

**THE EVOLUTION OF TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD  
TURKISH REPUBLICS POST-1990s**

**1990 SONRASI TÜRKİYE'NİN TÜRK CUMHURİYETLERİNE YÖNELİK  
DIŞ POLİTİKASININ GELİŞİMİ**

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**ÖZ:** 1989 yılından sonra Doğu Blokundaki meydana gelen köklü değişikliklerle birlikte, Türkiye eski Sovyet topraklarıyla ilgilenmeye başlamıştır. Türk Cumhuriyetlerinin bağımsızlıklarını kazanmasıyla, Türkiye istekli bir şekilde bu ülkelerle özel alaka göstermeye başlamıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, son 25 yıl içindeki Türkiye'nin Türk Cumhuriyetlerine yönelik dış politikasını incelemektir. Türk Cumhuriyetlerine yönelik Türk dış politikası iki dönem altında incelenecektir. 1991-2002 ve 2002 sonrası. Bu çalışmada varılan temel sonuç, Türkiye'nin Türk Cumhuriyetleri ilişkileri başlangıçta yüksek coşku ile başlatılmış, ancak gerçeklerle yüzleşmeden sonra, daha mantıklı ve makul bir yaklaşım ile devam etmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Türk Cumhuriyetleri, Türk dış politikası Orta Asya Kafkaslar, Türkiye*

**ABSTRACT:** With the drastic changes in the Eastern Bloc after 1989, global and regional actors including Turkey have become interested in former Soviet countries. Turkey has shown particular interest in the Turkish Republics since they gained their independence. This paper assesses Turkey's foreign policies towards the Turkish Republics over the last 25 years in two periods: 1991-2002 and post-2002. The main finding is that Turkey's foreign policy toward Turkish Republics was initiated with great enthusiasm but continued with a more logical and reasonable approach after having understood the realities.

**Key Words:** *Turkish Republics, Turkish foreign policy, Central Asia, Caucasus, Turkey*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, the Turkish world faced an unexpected international political situation that had not happened for more than a century. Countries that had been isolated from one another by an ideological concrete wall throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were now able to interact without seeking a third party's consent.

Changes in former Soviet Union territories in the 1990s caused Turkey to reshape its policy with the Turkish World. Having gained their independence after many years of subjugation under the communist regime, they began enjoying an independent existence free of foreign intervention. At first, Turkey was keen to act as a 'big brother' to unite all the Turkish republics through various formations. However, this assertive policy was later exchanged for a more realistic approach because of unforeseen challenges.

Major global powers and regional mid-power actors have attached considerable importance to the Turkish republics as these states have been at the center of economic, geopolitical and security rivalry. Thus, these powers' policies and those of Turkey have variously converged and diverged depending on changing geopolitical, economic and security concerns.

The main research question of this study is to explore how Turkish foreign policy has evolved after the dissolution of Soviet Union's in 1991 and which factors have affected this evolution.

The descriptive method of theoretical approach has been used to illuminate the research questions evolution of Turkey's foreign policy toward Turkish republics over the last 25 years with all dynamics.

In order to examine main theme, the study will be conducted in three parts:

-In first part a brief historical knowledge until 1990 and comments will be presented to fully comprehend the events after 1990s.

- In second part, Turkey's foreign policy regarding to Turkish republics between 1990-2000 will be examined.

- In third part Turkey's foreign policy regarding to Turkish republics 2000 and beyond will be explored.

Major finding of this study is that Turkey's foreign policy toward Turkish was initiated with great enthusiasm at first, has continued in a more reasonable manner which is still far from expectancy. All sides need to develop much more

effective political, cultural, military and technical mechanisms that could best serve the interests of all concerned, yet without disregarding a resurgent Russia.

Hoping that these research findings would bring new approach to subject and trigger more academic research focusing on how Turkey and Turkish republics would find more effective political, cultural, military and technical mechanisms that could best serve the interests of all, while considering Russia factor.

The last but not least, the major academics sources have been referred for the comprehensive analysis and findings.

## **2. THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF TURKEY-TURKISH REPUBLICS RELATIONS**

Modern Turkish nations trace their origins back to historical Turkish peoples, states and empires, which dominated the Central Eurasian landmass during the Middle Ages and early modern times (Bayaliyev, 2014). Over time, Turkish people migrated from Central Asia towards the west, with the tribes that gathered around Anatolia being able to found successful states and protect and sustain their national identities. In contrast, the Turkish tribes that remained in Central Asia experienced many challenges, hardships, constraints, wars and subjugation.

