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**TURKEY'S ROLE IN EURASIA AND IN THE BALKANS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR EU-TURKEY RELATIONSHIP**

by Ettore Greco

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The new geopolitical realities requires that the complex interplay between the European Union's policy and the Turkish one be understood in all its major aspects and implications. Indeed, the EU and Turkey are confronted with the same basic problem: how to redefine their role in view of the sweeping changes in the geopolitical environment following the end of the Cold War.

The central suggestion of this paper is that the EU and Turkey will be able to accomplish this goal more easily and successfully if they manage to better coordinate their policies and develop a common strategy especially towards the most worrying instable situations in the Eurasian region.

Many of the new states continue to look at the EU as the single actor which can contribute most effectively to their stability above all through its well-established economic power but also through its developing political instruments. However, the gap between these requests and the actual capabilities of the EU has been steadily growing since 1989. If this trend should continue, there is the evident risk that the new political entities emerged out of the collapse of the Soviet empire can turn to other interlocutors, moving from a logic of integration to a logic of bilateral or multilateral - and necessarily competing - alliances.

Clearly, the EU does not have the means to act as a decisive factor of stability in the Eurasian region without establishing forms of stable cooperation with the most powerful regional actors. It is not so much a question of political will - although this will has also to be tested - but a question of actually limited capacity of influence and intervention.

This brings us to the crucial role Turkey can play as a bridge - to use a certainly abused catchword - between Europe and Eurasia.

After the disappearance of the Soviet Union as a superpower from the international stage there was some fear in Turkey that the country could lose most of its strategic and political importance for Western partners. However, the evolution was completely different. Lying at the very crossroads of three unstable areas - such as the Balkan, Caucasus and Middle Eastern regions, Turkey has increasingly appeared as a sort of island of stability of growing strategic significance.

This significance lies mainly in Turkey's potential ability to influence the developments in several of the neighbouring troubled areas and states. This new Turkey's potential role became first evident during the Gulf crisis in 1990.

Of extreme importance for Europe are the Turkish effort to keep stable and friendly the relations with its neighbours, including the new ones. This attitude reflects Turkey's fundamental choice to abstain from cultivating hegemonic aspirations and to pursue a prudent policy aimed at avoiding involvement in interstate disputes and conflicts.

The second crucial element for the EU is the model Turkey can represent for the new republics as a secularist state based on the principles of democracy and market economy. From this point of view, the rediscovery of the ethnic and linguistic links with the peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as with the Muslims of the Balkan region should be regarded as a valuable resource, an important window of opportunity Turkey and Europe should use to facilitate the transition of the new states towards a democratic and market-oriented model of state.

One can question the idea according to which the new century is going to be a Turkish century, but the growing influence of Turkey on its external environment is simply a fact of life any major power has to reckon with. The EU's clear interest is that this rapidly growing influence is used to increase the stability of the troubled areas surrounding Turkey.

On the other hand Turkey's policy towards Central will be influenced, to a significant extent, by the EU attitude. So far, there has not been a clear definition of the EU interest in Central Asia. This constitutes a major factor of uncertainty for Turkey. It could feel obliged or be tempted to fill this vacuum with a more assertive and expansionist policy.

Indeed, one of the most widely perceived risk is the return to a system of spheres of influence which not only would contrast with the principle of equality and indivisibility of security established through the Helsinki process but would also be inherently unstable. This risk concerns other areas of Europe, but it manifests itself in the most acute way in the Eurasian region.

A growing source of concern is represented by the resurgence of the Russian factor made evident by Moscow's increasing activity in its so-called Near Abroad. What is needed is certainly not a new containment strategy but the activation or creation of effective instruments which can prevent the action of external powers from transforming into a form of more or less open hegemony. To this end a key role can be played by the European security institutions.

As an institution with a large legitimating power, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) can significantly contribute to promoting a stable environment in Eurasia. The enlargement of the CSCE to the new states of Central Asia was only decided after rather a long debate. Furthermore, those states often find it hard to ensure their active participation in all the major CSCE activities. However, these difficulties can hardly be surprising given their limited resources and lack of experience. It must rather be stressed that the participation in the CSCE represents for those states an important learning process at the diplomatic level as well as an instrument for promoting their internal democratic life.

The CSCE legitimating role is of great importance, in particular, for the future of peacekeeping operations in the region. After a long and difficult debate the CSCE participating states have reached an agreement on the possible involvement of a third party in peacekeeping. Today the problem concerns mainly Russia's military operations in the Near Abroad. In light of the strict conditions to which the CSCE has submitted any third party's participation in peacekeeping, it is highly doubtful that Russia's military activity in Central Asia can be considered legitimate. Furthermore, many practical and above all political obstacles remain for the organization of truly multilateral peacekeeping operations in the region. However, the work made within the CSCE on this problem should not be underestimated. It provides the legal basis for opposing military actions with hegemonic ambitions.

