

(Warsaw, July 7, 2010)



The Geopolitical Emancipation of Turkey and its Influence on the Western Balkans

Contrary to the common opinions, the expansion of the geopolitical role of Turkey is a long-lasting process, which began with the fall of the “Iron Courtain”. The reconstruction of country’s position began with taking the post of the Prime Minister of Turkish government by Turgut Özal (who in the years 1983–93, apart from being a prime minister, was also a president of the country), and was continued by later chief of diplomacy Ismail Cem(1997-2002) [\[1\]](#) . We can watch a specific “bloom” of the chosen goal from the year 2002, when the Party of Justice and Development (AKP) came to power

[\[2\]](#)

We can distinguish at least a few stages of the evolution of Turkish geopolitics and international position. Formerly, the Middle East and the Caucasus were the priorities, currently the Turkish interests are more and more noticeable also in the Balkans. In the case of this region, the factor that influenced the situation described above were not only the ambitions of Turkish politicians, but also hackneyed and stagnant policy of the European Union. Turkey was always active in Balkans, considered as a kind of a useful bridge leading to Western Europe. Nowadays, however, the presence in the Balkans creates a great opportunity for a display of power, which enstrengthen the position of Turkey in the negotiations with Brussels (we should remember about Ankara’s will to join the European Union, which is still strong). Luckily for the states of the region, the geopolitical actors are playing this political game using *soft power* tools (adored by both EU and Turkey).

Geopolitical emancipation

The American invasion against Iraq in the year 2003 was one of the most important turning points in Turkish foreign policy. The new geopolitical situation, which appeared after crushing the Saddam Hussein’s state, forced the Middle East countries to revise the earlier stance and seek for the new alliances. This situation became an ideal opportunity for Turkish concept of

The Geopolitical Emancipation of Turkey

Пише: Lukasz Reszczynski
субота, 31 јул 2010 15:41

„strategic depth” to come true. According to this concept, Ankara should become an heir to the Osman Empire, therefore Turkey should control the developments on the area of former empire [3]

. That is the reason why Turkey is more and more active in the Middle East, Western Balkans, Central Asia, Caucasus, but also Northern Africa.

The rising consciousness of own capacities and exporting them to the territory of „Eurasian Balkans” [4] is also an effect of changes in the tendencies that create contemporary reality of international relations. The rise of Ankara’s influence is simultaneous with noticeable decline of geopolitical position of United States (many commentators suggest that the latter started with the presidency of Barack Obama). The decline of international potential of Washington creates a chance for a new international order, which from now on may become multipolar. China, which managed to enstrengthen its international position in few last years, may serve as a role model for Turkey. This message was received by Turkey as a “green light” for its striving towards broadening its influences, which in the new situation is tantamount to wider freedom of action.

As Dominik Jankowski remarks, „in contemporary globalized world, the assessment of the state’s economic capacity plays a key role in the estimation of state’s power in international relations” Better and better condition of Turkish economy enables Turkey to play a crucial role in world economics [5]. The main factor that influences this situation is undoubtedly the geopolitical location of Turkey, as well as ruling elites’ will to undertake the risk connected with the economic reforms, as well as Turkish market’s extraordinary absorptiveness for foreign capital.

„No problems”

Apart from natural striving towards establishing good relations with neighbour countries, misunderstandings between Ankara and its main international partners (USA and EU) were the main stimuli which influenced the new elastic policy of Turkey. The invasion against Iraq, as it was mentioned before, was a factor that destabilized region and in large extent „restarted” its geopolitical standards. The decision of Turkish members of parliament from March, 2003, who refused to agree on transit of American and allied troops through Turkish territory, became a serious problem in bilateral relations with Washington. A tension in relations with United States was increased by Turkish attitude towards Israel, who used to be its main ally in the region. The Turkish reaction towards Israeli actions in late 2008 and early 2009 became a turning point in mutual relations [6]. A decision of American House of Representatives from February, 2010, which reckognized the events of 1915 in Ottoman Empire as a genocide against Armenians