More specifically, these Turkish tribes were “*rarely united and continuously clashed with each other, in their Central Asian homeland and beyond*” (Bayaliyev, 2014). Fighting with each other weakened their capacity so that they were unable to protect themselves against foreign threats. “*Ultimately, the Turks were subdued, their territories partitioned and incorporated into peripheral empire*” (Bayaliyev, 2014). In turn, Mongols, Chinese and Russians conquered and portioned the Turkish tribes’ Central Asian ancestral homeland.

As the final and most effective subjugator of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia occupied Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Central Asia in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century without regard for international law. Tsarist and Soviet-era Russians, who exerted great efforts to colonize Turkish states, caused great spiritual and material harm through ‘Russification’ and ‘Sovietization’ of Turkish territories over more than one and a half centuries. This had extremely negative effects that weakened the national identity of most Turkish people in region (Saray, 2015). However, the most critical effect of Sovietization was to weaken the cultural, economic, political and military bonds between Turkey

and the Turkish republics. The Soviets erected an ideological barrier that prevented relations within the Turkish world.

Historically, there were several attempts to unify the Turkish world when nationalism was aroused especially before, during and after the First World War. In order to compensate for Ottoman territories lost in the Balkans, the leaders of the Union and Progress Party (Ittihat ve Terakki Partisi), followed a pan-Turanist policy. Enver Pasha, the party's influential leader, who actively followed this policy after the First World War, was killed in 1922 fighting against Soviet troops in an uprising called 'Basmacilar'. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkish nationalism, which developed a distinctly pan-Turkish emphasis, failed due to Enver Pasha's advance into the Caucasus in 1918 and by the establishment of Soviet rule throughout the region during 1920-2, which made the pan-Turkist project completely unachievable (Hale, 2013: 222).

Pan-Turanism was subsequently abandoned during the Anatolian revolution of 1919-1922 since Turkey urgently needed military and economic aid from any country willing to supply it. At that time, because the Soviets Union were also fighting Western powers, the leaders of the Anatolian uprising and the Soviet Union agreed to help each other against their common enemy, the 'imperialist powers'. In return for Soviet economic and military aid, Turkey avoided pan-Turkish/Turanist policies.

Generally, the newly established Republic of Turkey's policy regarding other Turkish living outside Turkey was pragmatic, realistic and tailored to its 'peace at home peace in the world' motto. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was cautious in developing Turkey's foreign relations, refrained from any adventurist dreams. In particular, he strongly rejected Enver's earlier pan-Turkist ideas, declaring that "*neither an Islamic union nor Turanism may constitute doctrine or a logical policy for us*" (Landau, 1995: 74). Since then, Turkey has remained cautious regarding Russia due to perceptions and fears of a Russian threat formed over the last 300 years. Additionally, in the 1921 treaty between Russia and Turkey, Turkey committed itself to non-interference over Turks in Soviet territories in return for the Soviet's not promoting communism in Anatolia (Aydın, 2006: 3).

The Soviet Union continued to be a major factor determining the level of relations within the Turkish world. Between 1925 and 1939, for example major Turkish foreign policy decisions were taken in coordination with the Soviet Union.

After the Second World War, however, this policy was modified considerably when Nazi forces occupied the Soviet Union as far as Stalingrad. For Turkey, this released the pressure on İnönü's administration, which allowed free expression of pan-Turkism. However, once the Nazis had been defeated, this policy was rapidly abandoned once again (Hale, 2013: 66). Nevertheless, after the Second World War, İnönü's administration again turned to pan-Turkism in order to get American support against the threat of Stalin, although this policy was never actually implemented to unify the Turkish world. Rather, it just provided some degree of freedom for pan-Turkish activities. Turkey never thought to compete with the Soviet Union in its relations with the Soviet Turkish republics, as it had become one of the superpowers after acquiring its nuclear arsenal. In short, except for a brief period during the Second World War, Turkey more or less followed a non-intervention policy regarding relations with the Turkish republics and ethnic Turks.

### **3. THE EVOLUTION OF TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE TURKISH REPUBLICS POST-1990S**

After the collapse of the USSR, the region experienced a turmoil that destroyed existing values and norms. The Warsaw Pact was dissolved and fifteen new republics became independent following the USSR's collapse. The loss of the Soviet's sphere of influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia meant a security gap emerged in the region.

