

## The "Game" in Central Asia - Iran and Turkey Part 4

### Turkey's Role in Central Asia

After the fall of the Soviet Union predictions for the Central Asian Republics were going in two directions. According to some views the future for the region was quite grim. Landlocked, unable to integrate itself into the world's economy and burdened by the overall social stagnation after the fall of the USSR the Republics were doomed to the rise of radical Islamism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, drugs etc. On the other hand some analysts anticipated that the region will embrace the free market economies, integrate with the West, disband the Communist institutions and abandon the legacy of the Soviet regime. Although after the Cold War the Republics faced an array of difficulties in the economic, social and political sphere the countries didn't collapse, nor did they integrate with the Western world. In these hard times Turkey was the first state which recognized the independence of the Central Asian states and started reaching out diplomatically and economically with the five 'stans.<sup>1</sup> Although Turkey didn't represent (nor does it now) an exemplary democratic society the Turkish model of governance was welcomed by the Central Asian region. Other democracies in the West were distant, and not only in geographic terms. Democratic standards of Western countries were hardly attainable from the perspective of the Republics, besides West was preoccupied with other events after the fall of the Iron Curtain hence its lesser interest for the region at that time. Conversely Ankara saw its opportunity. Religious, social and cultural similarities which are shared between Turkish and Central Asian nations also promoted Turkey's "democracy" and its political system. Political elites of the Republics were inspired by the Turkish secularism, they saw possibilities which could allow accommodation of a Western based democratic system with Asian traditions, Islamic identity and religious practices.<sup>2</sup> This gave a huge boost to the Turkish approach towards Central Asia and the so called "euphoria" phase of Turkish politics during Turgut Ozal's presidency which was also later extended by Ahmet Davutoglu's theoretical framework illustrated in his book *Strategic Depth*.

On a cultural level Turkey shares a lot of similarities with the Central Asian states which can be very beneficial for spreading its soft power across the region. Language, cultural and historical heritage have been major factors during the nineties that prompted Turkey's

---

<sup>1</sup> K. Kaya, *The New Silk Roads - Turkey*, pp. 424-426  
(<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/GCAPUB-13.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> F. Vladimir, "Turkey as viewed from Central Asia", *Rethink Institute Washington DC*, April 2016, pp. 3-4  
(<http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Fedorenko-Turkey-As-Viewed-From-Central-Asia.pdf>)

engagement in the post-Soviet area. This has been successfully reflected on state-to-state culture and education projects between Ankara and former Soviet Republics. Education cooperation was very important and it was aimed primarily at giving university-level education to students coming from Central Asia. In the period between 1992 and 2002 around 14,000 scholarships were awarded to students coming from Central Asia and the Caucasus, also during that period a big number of schools, educational and cultural centers were established in these related countries by the Turkish government.<sup>3</sup> India had a very similar model of penetrating the region by promoting its own culture through the film industry, establishing cultural centers and giving scholarships to Central Asian students. However this was done during the Cold War era, giving the circumstances at that time and the Turkish alignment with the West Ankara was restricted in terms of accessing the region or projecting any kind of soft power onto the Central Asian Republics. Nevertheless after the dissolution of the USSR Turkey's power projection into the Central Asian region has also been welcomed by the Western states, in fear that if a secularist Muslim society doesn't establish itself as a "big brother" Iran's religious rhetoric would quickly gain momentum in this post-Soviet landscape.

Turkey's specific location that connects Europe with Asia, Caucasus with the Balkans and North Africa with the rest of the Eurasian landmass represents an important transit route which can promote economic relations across these regions. As mentioned previously Central Asian countries that are landlocked are dependent on the neighboring states for promoting their economy, production and placement of their products on the global markets. Ankara's economic engagement in Central Asia is reflected through regional as well as bilateral cooperation and trade agreements with the states, focusing mainly on banking, textile, energy, food and tourism. Most of the deals and investments were channeled to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Also Turkey was very ambitious in modernization efforts, specifically the Turkish Eximbank has been a large supporter of free market reforms in Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> Turkish government also managed to establish certain economic agencies such as TIKA and TUSKON which are focused on business, industrial cooperation and development. Some Turkish companies operating in sectors such as textile, machinery and construction had investments reaching up to five billion dollars in 2010. Furthermore the so called shuttle trading has been very popular between Turkey and Central Asia. Shuttle trading usually refers to economic practice in which small-trade businessmen shuttle forth and back between countries trading goods. Although this is bound to small and medium scale entrepreneurs, when there are many in the game economic contributions can be significant.<sup>5</sup> Trade and economy were instrumental in promoting Davutoglu's approach of "zero problems with neighbors" and shaping the Neo-ottomanism as an idea where Turkey could reach out to its former territories and hopefully establish a strong political presence. Balkans,

