has been during recent years in either Egypt or Libya.

Return to the Southern Seas

In the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire was a power strongly established on the Indian Ocean, competing there against Portugal. The re-emerging Turkey of today appears willing to establish itself on that great body of water again.

Turkey’s main strategic anchor south of the Fertile Crescent is Qatar. This small but rich and ambitious nation is Turkey’s ally and has been operating together with Ankara in both the Syrian and Libyan wars, among other geopolitical issues. The relationship bloomed after the Arab Spring, eventually leading to an agreement between the two nations, signed in December 2014, that allowed the deployment of the Turkish military in Qatar, including “to use... its ports/airports/airspace, deploy forces on its territory, benefit from its facilities, camps, units, institutions and military facilities.”²⁴

Some Turkish army, navy and special forces personnel were stationed in Qatar in October 2015. In December 2015, the two sides signed a package of agreements that included USD 2 billion worth of military equipment to be exported by Turkey to Qatar.²⁵ A permanent Turkish military base was established in Qatar in April 2016 while Ahmet Demirok, Turkey’s Ambassador to Qatar, said that troops stationed at the base would include ground troops as well as air and naval units, military trainers and special operations forces.²⁶

As of May 2017, the latest news regarding the Turkish base in Qatar included plans to establish a joint Turkish-Qatari divisional tactical headquarters in the Qatari capital of Doha and have 500 to 600 troops stationed at the base.²⁷

Turkey is the fourth non-Gulf region nation, after the US, Britain and France, to get a military base there. While the Turkish troops in Qatar are not very likely to be involved in any military operations in the immediate future, this military foothold in the Gulf and, more broadly, in the Indian Ocean basin, can prove important for asserting Turkey's geostrategic interests in the long term.

Qatar is not the only Indian Ocean basin country that will see Turkish troops stationed there. Since 2010, Turkey has been providing defense assistance to Somalia. In January 2015, Ankara and Mogadishu signed a defense cooperation agreement and one year later a Turkish diplomat mentioned plans to establish a Turkish military base in Mogadishu to train Somali soldiers.²⁸ By September 2016, Turkey had completed equipping the base with plans to station 200 Turkish military servicemen there.²⁹

Back in the Balkans

The Balkans are another region where Ankara has been working to build its influence. This undertaking represents a combination of cultivating political ties and developing soft power.

The foundation for this soft power is the legacy of the Ottoman Empire that is viewed positively by elements of the population in some of the region's countries. As Alida Vračić notes in her German Institute for International and Security Affairs research paper, "Turkey steadily expanded its efforts to establish concrete structures throughout the region. Networks of Turkish religious and cultural institutions have found fertile ground in many parts of the Western Balkans."³⁰

Turkey's effort has been primarily directed at "the predominantly Muslim areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia" and the Sandžak region³¹ in south-western Serbia and north-eastern Montenegro as well as at the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. It is conducted boldly and openly with gestures such as the one by the then Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who on his trip to Bosnia in 2009 said: "The Ottoman centuries of the Balkans were success stories. Now we have to reinvent this," stressing that "Turkey is back."³²

Evidence suggests that this effort has been at least partially successful. For instance, "in November 2015, Erdogan's admirers in Muslim majority areas of the region took to the streets to celebrate the election victory

of his Justice and Development party (AKP). Hundreds of Kosovars in the southern town of Prizren, Macedonian Albanians in Skopje and Tetovo, and Bosnians in Sarajevo joined the celebrations,” while “the Bosniak Party, a junior member of the ruling coalition in Montenegro, said the victory would allow Turkey to safeguard the peace and security of the Balkans.”³³

In Bosnia, Turkey’s ruling AKP “has good relations with some of the parties that make up the Bosnian government, particularly the Party of Democratic Action.”³⁴ Turkish soft power is also vigorously at work in the country. In January 2017, Turkey’s Deputy Minister of Education, Orhan Erdem, said that the Turkish language was being taught in over 80 schools in Bosnia³⁵ while “Turkey’s reconstruction programs, education programs and soap operas [in Bosnia] are contributing to a positive evolution in the ideas people have about the inheritor of the Ottoman Empire.”³⁶ In 2011, then President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bakir Izetbegović, predicted Turkey’s future as being at the center of attraction and magnetism.³⁷

During his visit to Kosovo in October 2013, the Prime Minister Erdogan said: “We all belong to a common history, common culture, common civilization; we are the people who are the brethren of that structure. Do not forget, Turkey is Kosovo, Kosovo is Turkey,” enraging Serbian politicians.³⁸ Turkey is the largest investor in Kosovo and subsidizes “numerous projects, including religious schools and the rebuilding of mosques.” At the same time, Ankara “expressed interest in assuming control over Camp Bondsteel, the US base in Kosovo, as US forces withdraw.”³⁹