The region's newly formed states shared certain common features characteristic of failed states. Central Asian states faced common security challenges of crime, corruption, terrorism and faltering commitments to economic and democratic reforms (Yang, 2008: 344). Their domestic governance also caused international concern because of pervasive degradation of social infrastructure and the environment, misrule, authoritarianism, repression and widespread fears of a potential Islamic insurgency (Blank, 2012: 151). Nonetheless, there was also deep ideological transformation in all these states. All former communist leaders abandoned communism and turned their face towards liberalism without hesitation. The leaders of the new Turkish republics were mostly unchanged from the previous Soviet regime. Unsurprisingly, these former communist leaders somehow became nationalists in overnight.

The Caucasus and Central Asia are important strategically for their energy reserves and energy transportation. This importance has increased although several

countries in the region have some of the characteristics of failed states. The region has also become a center for new global tensions with the emergence of micro-nationalism and ethnic or religious conflicts without the Soviet Union's powerful central authority. Consequently, ethnic and religious conflicts have significantly damaged the region, particularly in the Caucasus, though also in Central Asia to a lesser extent.

In the early 1990s, Turkey was both surprised by and welcomed the rapid developments in Eastern Europe and the USSR. The drastic changes of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union forced Turkey to reorient its foreign policy to respond to the global transformation. The foreign policy implemented by Turkey since 1990 toward Turkish republics have varied (Aydın, 2008: 366-439 and 2006: 3-33).

The Soviet collapse had three main effects. First, the disappearance of the Russian threat, which had been the main factor determining Turkey's foreign policy strategy for over two centuries strategy, presented a significant opportunity for Turkey to redesign its foreign relations and implement a multilateral foreign policy. Turkey therefore abandoned the foreign policy it had implemented more or less since its foundation, which can summarized as 'western oriented' and 'non-interventionist' in Turkey's neighborhood.

Second, the end of the Cold War meant that Western security concerns focused on how to cope with failed states, terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction as Russia was no longer considered as a threat. This also decreased Turkey's strategic importance in the eyes of the West, which greatly affected Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey's desire to become a full member of the European Economic Community, later European Union, was ignored in both 1987 and in 1997, which increased Turkey's sense of isolation in changing global political, economic and military structures.

Third, on the other hand, this radical transformation has had some benefits for Turkey, particularly that it no longer has such a powerful neighbor. This has allowed it to follow more multilateral and varied foreign policy tools while developments in the Balkans, Central Asia and Caucasus have opened enormous opportunities. Furthermore, Turkey's influence as a regional power has been reinvented both by Turks themselves and the Western world to cope with crises in the intersection of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus. Turkey's geopolitical importance has been unexpectedly boosted by the fallout from ethnic,

religious or sectarian regional conflicts, such as refugee flows, mass deportations and all kinds of smuggling. As Öniş puts it, “*the very foundations of Turkey's foreign policy ... were seriously challenged in the 1990s, resulting in a more assertive policy in the Balkans, Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asian republic*” (Öniş, 2001: 67).

Turkey was the first country to recognize the independence of the Turkish and other republics independence following the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. However, before doing so, Turkey sent a team to the region to evaluate the political and military situation (Aydın, 2008: 376-379). From this, it concluded that the international situation in 1990-1993 allowed it to abandon its previous timid approach in favor of more courageous policies. Now seeing itself as a ‘big brother’, Turkey started to act accordingly. In 1992, for example, Turkey instigated the annual ‘Summits of Turkish Speaking Countries’ Heads of States’, in order to increase solidarity between Turkish speaking countries and create new cooperation opportunities. At first, the new Turkish republics took a positive view that Turkey's significant capacity would guide them and meet their urgent needs. At that time, Turkey's leaders believed that the situation was appropriate for developing Turkish unity through a common market or some other form of economic cooperation. Thus, the first Turkish Congress was held in Ankara in 1992 with the participation of the new republics. However, this meeting proved that any unification of the Turkish world would be impossible. In particular, Turkish leaders seemed very upset by any wording regarding unification that might recall pan-Turanism (Aydın, 2008: 388), with no Turkish republic leader accepting any kind of economic or political unification. Therefore, “*the Central Asian heads of state refused to approve plans for a Turkish Common Market and a Turkish Development and Investment Bank*”(Gareth, 1996: 136) because of their continued economic and commercial dependence on Russia and unwillingness to harm Russia. Thus, although weakened, Russia was still the major actor in Central Asia. Nevertheless, Turkey managed to persuade Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to establish “*a consultancy mechanism*” (Fidan, 2010: 114).

