

TURKEY'S IMPACT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Turkey's growing role in the Western Balkans can be assessed by reviewing five key areas: the contours of Turkey's neo-Ottomanism; Ankara's diplomatic successes and limitations in the region; Turkey's cultural influences; its economic ties with the peninsula; and the impact of Turkish policy on the aspirations of the Western Balkan states to enter the European Union (EU).

Neo-Ottomanism: Policy or Accusation?

Turkish foreign policy has revolved around Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's notion of "strategic depth," which views Turkey as an ascending regional power. Dubbed as "neo-Ottomanism," it envisions a more activist policy in the Western Balkans, as well as other neighboring zones, through involvement in conflict mediation and a more pronounced diplomatic, political, and economic role throughout the peninsula. This approach has included strengthening Ankara's relations with traditional Balkan partners such as Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, developing relations with capitals where Turkey's relations have proved problematic, particularly with Serbia, and facilitating multilateral initiatives to enhance regional development and stability that would raise Turkey's stature.

Relations between Turkey and all the Western Balkan capitals have never been more intensive, particularly in the diplomatic, cultural, and

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The recommendations presented in this issue brief were drawn from a Council workshop on December 14 and 15, 2011 in Washington, DC. Sponsored by the US Army War College and the Institute for Turkish Studies at Georgetown, the workshop brought together 60 top US, European and Turkish experts and policymakers to discuss Turkey's relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States, and the changing strategic context among them. We are grateful for the insights of the workshop participants, but they bear no responsibility for the content of this paper. The findings and conclusions presented in this paper are solely the views of the author.

economic arenas. However, trying to convince people in the Balkans that, as the Turkish Foreign Minister once claimed, "the Ottoman centuries in the Balkans were a success story" will remain

problematic. Several national and state identities in the region were formed on the basis of resistance to Ottoman rule and resentments persist that Turkish occupation stifled economic development especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Some leaders in the Balkans are also concerned that Turkey is pursuing “neo-Ottomanism” as a result of the ruling Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) assertiveness and may be trying to pull the region away from Washington and Brussels into a more exclusively Turkish zone of influence. To dispel such fears, Ankara has asserted that it supports membership of NATO and the EU for all states on the peninsula and not a separate alliance system. It claims that it has simply embarked on building cordial ties with its neighbors in a region that has been neglected for too long by successive Turkish governments and which is inhabited by co-religionists and co-ethnics.

Diplomatic Successes and Limitations

Ankara has launched a number of initiatives in the West Balkan region. Turkey took the initiative to improve bilateral relations with Serbia when in October 2009 President Abdullah Gül visited Belgrade – the first official visit from a Turkish head of state in twenty-three years. Partly as a result of the Turkish-Serbian rapprochement and Ankara’s mediation, the Serbian parliament adopted the Declaration on Srebrenica in March 2010, which condemned the Srebrenica massacre of 7,000 Muslim men and boys in Bosnia-Herzegovina in July 1995. Through this symbolic act, Belgrade implicitly apologized for its role in failing to prevent the atrocity.

On April 24, 2010, the presidents of Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia signed the Istanbul Declaration on Peace and Stability in the Balkans, guaranteeing the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia. The three neighboring

countries also pledged to improve cooperation and work toward EU integration. Turkey also initiated two trilateral consultation mechanisms, one with Bosnia and Serbia and the other with Bosnia and Croatia. The former helped to secure the appointment of a Bosnian ambassador to Belgrade

Turkey was among the first countries to recognize Kosovo’s independence in February 2008, and has been committed to promoting Prishtina’s interests on the international arena. Ankara has been a strong supporter of Macedonia’s Euro-Atlantic integration and has encouraged NATO to invite Skopje to join even without a negotiated solution to the name dispute with Athens. Turkey has also tried to mediate in some of the region’s ongoing bilateral disputes. For example, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has expressed a willingness to mediate between Belgrade and Prishtina and help establish some basis for a relationship between the two capitals.

Turkey successfully lobbied NATO to give Bosnia-Herzegovina a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in April 2010. Turkey has been a significant contributor to international military and policing operations in Bosnia. It plays a positive role in overseeing the Dayton process through the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) Steering Board. Turkey has also aligned itself closely with the United States in opposing the closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Sarajevo, contrary to the stance of several EU states. The United States, the UK, and Turkey, are concerned that a premature evacuation of the OHR would undermine security in the country and the region.

