



**REDEFINING THE CONTEMPORARY RELATIONS
BETWEEN TURKEY AND UZBEKISTAN**

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to have another look into Turkish-Uzbek relationship. Many critics appear once the affairs between Turkey and Uzbekistan are discussed. When the Soviet regime collapsed, the bilateral relations gained a sudden intensity at first and then lost acceleration somehow. Scrutinizing this process, we try to show that ups and downs in this relationship are not directly linked to these countries that do not even have common frontiers. For Uzbekistan, Turkey remains one of the most important trade partners and there are some fields of cooperation that could be developed between these fraternal countries. In fact, these two countries follow their political interests and still collaborate in several fields that are considered to be prolific.

Key Words: Central Asia, Cooperation, Foreign Policy, Turkey, Uzbekistan.

ÖZBEKİSTAN–TÜRKİYE İLİŞKİLERİNİN YENİDEN TANIMLANMASI

ÖZET: Sovyet rejiminin çökmesini müteakiben Orta Asya’da yoğun tempolu temaslar kuran Türkiye ile Özbekistan’ın kavuşması, geride kalan 20 yıllık süreçte kazanımlar kadar tatminkâr olmayan münasebetlerle hatırlanmaktadır. Bu vetirede sadece karşılıklı çıkarların örtüştüğü değil; politik atmosferin soğuduğu yüzleşmeler de yaşanmıştır. Tamamen dostane ve pozitif ön kabullerle başlayan sürecin zamanla bir kördüğümüne dönüşmesi, her iki taraf için de yitirilmiş bir avantajlar dünyası anlamına gelmektedir. Şüphe yok ki beklenti ve çıkarlar, ikili münasebetlerin doğasına tesir etmektedir. Bu makale; gelinen noktada iki ülke arasında yaşanan kırılma noktalarından yola çıkarak; ilişkilerin normalleşmesi adına uygulanabilecek yeni alternatiflerin neler olabileceği yönünde bir fikir vermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dış Politika, İşbirliği, Orta Asya, Özbekistan, Türkiye.

Introduction

The relationship between Turkey and Uzbekistan has an important symbolical and political place. The countries have very close ethnic, linguistic and especially cultural peculiarities. Therefore, the people of both countries like each other and consider themselves as brother countries. For Turkish community, Uzbekistan represents not only a ‘fatherland’, but also a country representing a huge historical background where lie cities like Samarkand or Bukhara. And for Uzbek people, Turkey has always been the country to discover, a bridge between Europe and Asia, a nation that remains trustworthy and hardworking...

This was in terms of people’s conception of both countries who give a special place for relationship between two nations. But the question (Laçiner, 2006) is that does Turkey have a special Uzbek policy? Or does Uzbekistan have a special policy towards Turkey? The facts show that there is no particular policy of neither Uzbekistan nor of Turkey regarding each other. Instead, there is a pessimistic picture given by media that dominates for several last years. For example, it is usually stated that the last visit (Merdanoğlu, 2008) of Turkish Prime Minister to Uzbekistan dates to 2003. During the last years several Turkish businessmen working in Uzbekistan were jailed (Akhmadov, 2011) and that has been publicly spoken in Turkey and also in Uzbekistan. That picture given by media (Eurasia, 2012) is very pessimistic and that does not show the real picture that exists between the states. As a fact, both countries are responsible for the state of relationship. But the problems should be studied under different angles without forwarding to political reasons. For example, the case of jailed Turkish businessmen requires also an economic approach (Uznews, 2011) by the governmental authorities. Therefore the dissemination of this problem by media may create a real political problem and economic issues can really turn to inexistent political ones. Last and not least we should question why in fact the relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan must be active? Why their relations should be



fraternal? We have in reality more states that are linked with historical, ethnical ties and have very bad political relations like Algeria and Morocco, Russia and Ukraine, or China and Taiwan...