The most urgent problem for the new Turkish republics was economic recovery. Although Turkey's Eximbank provided some loans to these countries, however, Turkey's own economic capacity could not meet the needs of the whole Turkish world. Moreover, Turkey was itself struggling with economic crisis in

1994. Its initial policies regarding the Turkish world were therefore only partially successful, as clearly recognized by Freddy De Pauw (2015):

*“Turkey has only limited political and economic resources for extending its influence in the former Soviet Union ... Nor is the Turkish economy - with its high inflation rate and structural unemployment - in good shape for meeting the new challenges.”*

Furthermore, besides being *“a middle income country, lacking the financial capacity to assist countries on a grand scale”* (Öniş, 2001: 68). Turkey was also busy with a costly war against internal terrorism, which *“also cast doubt over the value of the Turkish connection”* (Öniş, 2001: 68).

Another factor was that the West wanted Turkey to become a model for the Turkish republic, as Turkey was considered to be a Westernized, modern, democratic and secular state implementing liberal free market principles within own values. The USA particularly feared that Iran could affect the new republics with radical Islamic ideology. In response, the Western world promoted the Turkish model to prevent the region falling under Iran’s sphere of influence (Aydın, 2008: 383). *“The idea behind the promotion of this model was that Turkey’s secular and democratic political structure and its free market economy would set an example for the newly emerging republics”* (“Turkish Policy toward Central Asia”, 2008). Such ideas encouraged Turkey to act very hastily in trying to restore a Turkish world by being an example of modernity and secularity based on a Western-defined role. *“Turkish foreign policymakers hoped that such leadership would enhance the country’s importance to the West in both strategic and economic terms at a time when its old role in the Cold War context had disappeared”* (Öniş, 2001: 66).

Turkey took several initiatives to formalize its relationship with the new republics. The first issue was to determine the mechanisms responsible for coordination. In 1992, Turkey established the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) to deliver development assistance and take an important step towards institutionalizing Turkey’s regional policy and political orientation (Fidan, 2010: 113). Turkey also helped the Turkish Republics establish relations with international organizations as *“they believed that they could easily build a good relationship with international organizations in the West if they made good use of Turkey’s present political relations with the West”* (Fidan, 2010: 114). Turkish mediation allowed the Central Asian republics to make their voices heard



in the Council of Europe, OECD, IMF, EU and NATO (Fidan, 2010:114). Additionally, Turkey provided training support for the republics' military forces and education opportunities for students of Turkish Republics in Turkey. Turkey also tried to convince some of them to change their alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin while Turkish non-government organizations tried to gain influence and develop close cultural and economic ties by becoming an interest group advocating sustained closer relations (Öniş, 2001: 67).

Although some in Turkey wanted to create a commonwealth of Turkish Republics, neither Ankara nor the Turkish republics were eager for such an organization since Russia's reemergence, including its "near abroad policy", which claimed certain privileges over areas around its borders. Thus, Russia forced the republics' leaders not to attend any Turkish related events.

Besides its bilateral diplomatic efforts, Turkey was also instrumental in the creation of regional economic and political links, especially the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was employed for this aim (Kramer, 1996:3). Since 1992, the ECO included all Central Asian new republics, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan besides its original members Turkey, Iran and Pakistan (Kramer, 1996:3).

Turkey's initial policies failed to achieve successful results due to some challenges and strains. Turkey's aspirations of being the Turkish world's leader and its attractiveness as a model (Öniş, 2001:68) both faded within three years. Turkey also had to recognize the realities of the region, including ethnic and religious hatred and conflict, poverty, instability, its inability to support Azerbaijan regarding Armenia, Russian's incursions into the region and the unwillingness of Turkish leaders to expand initiatives related to the Turkish World. The reasons for this partial failure can be listed as follows:

- From the outset, the Turkish administration failed to see the new republics as equals. Acting as a 'big brother' caused some uneasiness among the leadership of the new republics (Aydın, 2008; Öniş, 2001). They preferred "*a relationship that was both more limited and more equal*" (Öniş, 2001: 68). Another important concern of these leaders was Turkish attempts to influence their domestic politics. Furthermore, it was claimed that some Turkey's citizens had a links with coupists who attempted to make a coup at those countries. This caused them to be

suspicious of some strong nationalist or “Pan-Turkish” sentiments prevalent in Turkey (Öniş, 2001: 68).

- Having just getting rid themselves of Russian oppression, the republics did not want to. experience any similar bondage that might be seen as recolonization. What they demanded instead was economic aid, international recognition and legitimacy, and Turkey’s support to gain membership of international organizations. Turkey, however, prioritized establishing economic, commercial and other bonds rather than to understand and meet their requirements.