As for the peaceful settlement of disputes, the discouraging experience of the Minsk group operating under the aegis of the CSCE has highlighted the difficulties to establish effective negotiating instruments. However, the CSCE coverage as well as some specific CSCE instruments, such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities, can prove useful in the future to prevent and help solve the disputes and conflicts affecting the Central Asian region. It is advisable that those instruments be reinforced at the coming CSCE Review Conference of Budapest.

The availability of effective institutional and legal instruments is also crucial for promoting economic cooperation of strategic importance. The future European Charter of Energy is one of these instruments. It can prove particularly important for the Central Asian region whose production of oil and natural gas is at the centre of growing disputes in which Turkey is also involved.

In the military field, the central objective should be to make the most of the Partnership for Peace (PFP) process. For the Central Asian states the PFP represents a valuable opportunity in view of the restructuring of their military forces and of the reshaping of the civilian-military relations according to Transatlantic standards. The PFP puts a special emphasis on the democratic control on armed forces and the transparency of military planning and budgets.

The transatlantic framework remains essential also for coping with the threats connected

with the proliferation of conventional and mass destruction weapons in the Eurasian region. There is today a renewed attention on the possible lack of effective control on nuclear weapons in some parts of the Russian military-industrial complex. This aspect of the regional security needs to be addressed through a stronger cooperation involving the US, Europe, Turkey and the Central Asian republics. A similar cooperation framework is needed for ensuring the full respect of the provisions of the CFE treaty. Finally, Central Asia and, in general, all the areas surrounding Turkey remain of central concern with regard to the proliferation of chemical weapons. The experience of the two Gulf wars should not be forgotten. Here, again, a coordinated action promoted by Turkey and its Western allies could prove instrumental in avoiding the possible risk of a chemical arms race in the region.

Turkey has been particularly active in fostering the establishment of regional arrangements such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Economic Organization Cooperation. In the context of the former, Turkey has assumed an integrational function which can positively affect its relations with the EU. Indeed, this form of cooperation was regarded as a long-term move towards - or even accession to - the European Union. Furthermore, it is not exclusively concentrated on the objective of extending economic relations, but also on that of fostering cooperation with third countries and international cooperation in order to achieve a rapid integration of the Black Sea region into the world economy. For all these aspects, this initiative is of interest for the European Union. Indeed, the European Union has established the official policy of encouraging the forms of cooperation aimed at regional integration. The Black Sea framework could be particularly important for smaller partners which have no access to international markets. The Economic Cooperation Organization, in turn, could prove instrumental in fostering the dialogue between Turkey and Iran.

However, the overall importance of these arrangements remains limited. Until now, far from providing effective instruments for the settlement of disputes among the member states, they are often negatively affected by the political controversies arising among them. Indeed, the political dialogue developed within those frameworks often remains very limited if not totally absent.

Even the economic complementary among the member states is rather limited. The most developed countries themselves - such as Turkey and Greece within the Black Sea Cooperation framework - are not powerful enough to play an economically driving role. For this reason, most countries prefer to cultivate their bilateral relations with the EU.

Turkey's influence has also been growing in the Balkan region which constitutes the natural strategic link between it and Western Europe. No doubt, the evolution of the situation in the Balkans will considerably affect the future relationship between Turkey and the EU.

The EU countries have repeatedly expressed their appreciation for Turkey's prudent and non-ingerence policy in the Balkans. Of particular importance for Europe have been Ankara's diplomatic efforts to prevent the Islamic countries from opposing the initiatives of the European Union and the Western countries and from undertaking unilateral moves. This Turkish role was especially evident within the Organization of Islamic Conference whose role as a diplomatic forum to discuss the policy towards the Balkan conflict has increased in the last two years. In general, in the eyes of the EU states, Turkey has acted as a diplomatic bridge towards the other Islamic countries. Furthermore, Turkey has made noteworthy humanitarian efforts. In particular, it has hosted a great number of refugees.

The remarkable improvements in the relations with Bulgaria also has a great significance for the stability of the region. This was made possible mainly by the end of Bulgaria's policy of discrimination against the Turkish minority. But there has also been an indisputable Turkish contribution for the achievement of this goal.

Finally, a particular emphasis has to be placed on the special relations Turkey has

established with Albania. The latter assigns a great importance to these relations. In particular, Turkey has been very much engaged in the economic assistance to Albania. Among the EU countries it is Italy which has tried to take over a sort of special responsibility as regards the relations with Albania. Italy is therefore keenly interested in a coordinated action between the EU and Turkey to support Albania's democratization process. In general, a strategy aimed at avoiding the widely perceived risk of a spillover of the Balkan conflict towards the South requires an active participation of Turkey.

The activation of the so-called Contact Group was aimed at promoting a more direct involvement of key external power, such as Russia and the United States. But the need is also felt for a broader cooperation framework in which all the regional actors can try to elaborate a common strategy to prevent the extension of the conflict and find a stable solution for it. This is certainly one of the most vital areas in which a stronger cooperation between the EU and Turkey can be of immense importance as a factor of stability and security.