UNDERSTANDING THE PARTIES

Understanding Turkish Foreign Policy in Central Asia

Turkey was already present in Central Asia even before the collapse of Soviet Union. However that presence was negotiated by Soviet rule. Turkey is the first country that recognized the independence of Uzbekistan (MFA-TR, 2012) among other Central Asian republics. The date of recognition is the 16th of December 1991. A very friendly Turkish approach gave the quick results; the president of Uzbekistan decided to visit Turkey on the 18-19th of December 1991. It was the first visit made by Uzbek president to the country which recognized Uzbekistan as independent state. In this regard, the most active Turkish president in Uzbekistan was Turgut Özal (Laçiner, 2009) who proposed a new vector in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey during several decades remained symbolically surrounded by so called 'unfriendly environment'. The relationships between Turkey and neighboring countries were really complex due to the structure and political interests of Great Powers in the Middle East. Turkey found out symbolical friends by Central Asian countries and passed from 'enemy perspective' towards 'friendship perspective'. That created also a particular independence in Central Asian approach, and followed by more active and ambitious Foreign policy.

From another part, there were all necessary conditions for Turkey in order to enter Central Asia. Russia, the main actor of the region was very weak and especially was being more and more dominated by the western powers in foreign policy. USA took part in several operations in the Middle East (Iraq war) and in Eastern Europe (Yugoslavia) therefore both powers could not be active in Central Asian region at early 90s. Turkey could actually enter to Central Asian scene only at that moment and Özal's government understood it easily. So-called 'locked' Central Asian region and double locked Uzbekistan were very close to Turkey. For Uzbekistan, Turkey was an important bridge to the West. Turkey was the only possible state that could link Uzbekistan to the USA and also to Europe. Besides that, Uzbekistan was at that time looking for partners in order to keep its independence vis-a-vis Russia: Turkey being member of NATO and Western bloc was an important friend. For Uzbek politicians Turkey was a good example: secularism, democracy, and also market economy were the main aspects of its admiration (Poujol, 1993:167). Therefore, Uzbekistan decided to promote Turkish model of development (Abazov, 1998) from the early years of independence.

At the beginning, Turkish foreign policy was mainly based on an idealist approach. Turkish approach, to the new Turkic states in general and Uzbekistan in particular, was beyond friendship. Not only was the public but also political/official discourse at those days highly enthusiastic and totally fraternal. Turkey, not long after faced with real-politic at the region in midst 90s. While Turkey acting as unprepared, Russia quickly rebounded from the "collapse". The idealism between the "siblings" turned to more realistic perspective, when strong actors put an appearance in such a competitive region.

The difficulties of 90s were in fact very closely linked to each other state. The death of Özal showed that the relations were strongly linked to his personality. Thereafter, February events of 1997 in Turkey and similarly in 1999 in Uzbekistan turned so-called active diplomacy pages of each country. The both countries were rapidly enrolled in self security and internal areas. The change of status quo at the region has also an impact. China from one part and changing Russia from another were back to the region and Uzbekistan has lesser room to maneuver than before. The less active relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan left their footprints and the room left by Turkey was filled by other active actors. 'Westerners' (Atlantists) were no more in rule in Russia and Asian vector became more important in Russian foreign policy (Laruelle, 2008). From another part Turkey began to be interested in Balkans, North Africa and Middle East and rearranged its vector accordingly. Neighboring countries became of immense importance for Turkish diplomacy via so-called zero problem diplomacy. Turkey followed balanced policy in Central Asia following a soft power strategy put into practice (Gianotta, 2012) by AKP lead government. Turkey was a bridge between West and Central Asia, and hence USA was already present at the region where the countries were directly at the contact with the superpower. Leaving the previous idealist views back, Turkish side has been in search of more functionalist policy to be able to regain solidarity and stability in bilateral relations. Especially by 2010, the parties took steps to be closer. In other words, the policies of two parties fit each other; Turkey's functionalist and real-politic approach and Uzbekistan's pragmatism in foreign affairs.



In fact, the above statements show that both Turkey and Uzbekistan followed mainly their interests and factors like common language, common history or common religion were of use at critical periods. Both tries to profit from another one and still seek for the possible sphere of cooperation. In this context, potential cooperation areas are supposed to be reconsidered to be able to refresh mutual trust and to get benefited from the common denominators.