- Turkey attributed to itself more importance than matched its capacity to support the Turkish states. Broken promises therefore disappointed the republics so they sought alternative solutions to their urgent problems. Although Turkey wanted to be a link between the West and the republics, most of their leaders preferred to establish direct relations with the West since their economic resources were attracting the Western world.

- The leaders of the new Turkish republics were former communists implementing a new nationalism policy after the 1990s. They therefore wished for economic support and recognition rather than to be forced to apply liberal, democratic principles or free market economic policies. As Aydın notes, the Turkish states wanted to take authoritarian Turkey of the 1930s as their example not the liberal, democratic model of the 1990s (Aydın, 2008: 394-395). Hence, “*The Turkish model’s democratic component, despite its somewhat restrictive nature, proved unattractive to former the republics’ well-entrenched authoritarian political structures*” (Öniş, 2001: 68-69).

- Initially, Turkey seemed to wish to exploit the situation in former communist countries. Moreover, it seemed to lack the economic and political capacity to transform them, while former communist leaders were not ready to accept any unifying structure bringing all Turkish states together. Finally, Turkey itself needed economic aid from the West.

- In the midst of drastic global change, the way Turkish administrations approached the republics and expressed their intentions toward the region frightened Russia, Iran and other actors. The phrase ‘the Turkish World from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China’, is an example of this while. Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel’s suggestion to abandon the ruble for economic activities was perceived by Russia as threatening their economic dominance in the region (Aydın, 2008: 366-439).

- The Turkish republics seemed little affected by the supposed Iranian effect, taking serious measures against radical fundamentalism. Seventy years of communist rule had also embedded secularist thinking so the people were apparently little attracted by radical fundamentalism, except in Uzbekistan. Thus, *“from the Western view point, the “Turkish model” also appeared to lose its earlier appeal following a realization that initial fears concerning Iran's influence had been exaggerated”* (Öniş, 2001: 69).

Most critically, the region's geo-economic importance increased because of energy resources of the Caspian basin and Central Asia. In addition, a resurgent Russia started to increase its power beyond Turkey's was ability to compete alone. Therefore, the West has preferred to involve itself more directly in the region in support of its strategic interests. US policy regarding the Trans-Caspian intensified in 1994-95 when Washington conclusively rejected Russia's energy monopoly (Blank, 2000: 66). Other aims were to keep Iran in check and to defuse violent, anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism through economic growth (Yang, 2008: 337). According to Celikpala (2012: 75), during the second term of Clinton's administration, the US abandoned its pro-Russian policies; instead, it supported the newly independent states by including them in the Euro-Atlantic security structure. While also expanding its involvement in military issues. This included forward basing in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, access to airspace and restricted use of bases in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, training and equipment in Georgia, assistance for border security in Azerbaijan, and coalition-building by high-level visits to the region, intelligence-sharing and improved coordination within the American Central Command (Yang, 2008: 338). At this time, Turkey's own foreign policy towards the Turkish republics lacked a steady and integrated strategy. This overlap of declining Turkish influence and rising American policy toward the region explains how relations between Turkey and the republics evolved.

- Turkey's involvement in counter-terror operations at its internal borders decreased the Turkish governments' ambitious of being Turkish model.

- Turkey's active and assertive approach as a regional actor resulted in intense economic interaction with Russia and a certain subset of the former Soviet Republics (Öniş, 2001: 71). This improvement made Turkey more cautious in its policy regarding the Turkish Republics in order to avoid risking its newly positive

economic and other relations with Russia. In particular, Turkey's dependence on Russian natural gas (almost 70 percent of imports) has been the major force deterring Turkey from promoting stronger relations with the Turkish Republics.

At the same time, the region has become destabilized due to ethnic separatism, internal wars, corruption and failed states. Expanding risks and threats have led other actors, particularly Russia, to intervene either to end or manipulate conflicts as Russia desired. For example, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabagh in 1992-1994 clearly determined Turkey's limits and Russia's capacity in the region in that Turkey could not support Azerbaijan due to the threat posed by Russia. Russia's Chief of Staff threatened clearly that if Turkey intervened in the conflict then it would lead to a third world war (Aydın, 2008). Because of the Azeri military's weakness and Russian support for the Armenians, Armenia occupied 20% of Azeri territory with over one million Azeris being deported. Unfortunately, except for Turkish political and economic support, no other Turkish republic assisted Azerbaijan during the war. Since this indicated that Turkey could not provide a security umbrella for the Turkish republics, the Turkish republics reoriented their security policies towards maintaining good relations with Russia and China.

