



CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

REPORTS AND ANALYSES

Turkey, Russia and Iran: Common Interests, Common Positions?

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Report prepared in association with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Poland



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1. Abstract

This paper explores the prospect of alignment between Turkey, Russia and Iran by specifically examining whether they share common global and regional interests as well as adopt common positions on a number of key issues. While they share some common interests, others are at odds. In terms of common positions, with the exception of the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, they are wholly at odds. Consequently, the prospect of strategic alignment between Turkey, Russia and Iran appears slim, but certainly not impossible.

2. Introduction

Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkish foreign policy has undergone a reorientation. As part of this process, Turkey has pursued a policy of 'zero problems with neighbours'. The result has been rapprochement with a number of former adversaries, including Iran, Russia and Syria. At the same time Turkey's relations with traditional allies such as the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and Israel have deteriorated. Needless to say, this has prompted many to question Turkey's course. Some have argued that the AKP is re-orientating Turkish

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foreign policy away from the West toward the East.² Others have argued that the West should fear a wounded Turkey turning to Russia.³ One idea that has received little academic attention, but has many sympathizers among the Turkish military establishment is alignment with Russia and Iran. Indeed, in 2002, the then Secretary of the Turkish National Security Council, Gen. Tuncer Kilinc suggested that 'Turkey should be in search of new partnerships with Russia and Iran because the EU does not help us at all'.⁴ This paper aims to chart that territory and explore the prospect of alignment between Turkey, Russia and Iran.

For alignment to occur there should be considerable common ground among all three countries. For instance, they should share common values and have a close and comprehensive relationship. Relations should be mutually beneficial and based on equality. Mutual trust is also important. They should also share common global and regional interests as well as adopt common positions on a number of key issues. This paper will specifically focus on the latter and explore the prospect of alignment between Turkey, Russia and Iran by specifically examining whether they share common interests and adopt common positions.

3. Common Interests?

Having examined Turkish, Russian and Iranian interests at a global level, as well as in the Balkans, the Black Sea region, the Middle East and the South Caucasus, the following themes stand out.

3.1. Multi-Polar World Order

Turkey, Russia and Iran share a common interest in a multi-polar world order. Russia has long made its desire for the multi-polarization of the world well known. Indeed, the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 explicitly states that 'Russia shall seek

² <http://www.almendron.com/tribuna/23766/turkeys-turn-from-the-west/>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/28/world/europe/28turkey.html>

⁴ [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=5012](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=5012)

to achieve a multi-polar system'.⁵ If the succeeding Concept of 2008 is not quite as explicit, the Russian President certainly has been. In the aftermath of the Georgian conflict, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev laid down five principles that would guide his country's foreign policy going forward, one of which was a multi-polar world order.⁶ Akin to his Russian counterpart, Turkish President Abdullah Gul has also used the Georgian conflict as an example to illustrate that the US can no longer shape global politics on its own and should begin sharing power with other countries.⁷ Turkish efforts to broker a fuel swap deal with Iran in May, illustrate Turkish aspirations to become one of those countries, with whom the US shares power. Iran also favours a multi-polar world order. Above all, multipolarity would end the 'Great Satan's' era of global domination.

3.2. Outside Powers

Turkey, Russia and Iran share a common interest in excluding outside powers from the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region. For Russia, the presence of outside powers such as the US or the EU would directly undermine Russian influence in the region. What's more, the presence of the EU or US could pose a security threat by fostering regional instability. For Iran, a US presence would be of particular concern. In this regard Turkey, as a member of NATO should also be cause for concern. However, Turkey is also opposed to the presence of outside powers in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region. Turkey shares the same assessment as Russia, namely that the presence of outside powers would directly undermine Turkish influence in the region as well as pose a security threat by fostering regional instability. Turkish initiatives in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region act as a good illustration of its preference for excluding outside powers. Membership of the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) is strictly limited to the three countries of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – plus Russia and Turkey. Similarly, membership of the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Force,

⁵ <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>

⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm>

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/16/turkey.usforeignpolicy>

Operation Black Sea Harmony and the Black Sea Border coordination and Information Centre are strictly limited to the six littoral states – Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and the Ukraine.