However, Turkish involvement in Bosnia remains contentious. Bosnian Serb leaders perceive it as a potential challenge to the autonomy of the Serb entity. Ankara tried but failed to broker a new state government in Sarajevo after the October 2010 parliamentary elections and stood accused by

Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik of imperialist tendencies.

At the same time, not all Balkan Muslim leaders view Turkey's role positively. Albanians in Macedonia fear that Ankara will sacrifice their interests for a close relationship with the government in Skopje in an alliance against Greece. Some Muslim leaders in Sarajevo and Novi Pazar (in the Sandzak region of southern Serbia) are concerned that Ankara is so eager to maintain good ties with Belgrade that it will be less outspoken in defending the rights of Bosniaks in the Sandzak.

Ankara helped mediate a dispute between rival Bosniak Muslim groups in Novi Pazar, but the deal subsequently collapsed. Turkey was criticized by some Muslim leaders for opposing the views of Muamer Zukorlic, head of the Islamic Community in Novi Pazar, who has called for Sandzak autonomy. In effect, Ankara was seen as aligning itself with Belgrade. Sandzak has traditionally strong links with Turkey, as many local residents have relatives who emigrated during and after the 1912-1913 Balkan wars, when the Ottoman Empire was collapsing.

Cultural Influences

An estimated nine million people in the Balkans identify themselves as Muslims. They form a majority in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and the Sandžak, and a significant minority in Macedonia. Turkey tries to benefit from the region's Muslim populations as anchors for its engagement. And indeed, Turkey's religious influence in the region can help undercut any neo-Salafi influences among Muslim populations and contribute to preventing religious fanaticism from gaining a foothold. However, in much of the region there is a perception of growing Islamization in Turkey itself, which is viewed negatively in the religiously moderate and secular Balkan societies.

In the cultural arena, the Turkish mass media, which portrays Turkey as a modern, secular, and open country, has found an enthusiastic audience in all Western Balkan countries. With visa free travel, social contacts have also increased. Ankara has reconstructed numerous historic Ottoman monuments and is building schools and universities in areas with a predominantly Muslim population, while hundreds of Albanians, Bosniaks, and others have studied in Turkish universities. The Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) financially supports the reconstruction of Ottoman monuments, including mosques, hamams (Turkish baths), and traditional bazaars.

Until the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey's presence in the Western Balkans was constrained by the official secular Kemalist ideology. For the past decade, however, AKP has pursued increasing engagement with religious networks and charities throughout the peninsula. TIKA is actively engaged with various Muslim organizations in such areas as healthcare and agricultural development and is a strong supporter of regional Islamic institutions. It has facilitated the restoration of Ottoman monuments and the construction of mosques in collaboration with the Turkish Ministry of Culture. This has enhanced Ankara's role as a protector of the region's diverse Muslim population.

Turkish non-state actors also exert some influence in parts of the region. The Gülen movement is particularly active in the educational field. It established its first schools in Albania in 1993 and now runs more than twenty institutions throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo. The Turgut Özal Education Company has been operating a system of Turkish primary and high schools in Albania since 1992. Several Turkish universities have also been established in the region, including the International Burch University

in Sarajevo, Epoka University in Tirana, and Skopje's International Balkan University.

Economic Boost

Ankara is investing in strategic sectors in the Western Balkans in order to increase its economic and political clout. It is focused largely on telecommunications, transport infrastructure, and the banking sectors. Turkish investment is welcomed by all governments regardless of the intensity of bilateral political cooperation. The region needs capital for development. Trade between Turkey and the Western Balkan increased by 84% during the past decade. Nonetheless, trade and investment still constitutes only a fraction of what the region has gained with Germany, Italy, Austria, and other EU countries.

Unfortunately, Turkish business does not benefit from a glowing reputation in the Balkans, regarding its reliability, transparency, employee conditions, and the quality of products. Nonetheless, Turkish products are affordable and therefore popular among the poorer sections of local societies. For Ankara, the Western Balkan markets have limited attraction, as the population is small and mostly poor. Indeed, despite a long-term increase, trade with the region accounted for only 6.7 percent of Turkey's total exports and 3.4 percent of total imports in 2009. In the first half of 2010, Turkey only exported US \$3.4 billion worth of products to all the Balkan countries combined.