Driven by economic as well as security interests and pursued mainly by boosting financial, commercial and trade relations, China's projection toward Central Asia yielded impressive results in the course of the last decade (Frappi, 2013:7). Chinese giant economic possibilities have attracted Central Asian countries, which was resulted in Turkey's lessening popularity.

Looking back over the first ten years, Turkey has a mixed record as an influential power in the region (Öniş, 2001: 68). While it tried to develop close political, economic and cultural relations with the newly independent Central Asian republics, the mid and late 1990s, which witnessed a steady decline and failed to produce any concrete results ("Turkish Policy toward Central Asia", 2008), led to a change in sentiment: "*the mood has changed from the 1990s as a more pragmatic and realistic modus operandi has supplanted romantic and excessively enthusiastic expectations of the first decade*" (Bayaliyev, 2014). Once Turkey accepted its limited capacity, understood the realities of the Turkish republics and the negative implications of a resurgent Russia as major power with interests in the region, the region's increasing significance due to natural resources, it started to follow more balanced, pragmatic, realistic and cooperative approaches.

#### **4. THE EVOLUTION OF TURKEY’S FOREIGN POLICIES WITH THE TURKISH REPUBLICS IN 2000S AND BEYOND**

After the radical transition in domestic political power in 2002, Turkey’s new Justice and Development Party (AK Parti-JDP) government generally followed similar policies atop those of previous governments toward the Turkish republics. However, JDP, which originated from Islamic tendencies, has considerably shifted Turkish Foreign policy according to its ideological values, following a multilateral foreign policy based on a “zero problem” approach and utilizing soft power potential, especially economic power and religious affinity. This policy has mostly been characterized by Ahmet Davutoglu (2001), the main determinant of JDP power, as advisor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later Prime Minister. His book, “Strategic Depth”, generally summarizes his policy in foreign relations, predicting that Turkey can become a key power that can be an attractive center for neighboring countries by using its soft power capacity through its historical and geopolitical value. JDP’s “zero problems” policy, with its greater emphasis on soft power and developing friendly relations with all neighbors, has signaled a deviation from the classical fixed positions of Turkish foreign policy (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2009: 9). In its second and third terms, JDP has increasingly reoriented Turkish Foreign policy according to its new approach.

In its first term, however, before implementing these policies, the JDP government prioritized European Union membership in order to legitimize its existence. In its second term, it gave more significant importance to the Middle East and the Arab world, using the party’s Islamist roots as an asset (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2009: 9).

Turkey’s relations with the Turkish republics post-2000 have been shaped by the new government’s priorities, particularly cultural, historical and religious dynamics, geo-political concerns, increasing energy demand and Turkey’s desire to become an energy transit hub. “*For the Turkish government, the region is strategically important because of its vast energy resources and for the security of energy supply to the world market*”(Efeğil, 2008: 169). This policy has also been affected by the major powers’ strategic interest in the region as evidenced by Russia’s aggressive policies, especially in the South Caucasus.

In general, the JDP government has followed similar policies to those of previous governments regarding the Turkish republics, without becoming more

assertive, by prioritizing economic and energy issues. However, some intellectuals claimed that “*Unlike the 1990s, the AKP policy moved to form a deeper relationship with the region and clearly aimed for regional leadership*” (Altunışık and Lenore, 2011: 571). Additionally, Turkey’s leaders presented themselves to western powers as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East and central Asia (Hale, 2013: 136) in order to raise Turkey’s strategic value in the West. The Turkish Government also wanted to deepen relations with the Turkish republics taking into account religious and ethnic affinities. This approach was also intended to prevent Moscow regaining a monopoly of power in Russia’s near abroad but without damaging Turkey’s economic interests in Russia or provoking a direct clash with Russian military power (Hale, 2013: 136).

To avoid dependency and break Russian control over energy transportation, Turkey planned and starting building alternative pipelines, making Turkey a center for new energy transit options.

Another major achievement of the JDP government regarding the promotion of the relations Turkish World republics was the founding the Cooperation Council of Turkish Speaking States on 3 October 2009 The Aim of the Organization is to benefit to a great extent from the historical and cultural accumulations of Turkic world, to develop multilateral cooperation among the Turkic speaking states (“The Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States”). This international organization also functions as an umbrella body for all other autonomous collaboration mechanisms, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkish Speaking Countries (TURKPA), the International Organization of Turkish Culture (TURKSOY) established in 1993, and the Turkish Academy (Bayaliyev, 2014). Although the Turkish government wished all Turkish republics to participate, only four states, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey, became founding members. Turkmenistan did not join because of the neutrality policy it has followed since independence. Uzbekistan did not accept due to Turkey’s protest over the massacre in Andijan in 2005. These absences meant that Turkey still could not achieve an integrated stable policy toward the republics.

