

The Turkish Key to Greater Central Asia

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Abstract

The countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus, Afghanistan and Western China can more usefully be thought of as Greater Central Asia. While constituting something of a black hole on the map of globalization, they are viewed by many strategists as increasingly important in terms of diminishing global resources. Additionally, they form a geopolitical wedge between the states the West considers the greatest threats to its values of individual rights and democracy: Russia and China. The state exercising the greatest degree of what might be called 'organic power' in the region is Turkey, which is perhaps once more becoming a global power in its own right. Turkey is currently a Western ally and has spent almost a century imitating Western organizational mores. However, it also has an overwhelmingly Muslim population and seems to be increasingly torn between those Western values and Islamic ones. Aside from these geopolitical and even ideological struggles, there are sound economic reasons for greater international cooperation in Greater Central Asia. Nevertheless, Turkey will remain the geopolitical key to the region; whether that key turns itself or is turned by others is very much open to question.

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What is Greater Central Asia? The name implies that is the central part of a larger whole. However, it might more accurately be described as the remnant of a migratory corridor. From the 5th century onwards, Turkic peoples, led first by Attila, poured out of their native Mongolian steppe land in all directions to descend on the settled peoples of Europe, India and China. Their dominant route, however, was from east to west, with the Turks of present day Turkey finally settling in Anatolia and the corridor of their migration remaining intact behind them. In the modern period this led to a clash of Turkic and Slavic cultures, as the Russian Empire expanded into the corridor. Indeed, Russia and Turkey share the dubious accolade of being the two countries with the highest incidence of war between them.

Initially the Turkic peoples were thought of as barbarians by the neighboring Han Chinese. The most resonant expression of this was the building of the Great Wall, which was designed to keep them and other invasive tribes out. As successive Chinese empires waxed and waned, the central Chinese core developed its own conceit of exceptionalism, which enhanced the otherness of the Turkic peoples. Then, as China passed from fearful city builder to hungry colonizer, the Han expanded into the Turkic lands and made them tributary, forming the first concentric ring of vassal states. Chinese court

documents show that all known foreign states were divided into the categories of simple 'foreign states' and 'vassal states'. Foreign states were those over which the Chinese Emperor had no control, while vassal states were required to pay tribute to the Emperor.

However, it is not always straightforward to discover from these records exactly which groups were truly vassals and paying tribute. The Chinese character for 'tribute' is actually the same as the one for 'trading goods'. By way of example, the first English traders to arrive in China were recorded in Chinese court documents as bringing 'tribute' when, clearly, the Chinese Emperor exercised no practical authority over the English King in the 16th century. In any event, though the Chinese terminology for the area was never adopted by Europeans, the imperial connotations underlying it, in many ways, were.

S. Frederick Starr, probably the most prominent latter-day scholar in this area, has explained how, for the past century and more, the question of definition has been answered in terms of Tsarist then Soviet imperial expansion. Russians, from the mid-19th century, referred to the area as Middle (*Srednaya*) Asia. Much of the rest of the world adopted this terminology and its underlying assumptions, namely that the region was defined in terms of the territory under Russian control, rather than by its intrinsic

geographical, cultural and economic attributes, in other words: those common to the corridor.

The response of the Western academic world was to re-baptize the region as 'Central Eurasia'; a label that suffers from a lack of precision, given that 'Eurasia' itself is often hard to define. Starr, therefore, dissatisfied with both labels, preferred to base his conceptualization on those geographic, cultural and economic realities that together provide some degree of unity. It is in this way that he arrived at the idea of Greater Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but also Afghanistan and Xinjiang in China. To this the Caucasian states can be added for an even more comprehensive picture of what is known in Turkic languages as Turkistan, and in Persian as the Turan.

Greater Central Asia can also be considered an intrinsic part of Halford Mackinder's *Heartland*. In 1904, Mackinder, who was a British geographer and has come to be considered the father of modern geopolitics, published his seminal article '*The Geographical Pivot of History*'. In it, he posited the idea that the geographical area incorporating Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and what the Russians termed Middle Asia, is of such significance, that it holds the essential, or *pivotal*, place in world politics. The strategic possibilities rendered to the occupier of that area led Mackinder

to consider the ramifications of its control by a non-democratic and aggressively acquisitive power. Thus, the great worry in the minds of Western strategists has always been that this area could be consolidated under a single hostile power.

It is primarily this concern that has informed the strategic desire for not only Russian, Chinese and Turkish but also Western involvement in the region, and in particular places such as Afghanistan. This is something rarely communicated to the Western public in an age where the imperial overtones of grand strategy are unfashionable, though its relevance remains undiminished as a factor dictating foreign policy. In its place the more palatable rationale of preventing terrorism is given.