---

<sup>3</sup> F. Carlo, "Central Asia's Place in Turkey's Foreign Policy", *ISPI*, Analysis No. 225, December 2013, pp. 4 ([http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis\\_225\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_225_2013.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> K. Kaya, *op cit*, pp. 430-433 (<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/GCAPUB-13.pdf>)

<sup>5</sup> F. Vladimir, *op cit*, pp. 6-7 (<http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Fedorenko-Turkey-As-Viewed-From-Central-Asia.pdf>)

Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia were areas that this Neo-ottoman dominion would encompass thanks to the strong flow of financial and industrial companies which managed to significantly bolster Ankara's overall economics in the last fifteen years.

However in case of Central Asia energy also has a role of an important commodity. With a growing economy comes a growing need for energy, and in this particular case Turkey's energy supply is notably reliant on Russian energy exports. Ankara is actively trying to tap into gas and oil reserves of the Caspian sea, and we can notice an increased Turkish diplomatic activity in resolving disputes between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan on this particular matter. These disputes are very important for the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore the political elite in Ankara still has hopes for the Trans-Caspian pipeline which would create an energy corridor from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Turkey and Europe. We should keep in mind that Turkey isn't only interested in the energy *per se*, the AKP's ambitions are to establish a significant corridor for energy transit to Europe from Central Asia thus immensely boosting its geostrategic worth for the Western partners. This is also somewhat related to Ankara' perception of the EU-Turkey relations. Turkey regards itself as a "pivotal" country, an Eurasian state within the EU rather than a marginal EU member.

Turkey and Central Asia have a rather different perceptions of each other's interests and ambitions which drives their foreign agenda. Ankara develops its relationship bilaterally with Central Asia, calculating its moves with each different state and challenges which will occur in these bilateral partnerships. On the other hand the 'stans and their political establishment have a much more complicated assignment. Besides calculating its potential benefits and losses with the Turkish government Central Asian Republics also need to leverage between Russian and Chinese influences in the region. Deeper cooperation with Turkey will have certain consequences on partnerships with China and Russia. This was especially evident during the downing of the Russian fighter jet SU-24. The media campaign was very strong and given that Russia has its media outlets well-established in the region since the Soviet times it had an upper hand. Although Russia quickly changed its tone towards Ankara, this media-conflict left a mark on Central Asia-Turkey relations. Security factor also influences foreign relations between these political entities. Some of the Republics are integrated in the Russian led CSTO while most of them are participants of the Eurasian Economic Union. Turkey as a NATO country is largely confined by these organizations in terms of penetrating the region militarily-wise. Furthermore being a second largest military in NATO is additionally making it harder for Turkey to establish strong military presence in the Russian backyard of Central Asia.

Turkey's vector of expansion into Central Asia will face many variables, some of which will be hard to control. The ever shifting situation in the Middle East which is reaching new levels of political instability with the latest Qatari crisis is redirecting Turkey's political focus

---

<sup>6</sup> W. Thomas, "Turkey's role and interests in Central Asia", *SAFEWORLD*, pp.7-8  
(<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/172943/turkeys-role-and-interests-in-central-asia.pdf>)

and resources away from Central Asia. Turkey's turbulent engagement in Syria, Iraq and ISIS issue resonated badly not only in the Republics of Central Asia but on the Caucasus as well. Ankara's passive approach (and a specific support) towards radicals and extremists in the beginning of the Syrian crisis was perceived as a serious threat by the political and security establishment of the five 'stans. Looming threats of Islamist radicalism are still present in some of the Republics, hence Ankara's meddling with the extremists in Syria could have serious implications for other extremist organizations in Central Asian countries. However the rapprochement with Russia and Turkey's recent active diplomatic commitment in Astana is portraying a different regional power. Although the Astana talks are primarily focused on resolving the Syrian crisis, selecting a capital of the largest Central Asian country has its deeper meaning. By choosing this region Turkey is symbolically showing their Western allies its other strategic options and partners. Furthermore choosing to have negotiations in Kazakhstan, rather than in St. Petersburg, Edirne or Istanbul, both Turkey and Russia show their reinvigorated interests for the region. Although these talks are focused on Syria and are conducted on a multilateral diplomatic level symbolism of Astana, not only as a capital of Kazakhstan but one of the most beautiful cities of Central Asia, is not a mere coincidence. Nevertheless the idea of neo-Ottoman expansion onto Central Asia won't be realized at the pace in which Davutoglu's strategic thinking might have expected. Turkish current and primary foreign policy concerns are directed towards the perpetual crisis in the Middle East. Although it is a large regional power, extending on multiple diplomatic and economic fronts at the moment may prove to be a "bite" more than the Turkish political elite can chew upon. Likewise, Ankara's further perforation to Central Asia will be governed by the Russian factor and the overall political/security situation in the Middle East. Fortunately for Turkey (or not) both of these factors are mutually interconnected.

