

“How to Make Turkey Great Again”: The Twists and Turns of Erdogan’s Foreign Policy.

A deeply NATO-entrenched Turkey is heading east, but not in the way you think. Erdogan's 'Asia Anew' strategy is all about Turkic primacy, and will likely be at odds with Chinese and Russian-driven integration plans

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The information dropped like a Hellfire in the middle of a productive discussion with a group of top analysts in Istanbul: Across the Turkish establishment – from politicians to the military – over 90 percent are pro-NATO.

Eurasian ‘hopefuls’ in West Asia need to factor in this hard truth about Turkey’s oft-confusing foreign policies. The ‘Erdoganian neo-Ottomanism’ that runs through Turkey’s current ruling system is deeply colonized by a NATO psyche – which implies that any notion of real Turkish sovereignty may be severely overvalued.

And that sheds new light on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s perennial geopolitical waffling between NATO and Eurasia.

Let’s start with the *mediation* offered by Erdogan on the Russia-Ukraine drama, which for all practical purposes would mean a mediation between Russia and NATO.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu may not be the one dictating Ankara’s policy – my interlocutors stress that the man who really has Erdogan’s ears is his spokesman Ibrahim Kalin. Still, Cavusoglu’s latest talking points were quite intriguing:

1. “Russian and Belarussian sources” told him there will be no “invasion” of Ukraine.
2. The West “should be more careful” in making statements “about the allegedly possible ‘invasion’, as they lead to panic in Ukraine.”
3. “We, as Turkey, are not a part of a conflict, war, problem, however, any tension affects us all, the economy, energy security, tourism.”

4. “We will have a phone conversation with [Russian Foreign Minister Sergey] Lavrov on Wednesday, [then] with [Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro] Kuleba. We will happily agree to mediate if both parties agree. We gladly agree to host a meeting of the Minsk trio.”
5. “[Russian President Vladimir] Putin should not close the door. They [the Russians] don’t have a positive or negative answer.”

Ankara’s efforts in positioning itself as a mediator may be laudable, but what Cavusoglu cannot possibly admit in public is their futility.

As much as Ankara enjoys good relations with Kiev – Bayraktar TB2 drone sales included – the heart of the matter is not even between Russia and NATO; it’s between Moscow and Washington.

Moreover, Erdogan’s offer had already been sidelined by notorious opportunist – and totally out of his depth – Emmanuel Macron, via his meme-celebrated visit to Moscow, where he was politely but bluntly dismissed by Putin.

The Kremlin has been making it very clear, even before issuing its demands on security guarantees, that the only interlocutors that matter are the people in charge – as in the Russophobic/neocon/humanitarian-imperialist combo that remote controls the current president of the United States.

How to “Make Turkey Great Again”

It will be a hard slog to “Make Turkey Great Again” in Washington, even if they’re both part of the NATO matrix. It’s one thing to inaugurate the \$300 million Turkevi Center – or Turkish House – in Manhattan, near the UN headquarters, complete with a top-floor presidential suite for Erdogan. But entirely another thing for the Americans to allow him real sovereignty.

Still, whenever he’s snubbed, Erdogan always comes up with a thorny counter. If he is prevented from meeting the real players behind ‘Biden’ last September in New York and Washington, he can always announce, as he did, his intention to buy yet another batch of Russian S-400s which, irony of ironies, is a missile system designed to destroy NATO weaponry. As Erdogan then boldly proclaimed: “In the future, nobody will be able to interfere in terms of what kind of defense systems we acquire, from which country, at what level.”

Global South players, from West Asia and beyond, have been following with enormous interest (and trepidation) how Ankara, from a secular, well-behaved NATO semi-colony on the periphery of the EU eager to join the Brussels machine, turned into an Islamist-tinged regional hegemon – complete with supporting and weaponizing “moderate rebels” in Syria, dispatching military advisers to Libya, propelling Azerbaijan with armed drones to defeat Armenia, and last but not least, promoting their own, idiosyncratic version of Eurasian integration.

The trouble is how Turkey is supposed to pay for all this ambitious overreach – considering the dire state of its economy.

Quite a few Justice and Development Party (AKP) politicians in Ankara are avid promoters of a “Turkic world” that would stretch not only from the Caucasus to Central Asia but all the way to Yakutia, in Russia’s far east, and Xinjiang, in China’s far west. It isn’t hard to imagine how this is viewed in Moscow and Beijing.

It was actually Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the ultra-right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), a top Erdogan ally, who presented a revised map of the Turkic world to the Turkish president.

The response by Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, who happens to be a Turkologist, was priceless. At the time, he said that the heart of the Turkic world should be in the Altai mountains. That is, in Russia; not Turkey.

And that brings us to the [Organization of Turkic States \(OTS\)](#), the new denomination of the former Turkic Council, as approved by their 8th summit last November in Istanbul.

The OTS has five members (Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) and two observers (Hungary and Turkmenistan). The secretary-general is a Kazakh diplomat, [Baghdad Amreyev](#).

An initial visit to their lovely, salmon-colored historical palace in Sultanahmet – prior to an upcoming official conversation – establishes some much needed context. Among the dazzling Byzantine and Ottoman neighboring structures, we find the tomb of the last Ottoman Sultan, Abdulhamid II, who happens to be none other than Erdogan’s role model.

Depending on who you talk to – the largely AKP-controlled media or Kemalist intellectuals – Abdulhamid II is either a venerable religious leader fighting subversives and the Western colonial powers in the late 19th century or a retrograde, fanatical nutcase.