In the Western Balkans, however Turkish, Russian and Iranian interests are at odds. Iran opposes the presence of outside powers. Russia, albeit reluctantly accepts NATO and EU enlargement and Turkey openly advocates for NATO and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. Indeed, Turkey is said to have played a key role in persuading NATO to grant Bosnia-Herzegovina a Membership Action Plan in April 2010. What's more Turkey has participated in five of the six EU missions in the Balkans – KFOR, EUFOR, UNMIK, EULEX and EUPOL. For Turkey, participating in EU missions as well as championing NATO and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans enhances its EU membership credentials. In short, while Turkey, Russia and Iran share a common interest in excluding outside powers from the South Caucasus and Black Sea region, their respective interests are at odds with regards to the Western Balkans.

3.3. Separatism, Terrorism and Territorial Integrity

Turkey, Russia and Iran share a common interest in suppressing separatism and eliminating terrorism at home. However, their respective interests (surprisingly) diverge on the issue of preserving territorial integrity. North-west Iran is home to some eighteen-million ethnic Azerbaijanis, which accounts for roughly twenty-four-percent of the country's population. Iran is also home to some four-million ethnic Kurds, which have a terrorist organization – the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK). Similarly, Turkey is home to twelve-million Kurds, which also have a terrorist organization – the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). Indeed, the PJAK and the PKK are said to be affiliated and share bases and infrastructure in the remote Kandil mountain range of Northern Iraq. In an illustration of their common interest, Turkey and Iran signed a security cooperation agreement in 2004 that branded the PKK a terrorist organization. Then in 2008, they signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to increase security cooperation and exchange intelligence to combat the PKK

and the PJAK. While security cooperation has increased of late, it should be noted that there continues to be a nagging mistrust among the Turkish military about Iran given their support of the PKK during the 1990s.⁸ Russia does not brand the PKK a terrorist organization. However, this does not mean that their interests are at odds. On the contrary, Russia's reluctance to brand the PKK a terrorist organization arises not out of an interest in undermining Turkish or Iranian territorial integrity (which it has done in the past), but rather preserving its own territorial integrity by not giving the PKK cause to support the restless Russian Muslims of the North Caucasus in their own separatist struggle.⁹ The Chechens are perhaps the best example. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has put down various Chechen attempts at secession. It should follow then, that all three countries share an interest in preserving territorial integrity. However, Russian recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence from Georgia in 2008 suggests otherwise, as does Turkey's recognition of Kosovo earlier that same year.

3.4. Regional Stability

Turkey, Russia and Iran share a general interest in maintaining regional stability. Regional stability is crucial for their internal security. All three countries border the South Caucasus. Turkey and Iran border the Middle East. Despite being geographically removed from the region, a stable Middle East is no less important for Russia, given the some twenty-six-million Russian Muslims located primarily in the North Caucasus, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. For the same reason, Russia has an interest in a stable Balkans, an interest it shares with Turkey. One-fifth of Turkey's population is said to be of Balkan origin. Regional stability is also crucial for their respective economies. Turkey's two largest trading partners lie beyond the Balkans and the South Caucasus respectively. What's more, Turkey aspires to become an energy transit hub, transporting energy from multiple regions to the European market. As the first and second in the world in terms of proven natural gas reserves and second and fourth in terms of oil production, Russia and Iran wish to export their

⁸ http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_turkey_tpg_vol7_no2_dmc.pdf

⁹ <http://www.setav.org/ups/dosya/23841.pdf>

respective resources to the lucrative European market, for which stability is a prerequisite.

Having said all that, both Russia and Iran have in the past demonstrated their willingness to undermine regional stability in order to serve their own interests, at the expense of Turkish interests. The Georgian conflict and the continued presence of Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia offers a good illustration. In the case of Iran, support of radical Islamic groups such as Hezbollah undermines the stability of the Middle East.