### **Iran's Interests in Central Asia**

During the twentieth century most of the world's geopolitical tinkerers had perceived Central Asia as a Soviet hinterland. However, after the end of the Cold War and the sudden emergence of independence and sovereignty in the region of Central Asia caught both the local and the global public unprepared. Furthermore after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the region of Central Asia was firmly embedded into the world's geopolitical calculations. These geopolitical machinations have been quickly reflected upon the Republics, partially because of their large oil and gas resources but also because of the large potential of ethnic conflicts in the area (Tajikistan's civil war 1992-1997). Boundaries which have been drawn in the 1920s have also served as state borders for the newly independent states. These borders however didn't align with the ethnic nor linguistic characteristics of populace in these countries making social, economic and cultural transition in the states all the more difficult.<sup>7</sup> Many world powers sought

---

<sup>7</sup> A. Mustafa, "Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus; Continuity and Change Since the End of the Cold War", *The Turkish Year Book VOL. XXXII 2001*, pp. 168-175  
(<http://dergiler.ankara.edu.tr/dergiler/44/672/8560.pdf>)

their claim over this unfolding geopolitical arena. Iran as a Caspian country which also shares borders, culture and religion with the region saw the opportunity to project its power deeper into the Central Asia landmass.

After the end of the Cold War the Central Asia became a huge geopolitical landscape of independent states which was neither absolutely new to Iran nor completely familiar. The regional countries shared historical, cultural and religious patterns with Iran, however their development period during the twentieth century was quite different from Iran. The Soviet control over the region transformed its societies giving them cultural and political perspectives quite different than that of Iran. Secularism which was strongly embedded by communism had been also reflected on the governance of the five 'stans. Religious ideology as a fabric of Iranian foreign policy and its omnipresence in Tehran's state policy had little impact on the political theatre of Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Teheran has been trying to build close relations with the region for the past 25 years often citing the historical dimension as a prime basis for developing future relations. This Iranian effort demonstrated a rational and pragmatic advance, the so called *realpolitik* which was quite the opposite to the approach of the Islamic Republic when assessing the Middle Eastern region and its geopolitical spectrum. Although hampered by the US containment strategy and its close partnership with Russia Iranian efforts in Central Asia thus far have been persistent.

Main geostrategic interests of Iran in Central Asia are aimed at establishing strong economic cooperation with the Republics, projecting its power and influence over the region while countering and preventing any US or Israeli interests in the area. These geostrategic interests are driven by certain factors which include geographical proximity, the Islamic dimension in Iran's foreign policy, socio-cultural relations between Iran and Central Asia and various political factors which are tied with the Iran's national interests and security. Geographical proximity is a rather simple factor. To Iran as a large regional power it comes naturally to influence its northern neighbors with whom it shares common borders. However the other factors are much more complex. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran two main guiding principles of Teheran's foreign policy were pan-Islamism and exporting the Islamic Revolution. This was inevitably reflected on its foreign approach to Central Asia, however due to secularism caused by the Soviet period and the Sunni population which is dominant in the region Iran's Shia ideology didn't have the expected effect. After Khomeini's death in 1989 this religious rhetoric was quickly transformed into a more pragmatic approach during Khatami and Rafsanjani presidencies. The religious dimension of Iran's foreign policy is a double edged sword. Although it is portraying Iran as a guardian of Muslim population, in case of Central Asia Iran can be perceived as a harbinger of religious fundamentalism. Hence the very cautious approach of the Republics towards Teheran's policies in the region. Socio-cultural factor, though closely