There is, however, a third way to highlight Western interest in the region: this is the genuine economic rationale for enhanced Western engagement. Greater Central Asia is, as Starr has often said, 'a black hole on the map of globalization'. Yet this no-man's land sits between two of the world's three economic engines: Europe and China (with the U.S. being the third).

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less hospitable option as an attractive alternative. Though the Russian route does boast the advantage of a single set of national regulations, the Greater Central Asian route would be preferable if the states there could begin to dismantle their mutually uncooperative attitudes.

In their report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Andrew C. Kuchins, Thomas M. Sanderson and David A. Gordon detailed the economic possibilities of the region. An overland route running from Lianyungang, China, to Rotterdam via Xinjiang and Central Asia would reduce transport time between China and Europe from 20–40 days to just 11 days. Costs would also be reduced from 167 USD to 111 USD per ton. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) believes that overall trade could be increased by up to 80 percent, if rudimentary improvements are made to the transport infrastructure connecting Central Asia to Afghanistan. The ADB has simi-

larly predicted huge knock-on benefits to Afghanistan's bilateral trade with its neighbors, as well as transit trade through the country, thereby significantly boosting imports and exports. A United Nations study cited in the CSIS report estimated that if trade cooperation between its constituent states were prioritized, GDP growth would increase by 50 percent throughout Central Asia within a decade.¹

The U.S. has already declared its interest in seeing this happen. Former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, robustly supported the project of a 'New Silk Road', as partially realized by the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) used to supply NATO forces in Afghanistan.

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The Northern Distribution Network represents a policy of diversification for the supply of NATO forces in Afghanistan. Developed in the first half of 2009 the NDN now sees supplies that arrive by ship in Riga being tak-

¹ 'The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities: A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project and the Russia and Eurasia Program' (2010). at http://csis.org/files/publication/091229_Kuchins_NDNandAfghan_Web.pdf

en by road and rail through Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and finally from Uzbekistan via the German-controlled Termez airbase to forces in Afghanistan. The whole project is based on a series of commercial arrangements between local companies and provides an alternative route to the Karachi-Kandahar road through Pakistan into Afghanistan. Supply via the NDN also has the advantage of avoiding the clogged up Suez Canal.

The NDN properly consists of three distinct routes: NDN North, NDN South, and KKT. The NDN South route transits the Caucasus, bypassing Russia. The route originates at the Georgian port of Poti on the Black Sea and crosses Azerbaijan on the way to Baku. The goods are then loaded onto ferries for the journey across the Caspian Sea. The supplies arrive at Kazakhstan's west coast port of Aktau before being moved to Uzbekistan and finally on to Afghanistan. The KKT route takes in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. KKT is an alternative to the Uzbek border crossing at the Termez base.

The three routes of the NDN play a valuable role in the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, as was originally envisaged, and the NDN's potential as a permanent East-West transit route is much more significant as a permanent transit network than merely servicing NATO forces in Afghanistan.

However, the route faces multiple challenges, with one of the overarching difficulties being the parlous political relations between many of the Caucasian and Central Asian partners, in addition to numerous logistical inefficiencies.

Recognizing the threat from these disputes within Greater Central Asia is another essential requirement for the project's success. There are ongoing conflicts over water use, payment for natural gas and electricity, militant incursions, the status of ethnic minorities, and espionage, all of which have strained relations to the detriment of multilateral cooperation. The result is typically border closures, the *bête noire* of an ambitious transport project like the New Silk Road. Suspicion of U.S. and European intentions is also fuelled by Russian and Chinese activities. Nonetheless, the NDN has the potential to have a profound and long-lasting impact on the economic landscape of Eurasia.

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That said, following President Obama's 2011 Cairo speech, in which he committed America to interfering less in the Islamic world, and given the general tenor of the emerging 'Obama Doctrine' of al-

lowing regional balances to form and reform naturally, there are clearly policy constraints on what the U.S. can do to promote the project. And although the European Union has a robust strategy for engaging Greater Central Asia, it too faces constraints, largely due to of its relationship with Turkey.

The EU has demonstrated a schizophrenic attitude towards Turkey, with some member states supporting accession and others blocking it at every opportunity. This reluctance rests on two factors. One is the practical concern that admitting a populous but less industrially developed country will have a negative impact economically. The second is more historical, and concerns the perceived political negativity around admitting a large Muslim country to an essentially Christian bloc. The second is rarely admitted publically.

Economically, concerns about Turkey's integration are most probably overblown. Turkey is not encumbered by the legacy of a state controlled economy, as are most East European states. Its workforce is young, generally skilled and adaptable, and overall its economy is one of the most dynamic in stagnating Europe. Politically, the concerns may be more real. Turkey, along with Russia, is the Council of Europe country that is most regularly hauled before the European Court of Human Rights, and the government's record on cor-

ruption, justice and women's rights continues to be at odds with the rest of Europe - all of which have encouraged the EU's hot and cold approach to Turkey.