[7]

Undoubtedly, the problem of Iran and its nuclear ambitions is the main question influencing the relations in the triangle Ankara – Tel Aviv – Washington. The geopolitical position of Ankara obliges it to play an important role in this conflict. Despite the contradictions of geopolitical ambitions and interests, the Turkish-Iranian relations are blooming. The mutual trade exchange is increasing despite UN embargo against Teheran. The cooperation between both countries in energetic and tourist sector is also increasing. The diplomatic contacts also became intensified (the most distinct moment of this process was a visit of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in August, 2008 [8] . Not only the government in Teheran, but also European Union appreciate Turkish role as a mediator. Not so long ago, Washington's position was similar, but after Turkish-Brasilian proposition of signing an agreement with Iran about creating a storage of its low-enriched uranium in Turkey (what prevents further economic sanctions against Iran), Obama's administration became embarrassed.

The Turkey's striving to join the EU is the basic issue in the relations between Ankara and Brussels. The question of Cyprus, divided to the northern part (inhabited by Turks) and the southern part (inhabited by Greeks) remains one of the main problems in this field, heating up the atmosphere of distrust between Brussels and Ankara [9] .

In April, 2004, after laborious negotiations and diplomatic demarches many people thought that so-called Kofi Annan's plan will establish a new order on an island, and maybe thereby begin a new era in relations between Turkey and EU. None of above happened – Cyprish Greeks rejected the proposal in the referendum. Moreover, during the presidential election of 2010, Dervis Erglou (perceived by many as a die-hard supporter of a *status quo* on an island) became a head of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

[10]

Both questions directly influence the relations between Turkey and EU. On one hand, Ankara does not recognize the sovereignty of one of the EU members (Southern Cyprus), from the other hand Brussels does not respect the Cyprish Turks' right of self-determination.

Relatively good relations between Turkey and the main actors of the western world became a big problem in its contacts with its closest neighbours. The situation was very clear in the case

The Geopolitical Emancipation of Turkey

Пише: Lukasz Reszczyński
субота, 31 јул 2010 15:41

of its contact with Syria, which used to remain under the Soviet influence during the Cold War. However, nowadays the bilateral contacts with both Damascus and Baghdad are developing extraordinarily well – this fact is mentioned by Ankara’s ruling elites as an example of the “zero problem” policy. In the case of Baghdad this enthusiasm appears to be fainting, because regular clashes against the Kurdish rebels from Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) cast a shadow on the contacts with Baghdad (the Turkish army regularly enters and bombs the northern territory of Iraq) [\[11\]](#) .

In the case of „emancipation” of Turkish foreign policy, such an important regions as Caucasus and Central Asia should not be omitted. In both cases, Turkey has to face the two main geopolitical players of the region – Russia and China. Apart from economical questions, the cultural questions are the advantage of Turkey [\[12\]](#) . Apart from Turkish failure in a conflict of Nagorny Karabakh [\[13\]](#) , its geopolitical potential was noticed by Russia, which suggested Ankara a cooperation in the areas of nuclear energy and defence to calm down Turkish ambition in the region.

The return of the Sultan without his sword

Turkey derives advantage in the Middle East from balancing of its foreign policy, which recently harmed its contacts with Western world. The Turkish interests in Balkan Peninsula (a traditional Turkish gate leading to Europe) have noticeably increased. Turkey drew conclusions from history, remembering the time when the Balkans, strangled and exploited by the Great Porta, ultimately contributed to its fall. This specific region of Southern Europe has always been a challenge for Ankara because of its ethnic and cultural mixture and mountainous terrain. Nowadays, Turkey plays its role much more efficiently, being a real alternative for European Union and Russia. Similarly to the Turkish policy in the Middle East, in Balkans Ankara plays a role of a good neighbour, who is willing to help in every situation. An example of this kind of „care” was a mediation between Belgrade and Sarajevo undertaken by Turkey, meant to “clean” the relations between both countries in the name of the regional cooperation [\[14\]](#) . Turkish politicians created a similar patronage over the relations between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which also ended with a preliminary success [\[15\]](#)