---

<sup>8</sup> K.A. Nikolay, "Iran in Struggle for Influence in post-Soviet Central Asia: main goals and driving factors", *Institute of Middle East (Moscow, Russia)*, pp. 1-4 ([http://www.eisa-net.org/bruga/eisa/files/events/warsaw2013/paper\\_Kozhanov.pdf](http://www.eisa-net.org/bruga/eisa/files/events/warsaw2013/paper_Kozhanov.pdf))

connected with the religion, should be analyzed through history and common cultural heritage. Socio-cultural similarities between Iran and Central Asia are very important since it can lessen the dominant Islamic discourse which is heavily present in relations between Tehran and the five 'stans. Although Turkey and Russia also share certain social similarities with the region, the cultural factor can help Iran with the soft-power projection while also portraying it as a more "secular-friendly" power. Finally the political/geopolitical factor which determines and to a certain extent confines Iran's interests in Central Asia is Russia. Although Teheran follows the Russian-centric Eurasian policies, which can be seen in their common opposition towards the West and their cooperation in Syria, the Russian partnership in Central Asia is not so beneficial for Iran. When engaging in Central Asian political theatre Iran threads very carefully not to provoke Moscow. Since Tehran is already sanctioned by Western powers and has a very hostile attitude towards the US and its allies (mainly Saudi Arabia and Israel) it cannot afford to lose a partnership of another superpower, Russia.<sup>9</sup> Therefore since Russia still regards Central Asia as its political backyard any aggressive intrusion, even coming from their southern partner can be seen as an "unfriendly" act. In order to preserve its very important strategic partner Iran's engagement in the Republics will be limited and will focus on spheres which are of less importance to Russia or will follow the Russian narrative of Central Asia.

From the economic perspective Iran's importance for Central Asia is primarily reflected through transit. In other words Iran similarly to Pakistan has access to warm-water seas and is perceived as an important transport hub for Central Asian products. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are already connected with Iran via railway, furthermore the infrastructure project "North-South" is focused at connecting these states directly to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. This is a very important route because it can allow Iran to gain an advantage over Pakistan since it permits central Asian states an easy access to the Persian Gulf. The significance of Iran as a transit route can be seen from the Iranian customs data, the transit of goods from Central Asia through Iran generates around 3 billion dollars for the country's budget annually.<sup>10</sup> All transit infrastructure projects which are pushed by Tehran have a regional character and are mostly focused on railways including: Qazvin-Rasht-Astara, Arak-Kermanshah-Khosravi, Chabahar-Zahedan-Mashhad, Gorgan-Incheh Borun, Sangan-Herat and Shalamchek-Basrah railway lines. In recent years the Iranian government is also actively reconstructing or upgrading air-ports, sea-ports (both in the Gulf and in the Caspian) and land-border terminals. The other aspect of Iranian regional economic engagement is also reflected through ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization). The organization was created in the eighties between Pakistan, Iran and Turkey

---

<sup>9</sup>D. Manochehr and E. Nader, "Iran's Northern Exposure: Foreign Policy Challenges in Eurasia", 2013 Center for International and Regional Studies Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, *Occasional Paper No. 13*, pp. 2-12 (<https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/708817/CIRSOccasionalPaper13DorrajEntessar2013.pdf;sequence=5>)

<sup>10</sup>N.A. Kozhanov, "Iran in Struggle for Influence in post-Soviet Central Asia: main goals and driving factors", *Institute of the Middle East Moscow Russia*, pp.9 ([http://www.eisa-net.org/be-bruga/eisa/files/events/warsaw2013/paper\\_Kozhanov.pdf](http://www.eisa-net.org/be-bruga/eisa/files/events/warsaw2013/paper_Kozhanov.pdf))

to promote economic, technical and financial cooperation between the states. Over the years the organization grew and now incorporates most of Central Asian and South Caucasus states covering a population of more than 400 million people. The organization occupies a very important geopolitical position which borders China, Russia, Indian Ocean and has access to both Caspian and Arabian Sea.<sup>11</sup> For Iran this is not only an economic organization but a forum of countries with whom Iran shares culture and history and can also serve as a place for promotion of good neighborly relations. In this organization Iran plays a vital role since most of its newer members are landlocked countries (Central Asian Republics), for them Iran yet again serves as a pathway to the world sea and to the international waterways. Through ECO Iran has been mostly active in various infrastructure projects developing Central Asian states as well as Afghanistan. However compared to other regional economic organizations such as APEC or ASEAN, ECO's capabilities are quite limited. Nevertheless Iran strives to further develop and enhance regional cooperation following the framework of ECO, this comes as no surprise. As Richard Pomfret suggests the ECO's primary purpose is not in its economic or financial nature, rather the organization provides a round-table for discussion, regional disputes and peaceful cooperation between the states. This was otherwise confirmed by the Iranian President Rafsanjani, who sees the organization as an important pillar of stability and peace in this strategic and sensitive region.<sup>12</sup>