3.5. Regional Influence

Turkey, Russia and Iran all want to increase their influence in various regions of the world. Turkey and Iran appear to accept Russian supremacy in the South Caucasus. However, Iran's exclusion from the proposed CSCP in August 2008 suggests that Turkey is wary of Iranian influence in the region. The same could all be said of the Middle East. Indeed, the u-turn in Turkish policy toward the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq can be attributed in part to growing Iranian influence in the country. Likewise, Iran will be wary of Turkey's growing popularity among the Arab public, which it has long considered a strategic resource. In the Balkans, Russia will certainly be concerned by Turkey's growing interest in Serbia. In 2009, Turkish-Serbian relations improved significantly, following some historic visits and the signing of a free trade agreement. In June 2010, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu underlined the recent progress and spoke of a mutual interest in raising the relationship to the level of a strategic partnership. In short, their desire to increase their respective influence in various regions of the world puts their interests at odds, as well as illustrates a degree of mistrust between all three countries.

3.6. Energy

Turkey and Iran share a common interest in terms of energy. Turkey aspires to become an energy transit hub, Iran, with seventeen-percent of the world's proven natural gas reserves, a gas exporter, both to the lucrative European market. What's

more, given that Turkey imports nearly sixty-five-percent (and rising) of its natural gas from Russia, it has also looked to Iran to diversify its supply (clearly, the fact that Turkey considers it necessary to diversify its imports of natural gas away from Russia illustrates a degree of mistrust in the relationship). In an illustration of their common interest, Turkey and Iran signed a MoU in November 2008 on natural gas production and export. The Turkish-Iranian cooperation plan, first announced in summer 2007, included Turkish involvement in the development of the South Pars gas field and a proposed pipeline that would both deliver Iranian gas to Europe via Turkey, but also supply the Turkish market. The proposed Nabucco gas pipeline is the likely platform for their cooperation.

Clearly, Turkish and Iranian interests directly undermine those of Russia. Europe is heavily dependent on natural gas imports from Russia. By exporting Iranian gas to the Europe, the Nabucco project for example would break Russia's stranglehold over the European gas market, which in turn would undermine Russian influence as well as damage the Russian economy. Having said all that, the extent to which the MoU will become operational, and whether Iran will be a reliable exporter to Turkey and Europe remains to be seen. Iran suffers from a shortage of gas for export. Indeed, due to surging domestic consumption, Iran curtailed and then halted exports to Turkey for three weeks during the winter of 2007. This was at least the seventh time Iranian gas imports to Turkey had been curtailed or halted since 2002. With this in mind, there exists a lot of mistrust between the two parties and much caution in the implementation of the MoU.¹⁰ Yet by far the greatest challenge is Western attempts to isolate Iran internationally over its alleged nuclear ambitions.

Turkish aspirations to become an energy transit hub, also mean that Turkey and Russia, with roughly twenty-seven-percent of the world's proven natural gas reserves share a common interest in terms of energy. Indeed, in August 2009, Turkey gave Russia's Gazprom the right to explore its Exclusive Economic Zone to determine where it might construct the South Stream gas pipeline, which was proposed to

¹⁰ <http://www.oxfordenergy.org/pdfs/NG38.pdf>

counter the Nabucco project. Turkey will decide whether to proceed with the South Stream project by November 2010. Turkey has adopted an unclear stance to the project of late.

Clearly, there is the potential for Turkish, Russian and Iranian interests to be compatible in terms of energy. If Turkey agreed to the South Stream project at the expense of the Nabucco project (it is said that only one gas pipeline is sufficient to meet market needs) for example and Iran exported its natural gas to the South Asian market with the aid of Russian investment, rather than the Russian dominated European market then their respective interests would be compatible. However, at present, their respective interests are at odds.

4. Common Positions?

4.1. The US Invasion of Iraq (2003)

Turkey, Russia and Iran adopted a similar, if not common position on the issue of the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. All three countries opposed the invasion from the outset. Above all, Russia feared that a US invasion followed by a protracted occupation would unsettle the some twenty-six-million Russian Muslims located primarily in the North Caucasus, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. In an illustration of Russian opposition, Moscow voted against a 'second resolution' in the United Nations Security Council, which would have authorized an automatic invasion of Iraq if Saddam Hussein did not disarm. Turkey feared that regime change in Iraq would give rise to an independent Kurdish state with the oil-rich Kirkuk as its capital and so foster national impulses among the restless, twelve-million Turkish Kurds. An additional fear was that the PKK would abscond into the ungoverned areas of northern Iraq, from where they would renew their terrorist campaign against the Turkish state. In an illustration of Turkish opposition, the Grand Assembly failed to pass a motion permitting the US to launch a second front from Turkish territory. Without a doubt, Iran stood to benefit from regime change in Iraq. Regime change

would remove a bitter enemy, against whom it had fought an eight-year long war during the 1980s, as well as increase Iranian influence in both Iraq and the wider Middle East. Yet it was Iran's fear that the invasion would set a precedent and that it too would become a target of US military action that drove Iranian opposition, particularly after having been placed alongside Iraq on the 'Axis of Evil'.