Turkey also very well plays the role of a mediator in South Eastern European Cooperation Process (SEECP) [\[16\]](#) – now it is wielding a chairmanship of this organization. A summit of SEECP organized this year in Istanbul highlighted the special status of Ankara in the region. The president Gül gave a hint, that apart from the aspirations of EU members being the members of

organization (apart from Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Slovenia) an additional alternative is important. Ankara is to play this role [\[17\]](#) .

An important role of Turkey in Balkans is also noticed by the European Union. Brussels realizes that the peninsula becomes more and more important arena of “the clash” with Ankara – Turkish membership in the UE may be a price to pay here. That does not deter it from letting other countries (Turkey, Russia) to engage in Balkan issues. From one side it can be understood as a proof for the weakness of European concept of the future of the region, from the other – as a sensible idea for a breakthrough in the stagnate stabilization Balkan policy. The presence of the chief of Turkish diplomacy Ahmet Davutoglu on the EU – West Balkans summit, organized in June 2010 in Sarajevo may confirm those assumptions.

The engagement of Ankara in the Balkan stabilization is large-scale, which can be confirmed by a large number of Turkish soldiers and officers taking a part in Union’s missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ALTHEA) and Kosovo (EULEX, KFOR, UNMIK) [\[18\]](#) . The success of the influence of Turkey in the region may be compared to the efficiency of Russian influence on the territory of former USSR. Similarly to Moscow (and contrary to Brussels), Ankara is developing economic and political cooperation with Balkan states and does not demand deep reforms and respecting human rights in exchange. The confessional factor, which is a significant part of Turkish foreign policy, is also important here. In this aspect Turkey has large influence in Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which can be used in breaking the political deadlock in Sarajevo. The historical legacy may be a problem in the relations with the other states of the region. Negative associations having its genesis in the period of the Ottoman Empire are undoubtedly a considerable burden for the Turkish diplomacy in Balkans. However, the recent actions are changing this situation. Forcing Belgrade

[\[19\]](#)

to adopt the resolution about Srebrenica (in which the Serbian government expressed its regret) is a good example

[\[20\]](#)

The perception of Turkey in the Balkans exists according to a scheme similar to the one which took place among Arab states of the Middle East. Not long ago Turkey was perceived by the countries like Syria or Iran as a untrustworthy henchman of Washington. Nowadays, leading Turkish politicians (with prime minister Erdogan at the first place) are often welcomed in Arab states as defenders of Islam (prime minister Erdogan gained support because of his aggressive anti-Israeli rhetoric after the IDF commandos attack on the Flotilla of Freedom form May, 2010). It strongly affects the new “image” of Turkey. The term „econo-islamic” which is used by commentators to describe Turkish foreign policy is justified. The perception of Turkey is also changing in the eyes of Balkan states, more and more impatient about stall Union

accession talk. Alongside with Russia, Turkey is starting to create a favourable alternative, which multiplies the chance for economic and political advantages for Western Balkans.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Recently the role of Turkey in region rose significantly. It is an effect of conducive political processes which emerged in a few last years. The fact that Turkey skillfully took advantage of them created the basis for the rise of its position in international relations.
- The statements about redefinition of Turkey's priorities are undoubtedly a big abuse. Recent secret meeting between Turkish chief of diplomacy and Israeli ministry of industry dedicated to the normalization of mutual relations after the severe crisis may be a proof of Turkish need for good relations with the West.
- Despite its "rivarly" character, the main assumptions of Turkish policy in Balkans are fully compatible with the position of Brussels. The presence of Turkey in the region is constructive – it strongly and positively influences the stabilization process, which Ankara is also interested in.
- European Union should deepen and make more flexible its cooperation with Turkey in Western Balkans. Considering the confesional factors, Ankara may be a extraordinarily helpful mediator during political problems of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as during the possible talks about the status of Kosovo (after the decision of International Court of Justice).

