

TOWARDS A NEW TURKEY-NATO PARTNERSHIP IN CENTRAL ASIA

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This article discusses the altered strategic environment facing Turkey and its NATO allies since the Cold War. It reviews these countries' recent relationship with Russia and Central Asian states and recommends policies that could promote Turkey's transformation from strategic barrier to bridge in Eurasia.

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The general congruence of objectives between Russia, Turkey, and other NATO countries in Central Asia establishes the foundation for building a new geopolitical relationship to replace the obsolete Cold War framework. Although tensions will persist, Turkey, its NATO allies, and Russia all desire to promote peace and security in the region, ensure access to its energy supplies, pursue commercial relations with local businesses, and curb human and narcotics trafficking. A new partnership would help consummate Turkey's transformation from barrier to bridge between NATO and Eurasia.

The New Strategic Environment

During the Cold War, several factors integrated Turkey into the Western alliance. A pro-Western elite, which dominated the country's foreign and defense policies, viewed Turkey's affiliation with NATO as defining and ensuring its status as a core member of the Western camp. The alliance simultaneously defended Turkey against the Warsaw Pact and benefited from Ankara's efforts to deter Soviet adventurism. The episodic confrontations between Turkey and fellow alliance member Greece over Cyprus, the Aegean, and other issues actually served to underscore NATO's additional value in moderating differences between Athens and Ankara. Although firm Soviet control over Central Asia ensured political stability, it severely limited Turkey's contacts with the region.

The last decade has seen the collapse of these Cold War pillars. A number of societal actors - including ethnic lobbies, business associations, influential civilian politicians, a

resurgent religious establishment, as well as the general public - now exerts considerable influence on Turkish decision making. They have pushed for major departures from the status quo even in sensitive areas of Turkey's foreign and defense policy. NATO countries no longer worry about a possible military confrontation with Moscow. EU members have become preoccupied with organizational reform, economic restructuring, and integrating recent members. Efforts to develop a European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) distinct from NATO have presented challenges for Turkey due to its limited influence on EU decision making. In addition, many Europeans evince continued reluctance to consummate Turkey's long-discussed entry into the EU. They characterize the accession negotiations that formally began in October 2005 as a decade-long process that might not lead to full membership even if Turkey completes them successfully.

elsewhere, especially towards their complex relations with the EU, the threatening

given the risks of such chaos spilling across their borders. Moreover, the independent policies Ankara has pursued towards Iraq and other issues presumably have lessened Moscow's concerns about Turkey serving as an anti-Russian stalking-horse for Western interests in the region.

Turkey is well-positioned to fulfill this bridging function between its NATO allies and Eurasia. Although many influential Turks recognize that Central Asia's authorit

Closer cooperation between NATO and Turkey in Eurasia could also help improve their own troubled ties. Ironically, while other alliance members have become increasingly concerned about promoting stability in Turkey's neighborhood, the end of the shared Soviet threat has raised doubts among Turks about NATO's continued commitment to their security. In 1990, Germany and several other allied governments evinced a clear reluctance to defend Turkey should Iraq attack it-calling into question the presumed (if not legally obligatory) strength of NATO's Article 5 collective security guarantee.

Despite these divergences, Turkey still contributes substantially to promoting Western security interests in Central Asia. The Turkish government has established bilateral assistance programs with most regional intelligence, defense, and law enforcement agencies. It also has become heavily involved in PfP projects in Central Asia. In Afghanistan, the Turkish military has twice assumed command of ISAF and has contributed over one thousand troops to the post-conflict stabilization mission. Turkish firms have been very active in the country's transportation and construction sectors (including helping build the new U.S. Embassy in Kabul). Turkey's assistance also helps limit the spread of terrorism and organized crime to Central Asia and other countries from Afghanistan.

Developing NATO-SCO Contacts

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as one of Central Asia's most important multilateral institutions. It presently includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as full members. India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan have observer status. Cooperation against "terrorism" (broadly defined) has become the institution's priority, centered on the Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. SCO members also have undertaken joint initiatives to combat narcotics trafficking and organized crime, including by establishing a joint working group with Afghanistan.

Opposition from Russia, China, and other SCO governments presently precludes Washington from obtaining formal membership or observer status in the organization. In contrast, SCO members might allow Turkey to join because of its long-standing ties to Central Asia, dramatically improved relations with Russia, and growing contacts with China. Ankara has expressed interest in developing ties with the SCO given its problematic relations with Brussels and Washington. Turkey's entry into the SCO would make Ankara the only member of both the SCO and NATO, reaffirming its role as a geopolitical bridge. It also could help prevent the organization's transformation into an anti-American bloc or a concert of hostile anti-democratic states. For example, the Turkish government could invite U.S. and other NATO observers to attend any session it sponsors. This practice would follow the precedent set at the July 2005 SCO summit in Astana, when host Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, then SCO chairman, invited senior officials from India, Iran, and Pakistan to participate as "guests of the chairman." Although these countries became formal SCO observers at the summit, Afghan representatives have participated in several SCO meetings (e.g., President Hamid Karzai attended the June 2004 summit in Tashkent) without gaining such status.

Deepening Turkey-EU Cooperation Through Central Asia

From the perspective of Turkey-EU relations, enhanced Turkish-

Central Asian governments, hoping to reduce their own dependence on Russian-