Turkey and Iran also adopt similar positions on a post-invasion Iraq. Both countries seek a unified, stable and democratic Iraq. Unity serves to suppress Kurdish separatism and preserve their respective territorial integrity. Bordering Iraq to the north, stability is crucial for their internal security. A democratic Iraq has the potential to provide Iran with valuable influence in the country given that some sixty-percent of Iraqi's are Shiite Muslims. What's more, the internal squabbles associated with a democracy would keep Iraq weak and thereby pose no direct threat. Indeed, Iran encouraged the early organization of elections and spent considerable effort trying to mobilize Iraqi Shiites with great success. Despite adopting similar positions, however Turkey is said to be concerned by growing Iranian influence in Iraq, which illustrates a profound mistrust on the Turkish part. Concern has arguably contributed to a u-turn in Turkish policy towards the KRG. From being openly hostile, Turkey is now promoting strong political and economic ties with the KRG. For Turkey, strong ties with the KRG act as a potential source of influence in Bagdad and thus, a counterweight to Iranian influence.

4.2. Kosovo's Declaration of Independence (2008)

Russia and Iran adopt a similar position on the issue of Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008. From the outset Russia has sided with Serbia and refused to formally recognize Kosovo as an independent state. For Russia, recognition would serve not only to undermine its own territorial integrity, particularly with regards to Chechnya, but also Russian influence in the Western Balkans. Similarly, Iran has thus far failed to formally recognize Kosovo as an independent state. Indeed, Iran's failure to recognize Kosovo illustrates that Iran privileged its political interests, specifically its relationship with Russia over its revolutionary

vision.¹¹ For Iran, recognition would serve to undermine its own territorial integrity, particularly with regards to 'South Azerbaijan'. During the 1990s Turkey adopted a position similar to that of Russia and Iran today. Turkey opposed the idea of an independent Kosovo for fear that it may set a precedent, which its restless Kurdish minority might exploit. However, after Kosovo declared independence in February 2008, Turkey changed its tune and immediately recognized the Republic. What's more Turkey has since lobbied other countries to follow suit. This change is said to be attributed to Turkish fears of a 'Pan-orthodox alliance' in the Balkans.¹²

4.3. The Israel-Palestine Conflict

Turkey and Russia adopt a similar position on the issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Turkey's relations with Israel were once the cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. However, since the election of the AKP, the nature of Turkish-Israeli relations has undergone a transformation. Nowhere is this more self-evident than on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Under the AKP, Turkey has adopted a more pro-Palestinian stance. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has continually criticized Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza. Indeed, he recently referred to the Israeli raid on an aid flotilla destined for Gaza as an act of 'inhumane state terrorism'. Turkish criticism has also been followed up with action. Shortly after the raid, Turkey blocked an Israeli military flight from its airspace.¹³ At the same time, Turkey has established closer ties to the Palestinian leadership, including Hamas. Following their election success in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of January 2006, Turkey hosted the party's leader, Khaled Mashaal. This realignment has brought the Turkish position closer to that of Russia, which has itself undergone realignment. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union adopted a pro-Arab stance. Since the Soviet collapse however, Russia has steadily improved its relations with Israel. At the same time, it has maintained ties to the Palestinian leadership. Like Turkey, Russia also hosted Khaled Mashaal shortly after his election success. In an

¹¹ http://www.tau.ac.il/humanities/iranian_studies/files/spotlight1.pdf

¹² <http://www.setav.org/ups/dosya/7285.pdf>

¹³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/10432903.stm>

illustration of their similar position, Presidents Gul and Medvedev jointly called for Hama's inclusion in the Middle East peace process earlier this year. However, the Turkish and Russian position is at odds with that of Iran. Iran adopts a firm pro-Palestinian stance and is openly hostile towards Israel to the extent that it supports radical Islamic groups such as Hezbollah.