Łukasz Reszczyński – Expert of the Committee of Analyses of the *Amicus Europae* Fund.

A graduate of international relations faculty in Nicolao Copernicus University in Torun; specializes in the problems of international security and world geopolitics (especially the regions of Western Balkans and post-Soviet states). Cooperates with European Centre for Geopolitical Analyses.

[1] Turkey and the Middle East: ambitions and constraints, International Crisis Group, Europe Report No. 203, April 2010, pp. 5

[2] According to the commentators, awarding Ahmet Davutoğlu (who formerly was the advisor for the international affairs in the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) with the post of the minister of foreign relations was the “complacent” of the current course of AKP.

[3] A. Balcer, W stronę strategicznego partnerstwa Unii Europejskiej i Turcji w polityce zagranicznej, Raport demosEuropa – Centrum Strategii Europejskiej, Warszawa 2010, p.13.

[4] This concept was created by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who called so Balkans, Black Sea states, Middle East, Afganistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia.

[5] Adam Balcer estimates that until the year 2050, Ankara will become much more important for world's economy because of the demographical factors (the country's population is going to rise to about 100 mln). According to those estimations, Turkey is going to be one of the world's 10-12 most effective world's economies, A. Balcer, *W stronę strategicznego partnerstwa...*, s.6

[6] However, a recent attack of Israeli commandos against the sea convoy with humanitarian aid for Gaza, in which 9 Turkish citizens perished, became a climax of the destruction of mutual relations.

[7] This question is a main factor obstructing the normalization of the relations between Turkey and Armenia.

[8] Turkey and the Middle East, op. cit., s.16

[9] Of course the question of aversion of some EU countries towards Turkish accession remains the most important.

[10] Ł. Reszczyński, *Poker na wyspie miłości*, „Przegląd”, No 20 (542), p. 22.

[11] S. Tisdall, *Turkey`s „zero problem” policy is a flop*, “Guardian”, (28.06.2010)
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/21/turkey-zero-problems-policy>>

[12] In most of the Soviet republics there are considerable groups of Turkish-speaking population.

[13] The ratification of the treaties between Ankara nad Erevan signed last year that was meant to be the prelude of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between both states, became conditioned by the progress in the negotiations in the area of the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh.

[14] Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina definitely warmed the mutual relations when the Serbian parliament adopted a special resolution condemning Srebrenica events of 1995. A series of trilateral meetings under a patronage of Turkey was ended by signing a common declaration in Istambul, in which sides obliged each other to deepen the regional cooperation.
<<http://www.nspm.rs/nspm-in-english/istanbul-declaration.html>>

[15] A symbolical visit of the president Ivo Josipovic in Bosnia and Herzegovina of 2010 may be a good example here. A Croatian president apologized for a negative role his country played during a civil war of the 90s.

[16] This regional organization was created in 1996; its members are: Turkey, Albania, Bosnia nad Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, and Slovenia. The countries which belong to SEECP work for the improvement of the relations in region, as well as economic and political relations and fight with organized crime.

[17] Bojana Barlovac, *Regional leaders gather at summit in Istanbul* (01.07.2010) <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/28965/>

[18] Nowadays, Turkish soldiers and policemen are 4% of EULEX contingent in Kosovo, and 15% in EUFOR/ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They were also 4% of the KFOR contingent.: A. Balcer, *W stronę strategicznego partnerstwa Unii Europejskiej i Turcji w polityce zagranicznej, Raport demosEuropa – Centrum Strategii Europejskiej*, Warszawa 2010, p. 20

[19] In Serbia the anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic attitudes are the strongest in the region.

[20] A. Balcer, op. cit., p. 21