Turkish government-funded schools in the former Soviet republics have become popular choices while Turkish NGOs with clearly Islamist sympathies began to have a significant impact on Turkey’s international relations. Under the JDP they gained a far wider degree of acceptance and even moral support (Hale, 2013: 150). Among the NGOs, the FettullahGulen movement lost its political

legitimacy and defined as terrorist organization due to serious political discord in Turkey in 2014 and its role in failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016. Currently, Many Turkish schools under the Ministry of National Education exist in the Central Asian Republics. Turkey has been also carrying out “Turkey Scholarships” program for students and running two universities in Central Asia. (“Turkey’s Relations with Central Asian Republics”)

However, a lack of interest in the region has meant that the JDP government has not sustained a balanced and stable foreign policy toward the Turkish republics. Aydın (2012: 210) suggests that this disinterest was due to the US’ Iraq occupation in 2003, changing Turkey-EU relations, the Cyprus issue, PKK terrorism, and the closure case against JDP at the Constitutional Court in 2008. Besides, “*The Arab Spring distraught Turkey’s foreign policies and was the proverbial breaking-point for its continued stability and success*” (Türkmen, 2013: 1). Furthermore, the JDP government has been focusing on Syria since 2011 with the operations of Euphrates Shield in 2016 and Olive Branch in 2018, which have naturally caused Turkish Government to allocate less effort to other regional issues in foreign policy perspectives.

JDP’s regional foreign policy has sometimes shifted very radically. For example, it took radical decisions related to particular republics. In particular, in 2009, it signed the Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Turkey and the Republic of Armenia. By signing this protocol, Turkey was disregarding Armenian occupation of Azeri lands since 1992, which infuriated Azerbaijan and caused enormous dissatisfaction in Turkey and Azerbaijan. Consequently, the JDP government did not presented the protocol for parliamentary ratification, fearing the reaction against it. Another example is related to Uzbekistan. “*Uzbek-Turkish relations took a dramatic turn after the Andijan massacre in 2005, which has provoked an international outcry. The Turkish government backed the UN resolution condemning Uzbekistan’s human rights record over mass killings, resulting in a significant downturn in relations between Ankara and Tashkent*” (Satke et al., 2014).Uzbekistan, which is the largest Turkish state, accused of Turkey supporting radical fundamentalists in Andijan and downgraded its relations with Turkey, such as by no longer sending students for education in Turkey.

Besides these factors, major powers' interest or disinterest toward the region have also shifted Turkish policy regarding the Turkish republics. *"Turkey's political-economic power and military capabilities are not projected to support Central Asian republics, especially after China's Silk Road initiatives and Russia's revanchism in the former territories"* (Satke et al., 2014). Turkey cannot compete with *"Beijing's massive spending spree on the regional gas pipelines and infrastructure projects, or the Kremlin's coercive actions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan."* (Satke et al., 2014). As a result, *"Turkish policymakers appear to maintain a low profile that is consistent with a strategy of non-interference."* (Satke et al., 2014).

The revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and the attempted one in Kyrgyzstan, supported by various Western organizations have greatly concerned the authoritarian rulers of some Turkish republics. In response, they have restricted America's military presence in the region. For example, Uzbekistan closed the US base on its territory in 2005 while Kyrgyzstan increased its charges for using the Manas airbase in early 2006 (Yang, 2008: 348). Thus, Turkey was left alone to deal with Central Asian states.

It is a widely accepted that Russia has long perceived Central Asia and the Caucasus as areas of strategic interest. Russia's objectives in the Central Asia include promoting stability through economic development and fostering a sphere of influence to further its ambitions as a great power (Gergorin, nd: 10). Russia has tried to prevent Central Asian states from affiliating with the United States or other western militaries (Blank, 2007: 318). Besides, it has strived to secure Central Asia from foreign liberalism or Islamic revolution while ensuring its dependence on Russian commercial, political, energy and military influence (Blank, 2011: 209). This new policy has been named as "new Eurasianism" (İşyar, 2014), and widely adopted by nationalist intellectuals and scholars.