4.4. The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Officially, Turkey, Russia and Iran adopt a similar position on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. All three countries support the resolution of the conflict. However, it is hard to see how doing so, serves both Russian and Iranian interests. In the case of Russia, the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh has the potential to transform the South Caucasus into an alternative corridor for the transport of gas from the Caspian region to the European market, thereby breaking Russia's stranglehold. Second, the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh would facilitate the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, which would weaken Russian influence in the South Caucasus by reducing Armenia's dependency on Russia. Both developments would arguably attract Western interest, which would further undermine Russian influence in the region. Third, the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh would also undermine the legitimacy of the Russian 'peace-keepers' stationed in Armenia. For Iran, the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh would of course have its advantages. For one, it would serve to stabilize the South Caucasus, which brings benefits. However, the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh also has its disadvantages. First, it has the potential to undermine Iran's territorial integrity. If Azerbaijan regained Nagorno-Karabakh for example, it could foster nationalist impulses among the some eighteen-million Azerbaijani's in Iran. Second, the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh would facilitate the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, which has a number of related consequences. First, as part of the normalization process, the Turkish-Armenian border would be reopened. As Iran is currently the only source of southern export for Armenia, this would seriously undermine the country's economic interests. Second, the normalization of Turkish-Armenian ties would also reduce Armenia's dependence on Russia, which would attract Western interest. A Western presence in the South

Caucasus would undermine Iran's security as well as its ties with Armenia. Strong ties with Armenia help to ease Iran's international isolation. For both Russia and Iran, the status quo is arguably preferable. Hence, while officially they all adopt a similar position on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, it could be argued that their respective positions in fact diverge.

4.5. Turkish-Armenian Normalization

Turkey and Russia long appeared to adopt a common position on the issue of Turkish-Armenian normalization. Both supported the normalization of Turkish-Armenian ties and what's more appeared to agree that normalization should not be linked to the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, deteriorating relations with Azerbaijan has prompted Turkey to (re)link the two issues. What's more, it is hard to see how supporting the normalization of Turkish-Armenian ties serves Russian interests for reasons mentioned above. Russia arguably supports Turkish-Armenian rapprochement absent progress over Nagorno-Karabakh as it serves to undermine relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Tension between the two countries serves Russian interests, specifically by improving Russian-Azerbaijani relations and in so doing, gaining access to the country's energy resources. Indeed, days after the signing of the Turkish-Armenian protocols in October 2009, Azerbaijan's State Oil Company and Russia's Gazprom signed an agreement on Azerbaijani gas sales to Russia. Officially, Iran, like Turkey and Russia supports the normalization process; however it is hard to see how doing so serves Iranian interests for reasons mentioned above. Hence, while officially they all adopt a similar position on the issue, it could be argued that their respective positions in fact diverge.

4.6. Iran's Alleged Nuclear Ambitions

Turkey, Russia and Iran adopt different positions on the issue of Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions. Both Turkey and Russia are opposed to a nuclear-armed Iran and for a long-time appeared to agree that a diplomatic solution was the way forward. However, their respective positions have recently begun to diverge. In September 2009, Russia voted to censure Iran for building a clandestine enrichment plant at

Qom. Turkey abstained. In June 2010, Russia voted to impose a fourth round of United Nations sanctions on Iran. Turkey opposed. What's more, by way of voting in favour of the sanctions, Russia directly undermined Turkish attempts to establish a diplomatic solution. The vote came days after Turkey and Brazil had brokered a fuel swap deal with Iran.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the prospect of alignment between Turkey, Russia and Iran by specifically examining whether they share common global and regional interests as well as adopt common positions on a number of key issues. Turkey, Russia and Iran share some common interests. All three countries share a common interest in a multi-polar world order for example. Still, other interests are at odds. Nowhere is this more evident than the in the field of energy. In terms of common positions, with the exception of the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, they are wholly at odds. Hence, this paper concludes that if common interests and common positions are a prerequisite for alignment, then the prospect of such between Turkey, Russia and Iran appears slim, but certainly not impossible.

The text of this report has been completed in July 2010.

Center for International Relations

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