

Analysis

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Summary: Turkish policymakers consider regional cooperation and integration in the Balkans as an essential component of Turkey's new regional policy as well as its own stability at home. The regional policy is based on minimizing the problems in the region and to develop economic and political relations to the highest level of integration. Turkey aims to initiate a psychological breakthrough in the Balkans to undo the negative memories of the past. At the regional level, Turkey follows three different sets of policies. The first is to develop bilateral relations to the possible highest extent. The second track is the creation of trilateral mechanisms, such as between Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia; and Turkey, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The third track aims to achieve region-wide cooperation efforts and foster economic interdependence to secure the future of political relations.

Turkey and the Balkans: New Policy in a Changing Regional Environment

by *Bülent Aras*

Turkey's interest to the Balkans is not a new phenomenon, but its recent reorientation toward the region is more sophisticated and better coordinated. It seeks to achieve many interrelated objectives: to develop bilateral relations with the Balkan countries, create multilateral dialogue mechanisms, and energize regional cooperation schemes in this corner of the world. Nonetheless, the Balkans is not an easy geography for Turkish policy and significant obstacles remain in the way, which need to be carefully handled. The long-lasting problems among and within the Balkan countries, bitter history, and clashing regional perspectives constitute the major challenges to a cooperative Turkish policy toward the Balkans.

Turkey's Strategy

Turkey has a multi-level strategy directed toward the Balkans, which is justified by ideational and material prerogatives at the domestic and international level. Turkish policymakers consider regional cooperation and integration in the Balkans as an essential component of Turkey's new regional policy as well as its own stability at home. The regional policy

is based on minimizing the problems in the region and to develop economic and political relations to the highest level of integration. Turkish politicians often refer to the people of Balkan origin within Turkey as a necessary link and solid bridge with the Balkans. As Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu expressed, there are more Bosnians in Turkey than in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) and more Albanians than in Kosovo, and a considerable number of other ethnic groups live in Turkey. In his mindset, this situation fosters a multi-regional Turkish identity. Therefore, Turkey formulates its policies with a view that it needs to be responsive to the developments in the Balkans and play a constructive role in the solution of the problems in this region.

Turkey aims to initiate a psychological breakthrough in the Balkans to undo the negative memories of the past. While the past century represents war, destruction, ethnic cleansing, and ethnic enmity in this region, Turkey suggests a forward-looking vision that will facilitate a break with the past. Turkish regional policies are based on the development of bilateral relations, strengthening the mecha-

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nisms of political and economic cooperation, and creating a regional sense of ownership and problem solving in the Balkans. Turkey follows an ambitious policy to facilitate the solution of chronic problems, play a mediator role between conflicting parties, stabilize the region, and pave the way for a regional order in the Balkans. Turkey suggests a new Balkan regional order based on stable co-existence. This cooperative perspective offers the best option for the future of the peoples of the Balkans as well as those outside actors that develop constructive engagement policies toward the region.

Turkish Policies in the Region

At the regional level, Turkey follows three different sets of policies. The first is to develop bilateral relations to the possible highest extent. Turkey's enhanced diplomacy, increasing traffic of high level political visits, and the activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) for development cooperation and the Yunus Emre Foundation¹ for promotion of Turkish language and culture are all signs of this determined will to develop relations with the Balkan countries. Turkey has signed high-level political cooperation agreements with Bulgaria and Greece and aims to sign similar agreements with other Balkan countries. This initiative creates a structure for joint cabinet meetings and regular consultation, allowing for meaningful strategic dialogue among the state leaders.

The second track is the creation of trilateral mechanisms, such as between Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia; and Turkey, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. These aim to enhance dialogue and cooperation at the regional level. For example, the trilateral consultation mechanism contributed to the appointment of a Bosnian ambassador to Belgrade, which upgraded relations between Serbia and BiH. Another substantial achievement is the adoption of the Declaration on Srebrenica by the Serbian Parliament. The trilateral mechanism also facilitated the Balkan Summit among the presidents of the three countries, which first met in 2010. The trilateral process mechanism with Croatia and BiH was created to address issues of common concern by state leaders, and a similar process continues at the level of foreign ministers. It contributed to the reconciliation

¹ This is a new institution established to support programs for the promotion of Turkish language abroad, similar to British Council, Goethe Institute or Confucius Institute.

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among Bosniac and Croat entities in BiH and facilitated the political dialogue between BiH and Croatia.

The third track aims to achieve region-wide cooperation efforts through the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEEC) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and foster economic interdependence to secure the future of political relations. The SEEC and RCC have been slow to set in motion a closer degree of regionalization among the Balkan countries. The idea is now to carefully examine its limitations, and restructure the SEEC so that it is transformed into a regional organization with a fresh and proactive agenda. For this process, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu suggests creation of a group of "wise men," who may contribute to the improvement of the SEEC and RCC, among other things.