In frustration at this decades old snub, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan recently began making strong overtures to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) regarding Turkish membership. On paper, this seem improbable, as the two are clearly more like rivals than partners. Turkey remains a key NATO member that is perennially at odds with Russia in the Balkans, Caucasus and Turkistan. It is also worried by China's treatment of its Xinjiang region, which is home

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Weigh it carefully they must, because Turkey has the potential to play a determinative role in the West's Greater

Central Asian ambitions. After their first great migration westward, Turkic clans were divided into Oguz, Kıpçak and Cagatay groups. Today's Turks in Turkey, together with Azeris and Turkomen, are Oguz. Tatars, Bashkirts, Chuvash and Kazaks are Kıpçaks. And Uzbeks and Uighurs are Caatagay. Overlaying these three dialects and cultures are the two unifying forces of Turkic blood and Islam.

It is here that the Islamic question comes into play beyond the context of Europe: does the West really want to support Turkey in drawing the states of the Greater Central Asian away from Russia and China, thereby creating an Islamic wedge between the two autocracies? The geopolitical wedge the West desires can only be created by Turkish entreaty to a mixture of Islamic heritage and largely Western-derived modernization, which may in the end prove poor bedfellows, with Western values most likely losing out.

In other words, there is no guarantee that the secular state propounded by Atatürk and clung to by the West will be maintained if Turkish influence performs a counter-migration back eastward. And the result may be something less Western friendly than future Chinese dominance or the current Russian inertia. Especially if global economic growth prospects do not improve significantly, many in the region may repose in the comfort

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of Islamic traditions and convince themselves that Western market capitalism is more a curse than a boon.

Islam in Central Asia has generally been moderate, though Russia greatly fears the Islamic movements in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Turkey first tried to penetrate Central Asia in the 1990s. However, little progress was made when it was itself economically weak and Kurdish terrorism was at its height. Moreover, Greater Central Asia's geographic isolation made this difficult and, historically, all economic, cultural and ethnic links between Turkey and Greater Central Asia have gone via Iran, which has its own, partially religious, designs for the region.

Turkey's second penetration started in the 2000s. Since it has the closest cultural links with Azerbaijanis and Turkmen, Turkey prioritized its Greater Central Asian relations with those states. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project is representative of this, and is more political than economic, allowing Azerbaijan to be more independent of Kazakh-

stan. Turkey buys natural gas from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan via Iran. Azerbaijanis have bought the second largest petrochemical fortune in Turkey, and Turkey is also the biggest trading partner of Azerbaijan and Georgia, and in Central Asia its construction firms are the largest in terms of revenue.

Turkey has also decided on a strategy to conquer hearts and minds in the region. Its religious sects opened schools and founded cultural-religious centers. Thousands of academically able Turkomen, Kazaks and Kyrgyz from the lower and middle classes were given scholarships to Turkish universities, where they were taught that they are the descendants of a nation that governed the lands between India and Algeria, and from the Ukraine to Yemen, for 1000 years. These young people have Turkic-Islamic sentiments and little knowledge of the Russian culture that once enveloped them. In this respect, the evolving demographics of the region are also very much in Turkey's favor.

However, this is, of course, a double-edged sword and the Russian government plays effectively on Western fears of Islamism to balance its own declining influence. This is the case even though Russia has long abandoned entreaties to shared Christendom and, indeed, attempts to understand or forgive what is perceived as the West's betrayal of their common religious heritage, starting with the

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Crimean War. For this reason, President Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan and Karimov in Uzbekistan, who both fear mosques as much as the White House and Kremlin, enjoy fairly broad if reluctant support.

Yet, Western fears of supporting the Turkish project in Greater Central Asia, which results in them acquiescing to the status quo, does not actually benefit the primary status quo power in the region – Russia – to the greatest extent. In fact, it benefits the more dynamic of the SCO partners: China, which is currently buying up resources and concessions throughout Greater Central Asia to the extent that it has almost supplanted Russia as the most influential energy and mining player in the region.

Now, on the cusp of regime change in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the West is perhaps approaching a tipping point in its relations with Turkey. If it wishes to channel its own influence through that of Turkey in the Greater Central Asian region and leverage its position against Russia and China, it will most likely have to make a con-

crete and positive statement about its willingness to accept Turkey into the Euro-Atlantic world, and in so doing hope to preserve and export the Ataturk model.

The U.S. has essentially already done this, but it is not yet a European priority and, as a result, the Europe may lose the opportunity to influence its dynamic neighbor in future. For some in Europe, this ambivalence is a principled historical position. For others, it is a strategic own goal.