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**DISCUSSIONS ON THE RECENT AXIS SHIFT IN TURKISH  
FOREIGN POLICY AND RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA  
(ОБСУЖДЕНИЕ СОВРЕМЕННОЙ СМЕНЫ НАПРАВЛЕНИЯ  
В ТУРЕЦКОЙ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ  
И В ОТНОШЕНИЯХ С РОССИЕЙ)**

*INTRODUCTION*

Turkey, preferring to establish close relations with the West while the world was being re-structured after the Second World War, determined its foreign, security, and defense policies according to this choice. As a NATO member since 1952, Turkey emerged as a loyal and reliable ally of the West in military and technical sense. Turkey has been struggling to become an EU member since 1959 to supplement this choice in political and economic areas as well. When the Cold War ended in 1992, Turkey passed on to a different period in which Turkey was discussing its potential place and role in the new world order.

Discussions on where should be the strategic place of Turkey in the international arena began to be expressed aloud in the beginning of 2000s. The discussions has generally focused on Turkey's overview of its strategic tendency and setting new partnerships. Most frequently uttered opinion is that Turkey must look for a new formation that covers Russia and Iran. We can say that the discussions mainly stem from the dissatisfaction of Turkey as it has been waiting at EU's door since 1959.

The first statement about this issue, maybe at the highest level, was made in 2002 by General Tuncer Kılınç, National Security Council

Secretary General. General Kılınç, taking the floor in the symposium titled “How to Create a Peace Zone around Turkey?” organized by the Military Academy Command of General Staff in İstanbul, said, “I find it useful for Turkey to look for a new formation that comprises Russia and Iran because Turkey has not received even the slightest assistance from the EU.” [1] This statement was discussed for a long time in the Turkish public, and then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit explained in a television program that these statements are the personal ideas of General Kılınç, Turkey has positive relations with the EU, if serious problems emerge in the future, Turkey will take measures accordingly, but it has not plunged into such a quest today [2].

Thoughts about Turkey’s establishing closer relations with Russia and Iran had already been expressed for a long time by some left parties like the “Labor Party” and pro-Eurasianists [3, p. 9–16]. However, unlike others, it should be noted that these groups had an anti-USA rather than an anti-EU approach. These people were talking about a Eurasian bloc including countries such as Russia, Iran, China, India and Turkey as an alternative to the Trans-Atlantic bloc under the USA leadership.

#### *JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (AKP) ERA*

Struggled with coalitions, political and economic crisis throughout 1990s, Turkey started 2000s with a strong one party rule. Justice and Development Party (AKP), established after the economic crisis in 2001 and participated in the elections for the first time under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, came to power by taking 34.63% of votes in November 2002. In the early years of the AKP government, policies of the party were always approached with suspicion by the seculars and the army due to the political-Islamist roots of its founders. During these years, AKP became a party acting in fear to be closed any time, but it won the elections by increasing its votes. This pressure on the AKP government continued until the warning known as “electronic-memorandum” of the army on April 27, 2007. For the first time in the Turkish political life, a political

party raised its voice instead of remaining silent against the warning of the army, which is the most powerful institution of the country.

Erdoğan attached great importance to relations with the EU in the first years of the AKP rule. Progress made in the relations with the EU between 2002 and 2006 was more than almost all previous governments could achieve. On December 17, 2004 it was decided that negotiations between the EU and Turkey would start on October 3, 2005. New chapters were opened in the negotiations. Turkey founded the “Ministry for EU Affairs” specifically responsible for the relations with the EU. A “Chief Negotiator” who is primarily in charge of the EU negotiations was appointed. By developing relations with the EU, Erdoğan insured himself and his party against the outside world approaching suspiciously to his policies, against the seculars of the country and the army.

Turkey eliminated the negative effects of 2001 economic crisis via the measures taken, and reached a high growth rate in the AKP era. GDP and foreign trade volume began to increase and the country began to receive foreign investors and foreign capital. Great investments in infrastructure started. This situation was reflected on the general welfare of the country in a positive way. In these years, Turkish foreign policy started to play a very active role from the Central Asia to the Middle East, from the Balkans to Africa. The negotiator role and the constructive policies of Turkey in regional crises and conflicts were remarkable. As an Islamic country enjoying the closest relations with Europe, Turkey’s such policies were being followed carefully and in appreciation by other Muslim countries. Even in this period, Turkey was regarded as a potential model for these countries.