Understanding the Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan since its independence tried to keep a sovereign international policy. The sovereignty is the primary aspect of Uzbek foreign policy and foreign intervention to internal affairs was quickly responded. The country tried to follow a very pragmatic foreign policy with the concrete engagements rather than symbolical or unnecessary unions. At the very beginning, Uzbek leader Karimov's visit to Turkey just after gaining independence can be considered as a positive response to not only Turkey's recognition but also Turkey's idealism and enthusiasm in bilateral relations. However, Uzbek foreign policy does pretty much fit the pragmatist approach since its independence. Essentially practical and concrete results are important in point of pragmatist view. Along with other reasons, the limits of political/institutional capacity of each country inhibited from reaching concrete benefits. When it comes to the benefits of pragmatist approach (Heywood, 2012:72) in politics, "it allows policies and political assertions to be judged 'on their merits' (on the basis of 'what works'), and that it prevents ideology from becoming divorced from reality and turning into mere wishful-thinking".

Foreign Policy guidelines of Uzbekistan remain unchanged since the beginning of its independence. For example the Constitution of Uzbekistan devoted article 17 (Lex.Uz, 2013) on Foreign policy that states:

'The Republic of Uzbekistan shall have full rights in international relations. Its foreign policy shall be based on the principles of sovereign equality of the states, non-use of force or threat of its use, inviolability of frontiers, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and other universally recognized norms of international law. The Republic may form alliances, join or withdraw from unions and other inter-state organizations proceeding from the ultimate interests of the state and the people, their well-being and security'

As its states some focus areas such as 'sovereign equality of the states', 'non-interference in the internal affairs of other states' will remain in fact the most important aspects of foreign policy Uzbekistan during 20 years. The same issue is noted in the webpage (MFA-UZ, 2013) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan;

'The most important issue remains the keeping the sovereignty and independence of Uzbekistan, defending its national interests, keeping stability within the region and creating the better international conditions for development of Uzbekistan and empowering its authority as international actor.'

The new Foreign Policy Concept of Uzbekistan that was voted in 2012 has continued in that sense and stressed the aspects related to its military participations:

- *The Republic of Uzbekistan reserves the right to make alliances, to enter the community and other inter-state formations, as well as withdraw from them, guided by the best interests of the state, nation, its prosperity and security, priority directions of modernization of the country, applicable national legislation and accepted international obligations;*
- *Uzbekistan holds a peaceful policy and not involved in military-political blocs, reserves the right to withdraw from any of interstate formation in case of its transformation into a military-political bloc;*
- *The Republic of Uzbekistan takes political, economic and other measures to prevent its involvement in armed conflicts and tensions in neighboring states, and does not allow on its territory the placement of foreign military bases and facilities;*
- *In accordance with the Constitution, the law "On Defense", Military doctrine, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Uzbekistan are created solely for the protection of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, peace and security of its population and do not take part in peacekeeping operations abroad.*



In fact the new concept relies in accordance with the last phrase of article 17 of its Constitution. *‘The Republic may form alliances, join or withdraw from unions and other inter-state organizations proceeding from the ultimate interests of the state and the people, their well-being and security’.*

These developments may have different media interpretations, but nowadays many scholars are more serious about Uzbek intentions and policies. They agree on the lines of Uzbek foreign policy stating that pragmatism remains the primary objective of Uzbek policy rather than interpreting Uzbek policy as ‘easily changing’ or ‘adapting to the situation’. For example, in an article (Markedenov, 2012) Uzbek policy is described within NATO, CSTO and considered that being part of one does not necessarily mean against other. Besides that, the author proposes another vision of actions and writes *“Uzbekistan’s maneuvers on the international arena should not all be reduced to a game of choice between the West and Russia”.* According to another scholar (Saipov, 2012) *“The foreign policy behavior of Uzbekistan reflects the country’s firm stand in safeguarding its sovereignty that may at times clearly recall the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, heralded by China, India, Indonesia and others, whose non-aligned posture saved them from being involved in individual ideological camps and proxy wars during the Cold War”.* In another article (Tolipov, 2012) it is stated that *“The Concept does mention the region and includes the quite innovative and principled point that all regional problems should be solved by the countries of the region themselves without the interference of third parties.”*

This important step taken by Uzbek authorities is not disconnected from economic realities of the country. Dina Rome Spechler and Martin Spechler consider that multi vector Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan is much dependent also on its economy. They show that Uzbekistan unlike other Central Asian countries has developed multi partner economic policy that avoids being too much dependent on one country (Spechler and Spechler: 2010).