Nonetheless, economic prospects for Ankara may improve if the economic downturn in the EU continues, with French and German companies scaling down or gradually withdrawing, Italian and Austrian banks reining in lending, and Greek investment weakening. This could create space that Turkey will aspire to fill. Ankara has negotiated free-trade agreements and visa-free travel with every Southeastern European country except

Kosova. Such liberalization helps to boost both business and tourism.

Ankara has targeted strategic economic sectors in the region. Turkish Ziraat Bank Bosnia (TZBB), the first foreign capitalized bank to operate in Bosnia-Herzegovina, led the way for Turkish investments in the banking industry. Turk Ekonomi Bankasi (TEB) has opened a branch in Kosova, and was followed by Çalık Holding in Albania. Ankara has thereby increased its influence in the financing of small and medium sized enterprises.

Transportation has also attracted Turkish investment. Turkish Airlines, one of the few companies to serve every country in the Balkans, acquired 49 percent of Bosnia-Herzegovina Airlines in 2009 and has expressed interest in reviving Macedonian Airlines and purchasing Serbia's JAT Airways.

In infrastructure, the Tepe-Akfen-Vie (TAV) Airports holding obtained a twenty-year concession on Skopje and Ohrid airports in Macedonia, pledging a EUR 200 million investment to transform the country's capital into a regional transportation hub. TAV is also contracted for a new terminal at Zagreb airport and is interested in managing Belgrade's Nikola Tesla airport. The Turkish company LIMAK has been awarded the contract to run Prishtina's International Airport for twenty years. LIMAK has promised to invest US \$106 million in airport infrastructure as part of the arrangement.

Turkey is engaged in regional road building projects. Turkey's Enka and U.S. Bechtel won a tender for the construction of the recently opened highway linking Tirana with Prishtina. An agreement signed between Belgrade and Ankara will also allow three major Turkish companies – Kolin, Juksel, and Makwol – to build part of the 445 km highway stretching from the Serbian capital to the Montenegrin port of Bar, via the Sandžak region.

Ankara is also active in telecommunications. The Çalık-Turk Telekom consortium acquired Albania's Albtelecom in 2007, launching its subsidiary Eagle Mobile the following year. Turkish companies are vying for key stakes in the privatization of two of Prishtina's largest public companies: Kosova Energy Corporation and Post and Telecommunications of Kosova.

Despite its growing presence, Turkey's economic ambitions in Southeastern Europe are limited by a lack of sufficient resources. Ankara has also lagged behind other countries in targeting several strategic sectors. It was undercut by Russian plans in the energy industry and entered a telecommunications market already dominated by Greece's OTE and Germany's Deutsche Telekom.

Non-EU Members Unite!

Some observers believe that through its Balkan policy Turkey is seeking to reassure the European Union about its Western credentials, amidst growing concern over its ties with Iran and its deteriorating relations with Israel. Other analysts are convinced that Ankara is positioning itself to replace EU influence in the uncertain years ahead and even to create an alternative to EU membership.

Accusations that Turkey is challenging the EU or NATO for regional influence are exaggerated. Ankara does not exert a decisive role in national politics in any of the Western Balkan states, it is unlikely to achieve region-wide predominance despite its growing economic and cultural investments, and it cannot project military power outside of NATO channels.

Ankara's future role partly depends on the region's progress toward EU accession. If after Croatia's projected entry in 2013, the remaining countries

are excluded on a long-term basis, a closer link with Ankara, as well as other capitals, may become more attractive, especially if the Turkish economy continues to grow. If Turkey's accession to the EU remains deadlocked, Ankara might be tempted to split with EU and NATO positions in order to enhance its own independent role in the region. For the foreseeable future, however, Balkan leaders will avoid creating the impression that by moving closer to Turkey or any other power they are in any way surrendering their EU aspirations and joining a club of what will be perceived as European Union rejects.

Practical Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Turkey needs to consistently underscore that it supports Western Balkan inclusion in both NATO and the European Union to dispel any suspicions about the construction of a separate Turkish zone of influence.

Recommendation 2: When involved in sensitive agreements or mediation efforts, Turkey should find international partners who can dissipate the notion that it has a hidden agenda in pursuit of its own state ambitions.

Recommendation 3: Turkey must consistently demonstrate to the Western Balkan populations that it is a modern state, which is not backtracking in its political development. This entails a commitment to secularism, openness, religious tolerance, and pro-Westernism.

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