Erdogan and his party, living fear of closure in the first years, became so self-confident to have full control in the country after the consecutive success in the elections. After that, Turkey under the leadership of Erdoğan became more demanding in Turkish foreign policy. The first address was, of course, the EU which kept Turkey waiting at its door for almost 60 years. Relations with Russia and Iran further developed. Turkey, sharing

common history, geography, and culture with the countries of the Middle East, Balkans, and Africa in the Ottoman Empire era, began to direct its attention to these countries.

Developments after 2002 ignited the “Neo-Ottomanism” discussions, and then comments on the “axis shift” in Turkish foreign policy emerged. In this sense, rejection of the motion about the use of Turkish territories by the USA after September 11, 2001 before the invasion of Iraq on March 1, 2003 by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, gave rise to the debates about the axis shift. Close political, trade, and energy relations developed with Russia made the foreign policy of Turkey, a NATO member, more attractive.

#### *THE DEBATES ON THE AXIS SHIFT*

Since the second half of 2009, the number of comments, articles and columns asserting that Turkey turned its face towards the South (the Middle East) and the East (Asia) by growing away from the Transatlantic system, and also indicating that Turkey was in a process of axis shift, increased to a great extent in leading newspapers and journals of the Western world [4]. The policy pursued by Turkey about Iran’s nuclear work in the 2009-2010 period when Turkey was a temporary member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council supported those ideas. Although Iran was accepted to deliver enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for the delivery of fuel rods via Turkey, which are necessary to operate its nuclear reactors, within the framework of Iran’s nuclear program in June 2010 with the mediation of Brazil and Turkey; USA changed its mind and an embargo decision was taken against Iran. Turkey drew attention by voting “no” to this decision at the UN Security Council [5, p. 25]. Another crucial step came out in the fall of 2013 when statements were made indicating that Turkey would buy missile defense system from China. All of these developments were regarded as the signs of an axis shift in Turkish foreign policy.

The development that heated up the debates about the axis shift in Turkish foreign policy occurred in 2011. Turkey applied to the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization (SCO) to gain the Dialogue Partner status on March 23, 2011. Turkey's application for the Dialogue Partner status was approved at the Summit of Heads of State of the organization on June 6–7, 2012. Since that date, Turkey-SCO relations remained on the agenda.

The issue of Turkey's membership to SCO was first brought to the agenda with the statements of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during the visits especially to Russia. The issue is still discussed in Turkish public. We can say that the most important reason behind the foundation of SCO was to respond to the unipolarity debates beginning immediately after the Cold War and to react to the policies pursued by the USA. Although the issues such as border security, international terrorism, separatist movements, radical movements and human trafficking are listed among the foundation goals of the organization, it is known that the main purpose is to create a powerful alternative and an effective bloc against the US-led West. It is often called as “the NATO of the East” [6].

Prime Minister Erdoğan attended a TV program after his visit to Moscow on July 18, 2012 and said to Putin in a humorous way, “You are making witty remarks about us from time to time. You criticize us for our relations with the EU. Now I am making a witty remark about you. If you include us in the Shanghai Five, we will forget about the EU.” [7] Erdoğan expressed this idea again but in more serious tone in the same TV program on January 24, 2013, which kept the issue on Turkish agenda for a while [8].

What makes the discussion interesting was the fact that neither the EU and the SCO are actually equivalent to each other in a structural and functional sense, nor they have any alternative structure to each other. It is controversial whether the organization has the capacity to accept Turkey and whether the members of the organization, particularly Russia and China, are ready for the full membership of a NATO member country like Turkey. In this sense, the fact that Prime Minister Erdoğan often talked about the SCO was interpreted as a message to the EU [9]. In relation to Erdoğan's statements about SCO, US State Department spokesman Victoria Nuland said, “Obviously, when it is considered that Turkey is a

NATO member, that would be interesting.” [10] However, neither Kremlin nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made any comment on Erdoğan’s statements.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid an official visit to S.Petersburg in November 2013 to attend the High Level Cooperation Council which acts as a common Council of Ministers between Turkey and Russia. During his visit, Erdoğan also met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. In particular, the joint press conference made by the two leaders after the visit drew a lot of attention. During the meeting with Putin, Prime Minister Erdoğan brought the issue of SCO to the agenda once again by saying “Make Turkey a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and save us from the EU problem.” In this way, the SCO came to the agenda of bilateral relations once again. However Putin made a serious and calm assessment unlike Erdoğan’s humorous attitude at the press conference; he said “Turkey’s active role in the international arena justifies its participation to international organizations.” [11]

How Russia evaluated the possibility of Turkey’s full membership to an organization like the SCO opposing to the existence of the USA in the region? Debates on Turkey’s membership to the SCO were followed with great interest in Russia as well. Aleksandr Hramchihin, the Director of Russian Institute for Political and Military Analysis, indicated that Turkey made various reforms in foreign affairs within the last years, and it does not seem probable for Turkey to be a full member of to the SCO because the organization has not accepted any country as a full member for a long time [12].