Given events in the Caucasus and central Asia, Western powers have significantly lost influence due to Russia's resurgence. Russia's heavy blow to Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea with the so-called referendum in 2014 were major setbacks for the USA and other regional countries wishing to be side with the West, including the Turkish republics. These developments indicate that US superiority in the region, which peaked in the 1990s, has disappeared. Accordingly, the Turkish republics have had to reassess their policies to allay Russia's concerns. Additionally, in order to further weaken America's role in the



region, Russia and China are now collaborating by engaging in substantive, comprehensive and systematic efforts to undermine America's presence in Central Asia because of its support for democratic reform (Blank, 2007: 318). For example, they initiated the Shanghai cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2002, based on the 1996 Border Agreements.<sup>1</sup>

Surprisingly, other developments have led the US to divert its efforts from Central Asia. First, the US may be tempted to enter into a new "Great Game" for influence in Central Asia. The Afghanistan and Iraqi crises and the Arab Spring have distracted American attention from Central Asia while the Far East has become more important as the US looks to rebalance its military forces towards the Pacific (Gregorin, ND: 2). Owing to these changed strategic priorities, finite financial resources and geographical distance, the US remains at a distinct disadvantage in any overt competition for influence in the region (Gregorin, ND: 2).

Overall, both international and domestic politics have weakened Turkey's links with central Asia since the new millennium (Hale, 2013: 225). In contrast, Russian power and interests revived just as US attention switched to Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, while China has also emerged as an important regional player. In short, central Asia is no longer the focus of international attention might have been predicted in the early 1990s (Hale, 2013: 225).

Since Turkish forces shot down a Russian fighter plane near the Syrian border while violating Turkish airspace, Turkish-Russian relations have entered a difficult period that has destroyed the hopes of both sides. This event has also harmed Turkey's relations with the Turkish republics. While some countries, like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, have mediated between Russia and Turkey in order to help improve relations, Turkmenistan has blamed Turkey. In this new context, the republics may also hesitate to further improve mutual relations due to fears of Russian retaliation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

25 years since gaining independence, the Turkish republics are still a focus of international relations. The dissolution of the Soviet Union caused Turkey to

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed information on SCO, see Sertif Demir., "Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütünün Evrimleşmesinin Analizi ve Türkiye Açısından Değerlendirilmesi", Hasret Çomak ve Caner Sancaktar (Eds.), *Türk Dış Politikası (Turkish Foreign Policy)*, Beta, İstanbul, 2013.

reshape its policy with the Turkish world from its traditional foreign policy of distancing itself from nationalist movements within these states. However, particularly between 1991 and 1993, Turkey implemented a more active and independent policy based on more nationalist and unionist thinking, and disregarding Russian concerns. However, this policy can be characterized as uncoordinated, badly programmed. This change was encouraged by Russia's Western-oriented political attitude and the West's support for Turkey in order to limit Iran's regional influence. However, Turkey's weaknesses, the unwillingness of Turkish republics to develop stronger partnerships or unification, decreasing support from the West and Russia's increasing influence through its "new Eurasian" and "near abroad" approach (Erol, 2012:6) forced Turkey to apply a more realistic, balanced policy toward the region. Turkey has since followed more pragmatic regional foreign policy as the republics have refrained from any economic or similar unification. Thus, for the first ten years, the Turkish world learned how to deal with the challenges of the new situation by taking into account those factors that might threaten the region.

Since 2002, Turkey's interest in the region has dropped in line with the new government's priorities and various internal and external issues that have distracted its efforts from the region. Although the general pattern of relations has not changed, there are some differences from previous administrations in how JDP has implemented its policies. Considering last 25 years overall, relations between Turkey and the Turkish republics are now based on realities rather than wishes. Hence, Turkish policy has changed from enthusiasm towards logic, with economic connectedness being prioritized. This means that while Turkey has maintained its cultural and economic role in Central Asia, it lacks much real political power. However, Turkey considers Central Asia as strategically important region for ensuring the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic region. ("Turkey's Relations with Central Asian Republics")

In summary, Turkey's relations with the Turkish republics, which was initiated with great enthusiasm at first, has continued in a more reasonable manner. The major finding of this study is that the Turkish world remains unable to develop a mechanism that serves all parties' interests, although relations are better than that they were before 1990s. Therefore, all sides need to develop much more effective political, cultural, military and technical mechanisms that could best serve the interests of all concerned, yet without disregarding a resurgent Russia. Thus,

eliminating differences and converging the interests of all sides is essential to sustain cohesive and comprehensive relations throughout the Turkish world.

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