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Recent developments in the relations

Turkey and Uzbekistan had the important exchanges on official level during the last quarter of the last year. According to USAK analyst (Demirtepe: 2012) during the meeting at UN Headquarter in New York the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries agreed to empower bilateral relations. As the matter of fact, the Minister of the Culture and Tourism Ertuğrul Günay visited Uzbek capital in October (Internet Haber, 2012) followed by the visit of Minister of Turks Abroad and Related Communities Kemal Yurtnaç (YTB, 2012) in December 2012. This active exchange was qualified as a ‘new page’ by media between the two countries (Akşam, 2012).

However, it would be false to state that as if the relations were ‘frozen’ before that. For example, as it is reported (TİKA, 2012) both countries agreed on security related issues in February of 2012 proving that despite important media or opposition activities (Haber 7, 2012) both countries remained faithful on cooperation in the most important fields. We consider that, the last meetings aimed to develop unexploited fields of cooperation and focus on several concrete areas.

The initial aid and cooperation policy issues between Turkey and Uzbekistan were realized at the areas like democracy, free market economy, institutional capacity building, security and education as it was usually operated through new independent Turkic countries. Changing perspectives and international conjuncture requires redefining current state of bilateral affairs. Taking the expectations of both countries and regional realities into consideration, what the sides need is to look after each other’s interests.

Turkey is present in Uzbekistan in several sectors starting from agriculture to medical equipment. However, the main area of cooperation remains machinery and industrial cooperation. In exchange raw materials constitute main exporting items from Uzbekistan. The trade balance is in favor of Uzbekistan for the last five years.

TİKA is very active in Central Asia and the region receives the main part of aid. Uzbekistan was in 2010 the 8th among 34 countries according to the volume (TİKA, 2010) of aid. TİKA unlike other aid agencies sometimes decided to give lion’s share of aid to Uzbekistan. For example, in 2003, TİKA has given 40 Mln US dollars of credits to the country which was the highest rate among its aid (Parlak, 2007:195-196). Turkish aid has mostly slow but sure characteristics which reflect the nature of ongoing relations. However, if we look into the nature of aid we can easily



understand that the cooperation could be much intense and prolific. We will try to enumerate some of the areas that could be of use for the both states.

How to Cooperate in Foreign Policy

Turkey and Uzbekistan has many similarities in their situations and aspirations. Turkey is the most populous Turkic state and Uzbekistan is the most populous state in Central Asia. From this regards, these are the most important Turkic states and their union and friendship may influence much in regional politics. Both countries from the beginning try to show their independent foreign policies and be the key elements in regional and international politics. Turkey and Uzbekistan received harsh critics regarding their internal and external policies, but nowadays these two countries became the important elements regarding Great Powers. Both of them are located in the very difficult geographic situations that are systematically under pressure.

Uzbek Foreign Policy was rather poorly interpreted in each step. For example, its membership at GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) was considered as pro-Western. Another pro-western step was the quitting of CSTO in 1999. At the same time its join of CSTO in 2006 was interpreted again as pro-Russian step. In fact, each Uzbek step was always being described as pro or against; the country did not have according to these interpretations its own policy. However, the current situation shows that Uzbekistan without having any military bases has excellent relationships with both Russia and USA. It continues good relationships at the same time with China, Japan, India and Pakistan. Politically Uzbekistan has always proposed the regional independence that has not been always truly understood.

Turkey has also similar peculiarities and recent developments show how the country became relatively independent in its foreign but also domestic policy.

This is however a crucial period for both diplomacies. The changing spectrum in Middle East obliges Turkey to re-evaluate its zero problem policy. However Turkey misses at least to become a mediator for the problems among the Turkic republics such as the serious controversy on Rogun hydroelectricity plant between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. What is argued that (Demirtepe, 2012) Moscow tries to have its old hegemonic superiority in this fragile process. Tashkent also need a serious political partner and is aware that it has lesser room to manoeuvre than before. In 1999 Putin, just after presidential elections visited Uzbekistan as the first country and in 2012 he visited Astana. Tashkent is under the obligation to seek partners not only in the region among the neighbors, but also out of the region. Over the events of Andijan in 2005, Uzbek diplomacy showed how it can bypass the traditional powers and use other states like Germany in order to defend its interests.