International relations expert Sergey Markov, Advisor and a close associate to President Putin, said “Turkey’s full membership to the SCO does not seem probable because of two reasons: First, the SCO has not admitted any country as a full member in recent years, and it does not seem likely in the near future. Second, none of the full members of the SCO is an ally of the USA. However, Turkey is both a NATO member and one of the closest allies of the USA. Under these circumstances, it is not possible

for the SCO members to accept Turkey to the full membership. But the orientation of Turkey, making reforms in its foreign policy, to the Eurasian Economic Community instead of the SCO will be beneficial both for Turkey and the countries in the region.” [12]

Aleksandr Dugin, Foreign Policy Advisor to the Duma – the lower chamber of Russian Parliament – and recent representative of Eurasianism, stated that there are two sides in Turkey; one side is pro-Western while the other stands for rapprochement with Eurasian countries. Dugin brought the idea that today pro-Western approach is dominant in Turkey, which eliminates Turkey’s chance for full membership to the SCO. On the other hand, Dugin said that Turkey has not received any positive results from the relations with the USA and the EU; therefore Turkey will certainly turn its face to Eurasianism, which means Turkey will be a part of intense political and economic collaboration with the leading countries of the region such as Russia, China and Iran. Dugin also commented that “Although the current pro-Western line in Turkey prevents the country’s full membership to the SCO, Turkey has not benefited from the West. Turkey will turn its face to Eurasia on the basis of the facts that European countries are in economic crisis while Eurasian countries are growing. Strengthening economic relations between Turkey and these countries will lead to rapprochement in other areas. As a result, we can say that the pro-Western attitude of Turkey, as observed in the Syrian issue, will change in the future.” [12]

The most interesting contribution to the debates on the axis shift in Turkish foreign policy was made by Russian scholar Yulia Kudrashova. Kudrashova argued that Turkey has experienced an “axis expansion” rather than an “axis shift” in the foreign policy [13, p. 50–51]. While the issue was discussed in the newspaper “Argumenti Fakti”, it was stated that “Turkey’s proposal to SCO is an ordinary blackmail to the EU and the ultimate warning about China.” The newspaper emphasized “the danger of establishment of the Turan Union” and noted that “it is no coincidence that a few days after Erdoğan’s speech, new steps were taken towards the

establishment of Eurasian Military Union with the participation of Azerbaijan, Mongolia, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan... It is necessary to evaluate Turkey's accession to SCO as dangerous as a Trojan horse.”[14] In this regard, some regarded Turkey's act as playing the “Eastern card”. [15]

### *CONCLUSION*

In conclusion, as described here briefly, the debates on the axis shift and Turkey's search for alternatives show us that Turkey now pays greater attention to political or economic alternatives than before. Turkey is no longer the old Turkey. Today, Turkish decision makers are more self-confident, they act more bravely to express the alternative orientations in the foreign policy. Turkish public have more debates on these issues. Turkey will be incomplete if it becomes a member only to the EU or SCO. Multi-dimensional Turkish foreign policy is forcing the country to ensure the balance between the East and West, and to develop strong policies.

In Ankara's quest for alternatives, Russia offers significant opportunities to Turkey. It is observed that Turkey has been through an institutionalization phase and gained great experience in Turkish-Russian relations since 1992. The experience in bilateral relations has also great potential in bringing forward cooperation opportunities and preventing the transformation of mutual conflicts into severe discord. Turkey's importance for Russia as a NATO member and a close ally of the West should always be kept in mind. Turkey's such status requires being “realist”. On the other hand, in today's uncertainty and instability atmosphere triggered by the regional conflicts around Turkey, the continuation of high level cooperation between Turkey and Russia is critically important. Turkey has not experienced a serious “axis shift” in its foreign policy, but it is certainly going through an “axis expansion”. The most important aspect of Turkish foreign policy in the process of axis expansion is undoubtedly taking place with the multi-faceted relations developed with Russia. It is understood that Turkey wants to be a country deciding its own place and role by itself in the new international order of

the twenty-first century. Developing better relations with Russia is quite important for Turkey in terms of gaining self-confidence. Continuing to develop this relation in a rational and pragmatic way without sacrificing it to idealism is the best choice for the both parties.

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