The United States, EU, and Russia

Turkey's long-term perspective on the Balkans considers this region an integral part of Europe and, if possible, eventually the EU. The recent problems Turkey has encountered in its own EU membership process have not had a negative impact on Turkey's evaluation of the EU's importance to the Balkans. Rather Turkey has a principled position on the EU involvement in the Balkans, as it sees the future of the region in Euro-Atlantic structures. Unlike the arguments from some quarters that it frames its Balkan policy in direct opposition to the Western objectives in the region, Turkey



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sees its involvement in the Balkans in complementary terms with the EU. In line with the Western policies, Turkey has played a regional stabilizer role, and contributed to both the consolidation of Kosovar independence and political stability in the post-Dayton Bosnia. Likewise, Turkey's relationship with Serbia is strengthening regional peace dynamics and helps neutralize Russia without leading to a feeling of isolation on its part. The Kremlin would prefer a stable Balkans and would like to have a balanced relationship with Turkey.

Despite its support for a European vision for the Balkans, Turkey also maintains a principled criticism of the EU's involvement in the region. From Turkey's perspective, the current EU thinking toward the Balkans seems to divide it into several subzones, and to present Western Balkans as the most valuable part for the EU. This is a divisive and exclusionary approach, since it draws demarcation lines between those who are likely to be EU members and those who are not. It creates tension within the region and has implications on the domestic politics as well as foreign policies of the countries in the region. A staunch supporter of NATO's interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, Ankara considers NATO's ongoing involvement in the region as a key stabilizer in the Balkans. Turkish attempts to obtain a NATO perspective for BiH and its earlier support for NATO enlargement in the region are exemplary in this regard.

Turkish-U.S. cooperation is likely to continue in the Balkans considering the overlap of their medium- to long-term perspectives and interests in the region. Ensuring the continuation of regional stability is an objective that binds Turkey, the EU, and United States together. Similarly, when it comes to the issue of energy security and the European priorities in securing alternative routes of energy through the construction of new pipelines traversing the Balkans, again one can see a case of overlapping strategic visions. Turkish policies are helpful for the EU without any doubt. However, it will be up to the EU to cooperate and coordinate its Balkan policies with those of Turkey.

Conclusion

The security situation remains fragile in the Balkans so long as the political landscape is not stable. Turkey welcomes the involvement of the EU in the region as complemen-

tary to the regional cooperative efforts. As valuable as it is, Turkey also realizes that external involvement may sometimes complicate the problems. Therefore, the role of the European integration in the region has to be carefully played out, so that it does not create divisions and a sense of isolation and marginalization in the region. For its part, Turkey follows a very careful policy that pays due respect to the ramifications of EU enlargement, the critical situation in Kosovo, Russian sensitivities, possible Russian-European tensions, the Bosnian situation, and the ethno-nationalist Serbian circles, among others.

The motto that sums up Turkey's outreach to the region is regional ownership and reintegration, for Turkey realizes that in this era of global economic crisis, the Balkan countries can cope with the myriad economic, political, and security challenges only through closer cooperation among themselves. It is, however, an inescapable fact that despite the rich history of peaceful coexistence and many cultural similarities, nationalist historiographies in the Balkans have forged bitter images of each other in the last century. Cognizant of those perceptions, Turkish politicians have attempted to remove not only physical barriers but also psychological barriers, so that they do not stand in the way of the bilateral and multilateral mechanisms that are urgently needed for the solution of the chronic problems.

Turkey relies on four mechanisms for conducting its regional policy: high-level political dialogue, economic interdependence, promoting multicultural co-existence, and an inclusive understanding of security. Through these instruments, it aims to enhance cooperation and integration with its surrounding nations. Turkey's Balkan policy

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is an extension of this new framework. By projecting this new vision on the region, Turkish policymakers work to infuse a new spirit of regional cooperation into the Balkans. The principles and mechanisms of Turkish policy function effectively in the Balkans considering the progress it has achieved in bilateral relations and Turkey's influential mediation role.

So far, Turkish involvement has been constructive and has proven to be a positive factor in the stabilization of the fragile regional Balkans environment. Turkish leaders from all segments of the political spectrum have the strong political will to sustain Turkey's engagement in the region at various levels. The outcome of this proactive Balkan policy will depend on Turkish diplomatic abilities to manage the perceptions of its role on one hand and strike a balance between the intra-regional dynamics and the extra-regional processes on the other.

About the Author

Bülent Aras has been the chairman of the Foreign Ministry's Strategic Research Center since November 2010. He is also an academic advisor to the minister of foreign affairs. He became a full professor at Işık University in 2006. He has also taught at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of Istanbul Technical University. Prof. Aras has had 13 books published abroad and at home. His articles have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers and have been translated into several languages.

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