When it comes to good intentions, it should have concrete indicators not only words and politic discourses. However President Karimov's refusing to offer an invitation for President Gül's visit to Uzbekistan, a more negative atmosphere surrounds the positive steps in the future. That somehow creates vicious cycles, if to give examples (Devlet, 2012), Uzbekistan's absence at TURKSOY summits and Uzbekistan's absence from Turkish Grand National Assembly's inter-parliamentarian friendship group. On the other hand the reasons on why Karimov, who made ten visits to Turkey between 1991 and 1999, gave up keeping in touch with Turkey should be scrutinized. Prime Minister Erdoğan declared (Başyurt, 2003) that "there cannot be resentment between brothers", however, it is such a broken feeling that still active regardless of past ten years.

American retreat from Afghanistan and probable retreat from Iraq will change the geopolitical picture in both Central Asia and Middle East. Turkey and Uzbekistan are both facing a complex situation regarding geopolitical pictures in the regions. Both countries have the good relations with US administration, but consider that US could do more and better in the respective regions. Both of these countries assure that Russia remains as an important neighbor and unlike Americans have increasing capacities to increase their presence both in the Middle East and Central Asia. The situations in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan are limiting the capacities of more active foreign policies of the both countries. Turkey and Uzbekistan have criticized UN structure and especially Security Council membership regarding the problems in the world and in the neighboring countries. Therefore, the countries understand that traditional Great Powers have lesser impact in some regions leaving more space for regional growing powers. Therefore, the willingness of diversification of economic and political partners shows the critical situation of Central Asian states that are using the changing status quo for their benefits. American retreat from Afghanistan not surprisingly occurs when China surpasses USA (Bloomberg, 2013) as the 'world's biggest trading nation'.



In this situation, Turkey's cooperation with Central Asian states cannot be constructed with the absence of Uzbekistan. At the same time, Uzbek government measures well contemporary Turkey's impact in world politics that is rather larger than ever before since its construction. The cooperation between these states can no more be qualified or approached as Pan Turkism, Turanism or Pan Islamism, but rather Pan Pragmatism.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not create failed 15 states, but new actors in international relations that try to have their place in globalised system. The rise of Asia in politics as followed by economic regain of power obliges other states to adapt into new rules in foreign policy.

The region is still considered as the part of the Great Game and remains the object rather than subject of the game between the powers. In fact, region is the unique geographically being bordered by powers such as Russia, China, US being present in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is no region in the world having such a situation and therefore the peace and stability in the region owes much for the diplomacy of these states. Famous American thinker Brzezinski calls the region as 'Eurasian Balkans' making a point on the fact that ethnic and religious divergence of the area can create easy conflicts within the region.

At that complex context any relationship should be reconsidered and reevaluated. After the very active Turkish policy in early 90s the real picture reappeared putting forward the possibilities of Turkey among other powers. The less active relationship should be considered as a "normal" and a very active relationship at Özal period as "fabulous" period that would be uneasy to revive.

The closest agenda of each country show that there will be no change of status quo among these countries that privilege in first stance economic and cultural links.

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Remaining distant to each other, the bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Turkey, which carried out close cooperation with new Turkic republics in general, is far from the optimism and enthusiasm of the previous days. While Turkish side has lost many advantages and diplomatic sphere in this respect; Uzbek side has begun to feel the repression of regional actors. Seemingly it is a necessity for both parties to take each other's solicitudes and new balance of powers come out via the changing international conjuncture.

The current state of affairs is a turning point, where especially economic and politic cooperation can be revitalized, in terms of mutual interests. This is such a new period that Russia on one hand regains its dominant characteristic at the region and China puts a clear appearance on the other hand. This is why the both decision/policy makers need a new rapprochement strategy that paves the way through the tangible outcomes for Turkey and Uzbekistan. More specifically, new steps should be taken at the diplomatic, security and socio-cultural cooperation areas in particular and amicable aid in general. Having confidence inspiring impact, this kind of aid and cooperation initiatives will contribute to not only mitigating tensions but also to new openings. Otherwise misperceptions will unfortunately blockade potential cooperation opportunities. This means limited Uzbekistan, inactivated Turkish regional policy and lost Turkic world.

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