The OTS is an immensely intriguing organization. It brings together a NATO member with the second most-powerful army (Turkey); an EU member (Hungary, yet still an observer); two CSTO members, that is, states very close to Russia (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan); and a supremely idiosyncratic, permanently-neutral gas superpower (Turkmenistan).

Even at OTS headquarters they agree, smiles included, that no one outside Turkey knows about the real aims of the organization, which are loosely framed as investment in connectivity, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), green technologies and smart cities. Most of the investment would be supposed to come from Turkish companies.

Until recently, Erdogan was not exactly focused on the Turkic world in Central Asia – which was considered too secular from an Islamist point of view, or even worse, a bunch of dreaded crypto-Kemalists. The focus was on the US-defined MENA (Middle East/Northern Africa) region – which happened, historically, to include the key Ottoman lands.

The record, of course, shows that these neo-Ottoman incursions did not go down so well in Muslim lands. Hence the spectacular re-entrance of Eurasia into Turkish foreign policy. It may sound swell in theory, but way more complicated in practice.

Crisscrossing Eurasia

The OTS may be unified by language – but you won’t find many people speaking Turkish across Central Asia: they’re all about Russian.

History and culture is a different story, and it goes something like this:

As Peskov correctly pointed out, the Turcophone peoples originally came from the Altai mountains – between Mongolia and Central Asia. Between the 7th and the 17th centuries, they were invested in a conquering migration drive in the opposite direction compared to Alexander The Great and his Hellenistic successors, the Seleucid kings and then the Arabs under Islam.

So, for a long time, we had a few ephemeral empires founded by Turkish dynasties and built essentially over Persian Sassanid structures, with an add-on by Turkmen groups, until the Ottomans, based on Byzantine structures, established an imperial system that lasted for no less than five centuries.

In terms of ancient connectivity, the route of the steppes lay more to the north of Eurasia – and was followed in the 13th century, with spectacular success, by Genghis Khan and his successors. We all know today that the Mongols built the very first, real Eurasia-wide empire. And in the process, they also took the southern route traveled by the Turks and Turkmen.

Just like the Persian, Greek and Arab empires, the Turkic and Mongol empires were bent on continental conquest. The main line of communication across Eurasia was always, in the precise definition by Toynbee, “the steppe and desert chains that cut across the belt of civilizations, from Sahara to Mongolia.”

Much like China’s recent revamp of the Silk Road concept, Erdogan – even as he’s not a reader and much less a historian – also has his own neo-Ottoman interpretation of what makes connectivity run.

Instinctively, to his credit, he seems to have understood how the conquering migration runs of the Turko-Mongols from Central Asia towards West Asia ended up shattering this huge zone of discontinuity, very hard to move around, between East Asia and Europe.

The sun “rises again from the East”

Erdogan himself went no-Eurasia-holds-barred at the November summit of the OTS: “Inshallah, the sun will soon start to rise once again from the East.”

But that ‘East’ was very specific: “The Turkestan region, which had been the cradle of civilization for thousands of years, will once again be a center of attraction and enlightenment for the entirety of humanity.”

The mere mention of ‘Turkestan’ certainly sent shivers all across the Zhongnanhai in Beijing. At the OTS though, they assure the organization has absolutely no designs on Xinjiang: “It’s not a state. We unite Turkic states.”

Much more relevant to the ground is the OTS drive towards “sustainable multimodal connectivity.”

Enter a twin strategy juxtaposing the Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor Initiative – a trans-Eurasia link – and the [Zangezur corridor](#), linking the South Caucasus to both Europe and Central Asia.

Zangezur is absolutely key for Ankara, because it allows for a direct link not only to its key OTS ally Azerbaijan but also to Turkic Central Asia. For the past three decades, this connectivity route happened to be blocked by Armenia. Not anymore. Still, a final agreement with Armenia is pending.

In theory, the Chinese New Silk Roads – or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – and the Turkish Middle Corridor binding the Turkic world are complementary. Yet only (connectivity) facts on the ground will tell, in time.

The fact is, Turkey is already neck deep in a major connectivity drive. Take the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway connecting Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Ankara may not have anything nearly approaching the scale and scope of the BRI master road map, which plans all steps to 2049.

What has been designed is a Turkic World Vision – 2040, adopted at the OTS summit, with the Middle Corridor billed as “the shortest and safest transport link between East and West,” including a new special economic zone (SEZ) called Turan, in Kazakhstan, to be launched in 2022.

This SEZ will be exclusively for OTS members and observers. The Turan steppe, significantly, is also considered by many in Turkey as the original home of Turkic peoples. It remains to be seen how Turan will interact with the Khorgos SEZ, at the Kazakh-Chinese border, an essential node of BRI. As it stands, the view that Ankara will pose a major systemic threat to Beijing in the long run are mere speculations.

The bottom line is that the OTS is part of a larger Erdogan initiative also not well known outside Turkey: *Asia Anew*. It’s this initiative that will be guiding Ankara’s expanding connections across Asia, with the OTS promoted as one among many “tools of regional cooperation.”

Whether Ankara can leverage this vastly ambitious strategic reading of geography and history to build a new sphere of influence depends on a lot of Turkish lira that the Erdogan coffers sorely lack.

Meanwhile, why not dream of becoming Sultan of Eurasia? Well, Abdulhamid II would never have thought that his future pupil would upstage him by going East – like Alexander The Great – and not West.

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Featured image: The 'Sultan of Eurasia' is planning a uniquely-Turkic eastward thrust into Asia, one that is unlikely to complement Eurasia-wide integration. Photo Credit: The Cradle

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