The Iranian economic perspective for Central Asia doesn't end there, on the bilateral level Teheran also has good economic relations with each of the Republics. After the dissolution of the USSR Iran started developing stronger economic relations with the Central Asian states. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are probably the most significant countries in Central Asia for Iranian economy. Despite having some differences over the Caspian Sea Turkmenistan and Iran are close partners in the economic and political sphere. Iran's perception of Turkmenistan is that of a gateway to Central Asia, Teheran is the second largest trading partner for Ashgabat after Moscow. In 2015 both countries agreed to increase their bilateral trade to 60 billion dollars in the next 10 years, although this might seem unrealistic it still shows the determination of these governments to further strengthen their relations. However the friction between these states remain in the energy sector. The pipelines which are planned to go from Turkmenistan and under the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and further to Europe are bypassing Iran. Furthermore the TAPI pipeline which should allow Turkmenistan to transfer its energy to India is also bypassing Iran. Teheran as a regional power is strongly opposing such projects since its energy potential will be left out of the equation. On the other side Turkmenistan fears that if Iran finally reaches its goal of producing nuclear energy its oil and gas will be highly available for the global market and for

---

<sup>11</sup> Dr. M. Ali and N. Mujahid, "An Analytical Study of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): Challenges and Perspectives", *European Academic Research*, Vol. II, Issue 11 February 2015, pp. 14-33. (<http://euacademic.org/UploadArticle/1330.pdf>)

<sup>12</sup> E. Herzig, "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia", *International Affairs*, May 2004, pp.512-515 ([https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Edmund\\_Herzig/publication/227723934\\_Regionalism\\_Iran\\_and\\_Central\\_Asia/links/0c960533f090ab9e16000000.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Edmund_Herzig/publication/227723934_Regionalism_Iran_and_Central_Asia/links/0c960533f090ab9e16000000.pdf))

the region as well.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless ties between these countries are on a positive rise which can be also seen from Ashgabat's positive stance towards the removal of sanctions on Iran.

Besides Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan is also an important Iranian trading partner in Central Asia. While Iran exports food, chemicals and construction materials to Kazakhstan, Astana on the other side exports wheat, metals and oil products to Tehran. Both countries have seen a relative drop in trade after the Western powers had imposed sanctions on Iran, nevertheless Kazakhstan is eager to continue and further develop its economic relations with the heirs of Persian Empire. This is especially evident in the sphere of infrastructure projects which are mainly focused on developing better transit infrastructure. Lastly the economic cooperation between the countries is also present in joint oil and gas ventures focused on constructing energy pipelines while also working together on various projects in the Caspian Sea and in the Economic Cooperation Organization as well.

After the fall of the Soviet Union Iran has assumed a very important role of a conduit which can bond the Caspian basin with the Persian Gulf. Furthermore after the collapse of the USSR Iran has managed to establish impressive relations with South Caucasus as well as Central Asian states regardless of Western sanctions and the US containment strategy.<sup>14</sup> Despite its religious rhetoric when accessing the politics of Middle East, Teheran in Central Asia is taking a very different stance trying to impose its presence through cultural or historical heritage. In other words, Iranian Islamic rhetoric is trumped by rational national interests in Central Asia. Developing and pushing for stronger regional cooperation which is evident through regional infrastructure projects and ECO, Tehran is positioning itself as a responsible regional power capable of managing and governing the sensitive geostrategic nature of the region. Nevertheless Iran also faces obstacles when further engaging in Central Asia. Russia, China and Iran although cooperating and forming a strong block on the global stage when facing Western powers, on the Central Asian political theater all of them have a rather different policies and interests which are intertwined. All of them are actually competitors on this regional plain trying to establish a stronger political and economic presence in the Republics. Iran, as a lesser power in comparison to Russia or China, has a difficult task of establishing its influence over the region and not aggravating powers which are a very important partners on the global stage. So far Tehran's *realpolitik* approach is steadily building a strong foundation for Iranian politics in the region. In the future there is no reason to believe that Iran won't succeed in its political and economic endeavors as long as it preserves the secular dimension of its foreign and regional policy on the Central Asian geopolitical scene.

---

<sup>13</sup> M. Milani and J. Mankoff, "Iran in a Reconnecting Eurasia - Foreign Economic and Security Interests" April 2016, *Centre for Strategic & International Studies - CSIS*, pp. 16-17 ([https://esis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160420\\_Milani\\_IranReconnectingEurasia\\_Web.pdf](https://esis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160420_Milani_IranReconnectingEurasia_Web.pdf))

<sup>14</sup> Armenia is one of the most important strategic allies for Iran since it represents a gateway to Europe.



Part five coming soon...

*IGOR PEJIC, graduated Political Science Foreign Affairs Department at the Faculty of Political Science and MA in Terrorism, Security and Organized Crime at the University of Belgrade, Serbia.*

*The article has been edited by Jovana Ljubic*