Again working through soft power, Ankara is trying to influence the historical narrative in Kosovo. Kosovan Education Minister, Rame Buja, “reported that Turkey’s education minister requested that school books and other historical accounts revise their interpretations of the Ottoman period to show the Empire in a less negative light... At Turkey’s request, Kosovo education officials were making changes to history textbooks to tone down the language describing the Ottoman Empire.”⁴⁰

In Macedonia, a new ethnic Albanian political party, Besa, is reportedly supported by Ankara.⁴¹ At the same time, Turkey is trying to connect not only with Macedonia’s Albanians, but with the country as a whole as well. “Over the years, Turkey has donated military equipment and provided Macedonia with numerous trainings and courses for officers and non-commissioned officers.”⁴² Turkey has reportedly “gained substantial credit

in Macedonia – among political leaders as well as the population – for its early and constant support of its independence and the recognition of the country under its constitutional name.”⁴³

In Albania, Turkey’s clout is relatively weaker, despite the country also being an object of Ankara’s interest. There is some military cooperation between the countries and Turkish naval ships have access to the Albanian port in Durrës. At the same time, Turkey’s soft power in Albania appears to be weaker than in Bosnia or even in the Albanian-populated Kosovo. When rumors surfaced in Albania that Turkey wanted changes in the country’s textbooks similar to the ones in Kosovo, parts of Albanian society reacted with indignation.⁴⁴

Turkey also engages with pro-Turkish minorities such as the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria⁴⁵ and the Bosniaks of the Sandžak⁴⁶ historical region in Serbia and Montenegro.

A Corridor in the Caucasus

The South Caucasus is strategically important for Turkey due to a transit corridor running through Georgia and Azerbaijan with the potential to become a vital link between Europe and Asia. Existing and projected pipelines and railroads reach from the region into Turkey, making the country a part of that corridor as well. Its successful development would increase Turkey’s wealth and strategic weight.

Besides potentially connecting Europe and Asia, the South Caucasus corridor also more specifically connects Turkey to the Central Asian region. Turkey has ambitions to have influence there, yet geographical positions of the rival powers of Russia and Iran leave only one physical route between Turkey and Central Asia – the one that goes through Georgia, Azerbaijan and across the Caspian Sea.

Turkey has friendly relations with Georgia. Its partnership with Azerbaijan, however, has reached the level of a military alliance. The Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support, signed between the two countries in August 2010, obliges Turkey and Azerbaijan to support each other “using all possibilities” in the case of a military attack against either of the countries.⁴⁷

Ankara has been consistently supporting Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Besides diplomatic support, Turkey has issued de facto security guarantees⁴⁸ for the exposed Nakhchivan exclave of Azerbaijan which is separated from the country's main area by the territory of Armenia.

* * * *

Turkey's re-energized foreign policy is not limited to the neighboring regions only. Beyond the scope of this paper, there is Turkey's strong interest in the Turkic nations of Central Asia, political rhetoric in support of the Turkic Uighur people in China's Xinjiang region, relationships with Afghanistan and Pakistan, developing ties with the African and Latin American nations, and other expressions of Turkey's effort to promote its interests in the modern world. It seems certain that the Turkish foreign strategy will keep providing a lot of new material for observers and researchers of international politics.

Understanding Turkey

An essential characteristic of a great power is its effort to construct a reality, a certain kind of order, with the said power at its center. The geographic scale of such an order may include only one region, as was the case with, for instance, Austria-Hungary; or it may include the entire planet as was the case with the British Empire and still is with the United States. But whatever the scale, the defining component of such a power's behavior is an endeavor to organize a certain part of the world along its chosen lines.

In order to truly understand Turkish foreign policy, Georgians need to appreciate the cardinal difference between the worldview of modern Georgia and that of modern Turkey: Georgia wants to be a part of the reality constructed by the United States and the European powers after their victories in World War II and, this time with Germany among them, in the Cold War. This is the actual essence of what we officially call "Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration." We Georgians want this because we see fully joining that system as the best option for ensuring our security and prosperity.

There was a time when Turkey also was content to only be a part of that reality. Such a state of affairs is now in the past and it is not likely to come

back anytime soon. Modern Turkey does not want to be just a part of someone else's reality. Instead, it wants to construct a reality of its own and to be its core – the core of the Islamic or, rather, Sunni world; of the Turkic world; of the lands with the lingering Ottoman legacy; of the international ideological community identified with the Muslim Brotherhood. The venues and narratives are different but all of them put Turkey at the center of something that is bigger than itself as drawn on the modern political map of the world.

It is true that Turkey's economic and military means are smaller than those of the largest modern powers. But the ambition is there and hard evidence clearly demonstrates that the Turkish national resource is at the very least enough to sustain a consistent effort aimed at satisfying this ambition.

It is not necessarily a given that Turkey will be successful in its endeavor. But it is trying and it will keep doing so. Barring some catastrophic internal political cataclysm, during the coming decades Turkey will remain a crucial geostrategic player in several regions of the planet, including the South Caucasus. All interested parties should see Turkey as it sees itself – a power with an independent sense of purpose, strongly manifested and consistent geostrategic vision and material capabilities to act on that vision.

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