

## TURKEY'S MIDDLE POWER PENDULUM: «Middle Corridor's» project coupling with China's «Belt and Road Initiative» in Eurasia



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## Abbreviations

AKP: Ak Partizi

OBOR: One Belt One Road initiative

WWII: World War II

MC: Middle Corridor

SREB: Silk Road Economic Belt

NC: Northern Corridor

OTS: Organization of Turkic States

TRITR: Trans-Caspian International Transport Route

CA: Central Asia

OIC: Organization of Islamic Cooperation

ME: Middle East

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

## Keywords

revisionism, geopolitics, sovereignty, international order, Russian propaganda, disinformation, strategic lessons, military scenarios, nuclear weapons

## Introduction

Given the geopolitical uncertainty created by Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, it makes sense for countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus to search for an independent of Russia, alternative overland trade route to global markets. China has been always regarding all new trade routes across Eurasia as broadly beneficial because they give Chinese industry greater access to international markets and the Chinese government more clout in Central Asia, a region where Beijing and Moscow have long vied for influence. Indeed, that rivalry in large measure is what motivated Beijing's enthusiasm for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the 2000's. China appreciates that while it may currently share a "no limit" partnership with Russia, the longevity of that partnership is not guaranteed.

The present analysis -based on the Neo-realist school of International Relations- seeks to demonstrate that for Ankara the "Middle Corridor" project's combination goal to China's "Belt and Road initiative" reflects Turkey's geostrategic self-identification in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **1. Turkish Eurasianism ideology used as geopolitical strategic tool by AKP.**

Turkey's main objectives in launching "Middle Corridor" initiative are creating a belt of prosperity in Central Eurasian region, encourage people to people contacts, reinforce its own sense of regional ownership, connect Europe to Asia, notably the Caucasus, Central Asia, East Asia, and South Asia, create connectivity between the East-West and the North-South corridor, expand markets and create large economic scales. In other words, Turkey's vision for a multi-polar world with herself as one of the poles within the scope of her questioning the world order constructed by the Washington in the aftermath of WWII (1945). Ankara instrumentalize ex-Ottoman Empire's Sultan status as Khalifa of the Umma (Muslim community), to revoke in world public opinion the injustice of refusing Islamic World -other ways the Islamic identity [1]-, the right to be included as an equal partner and competitor in the foundation of the capitalist development and definition of the ecumenical civilization.

It is worth mentioning here that in the course of ideological currents in post-war Turkey, Turkish historical and international role cannot be defined solely on the basis of Western modernity and the country's relation to the West. The quest for a more complex identity, one that didn't refuse necessarily the West, but intended to differentiate from it and position itself between West and East, encrypted in notions like "Great Turkey", "state bridge", or "central state", was always researched. In the governing AKP party rhetoric, Islamic movement's anti-Westernism -naturally allied to its Russian analogue Eurasianism-, takes the shape of "Islamic Eurasianism". On identity, historical, and international context, the latter aspires to evolve Turkey in a unique international system pole, defined by concrete ideological, cultural, political, and economic characteristics. In this equation, a more Asiatic and Eurasianist international scope is attributed to the anti-West, Islamic culture promotion, and international order decentralization,

but the West is definitely not annulated or abandoned, just no more conceived as the natural cultural space of Turkey. AKP's "Third Pole" strategy, although includes institutional and material bonds to the West that relate to realistic strategic calculations, the West itself becomes for Turkey a deconstruction and reverse of its own tool, on the purpose of promoting Ankara goals, for the time being leaning towards the Eurasianist doctrine [2].

Turkey has seen the "Middle Corridor" as a way to not only build stronger economic ties to Central Asia, but also improve its strategic position. Ankara hoped to leveraging its common linguistic roots with Turkic-speaking countries in the region and offering them a trade outlet that is an attractive alternative to those of Iran or Russia, Turkey's longtime rivals.

## **2. Turkey "Middle Corridor" strategy.**

Turkey, in the midst of global economic alternations especially after 2018, promoted a new economic model focused on its industrial basis empowerment that would facilitate its development and subsequent political autonomy in the international relations' chessboard.

President Erdogan, realizing the "family resemblances" [3] that Turkey shares with China, Russia, and Iran, induced by applied electoral authoritarianism, common anti-West agenda, and desire to achieve Western dependencies and prescripts' independence and autonomy, deployed his plan to transform Turkey into a "central state" [4], equal power pole in the international system, bearer of alternative cultural identity, and able to set or having a say in shaping the international order. One that, in Erdogan's words, is "multi-polar, multicentric, multicultural, more inclusive and more just" [5].

In order for Turkey to achieve restructuring the world order, in other words the United Nations Security Council, Erdogan used the motto "the world is bigger than five" [6], and stressed that Turkey share many similarities with China, as both support multipolarism and the International Law application and pursue a policy that foresees both states' bigger role in the international system and project more power further of their borders and more efficiently.

In that sense, Ankara promotes the "Middle Corridor" (MC, map 2) strategy, seeking to contribute to the development of regional cooperation in Eurasia, that is a Eurasian peripherism. China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB) railroad integration policy, equally visions to facilitate the trans-continental connection of the "Middle Kingdom", initially through Russia via the Northern Corridor (NC). Harsh winter conditions and political problems tend to alternate the latter into a SREB and MC connection through Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, being fastest and politically more pronounceable than the NC or the Ocean Route (OR, map 1). Turkey aims to capture 30 per cent of the flows passing through the NC by diverting them to the MC. That for, Ankara have been trying to induce Central Asian countries to develop transport routes along its planning. The sanctions imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea (2014), Turkey's hard power exhibition in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war that upgraded its image and reach in CA, and strategic connectivity partnerships building with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan while Moscow was distracted waging its war against Ukraine, as well as Ankara further involvement in the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), yielded Turkey to achieve OTS "Turkic World Vision-2040" which seeks to incorporate member states into regional and global supply and value chains via the MC.



Map 1: Eurasia inter-connectivity routes.



Map 2 : The Middle Corridor, SWP, 2022.

In the meanwhile, the Turkish government has been developing links between SREB and its seaports in the Black sea and the Mediterranean via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, the Zangezur Corridor (Nakhizevan-south Armenia) and optimizing cargo new speed trains connection with Bulgaria, Serbia, and

Hungary, so as to attract freight from the NC and boost trade and advance economic integration of South-Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and CA. Beijing also promoted using BRI the joint use among participating states of energy and natural resources as well as their extraction operations in order to realize energy and mining projects in Turkey. Given the close ties between Turkey and the European Union, and China's intention to invest particularly in Central/Eastern Europe, it becomes clear that Turkey's will to cooperate with China and other MC countries in order to attract investment in the corridor's hard and soft infrastructure promoting the MC is more than sound. EU is also willing to explore developing extra-regional connectivity with MC economies, seeking cooperation in economic diversification, investment and trade, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed its vulnerability in energy and supply-chain networks. But what about Beijing's attitude toward the MC, taking in consideration Ankara's intention not to depend either on China or the USA/EU?

As a matter of fact, Ankara wishes more Chinese investment in Turkish transportation, energy and mining infrastructure and a flow of Chinese assets to Turkey, but doesn't offer lucrative tenders to Beijing. Meanwhile, Beijing has not made clear its BRI vision to Turkey, because Ankara's NATO membership and economic interaction with the EU leaves Beijing hesitant to declare its so-called grand strategy to Turkey. "...it seems that trends in global politics such as the US-China trade war, the tumultuous US-Russia relations, the reinstatement of US sanctions against Iran, and the ongoing process to reach a final peace settlement in Syria have made the prospect of further Sino-Turkish cooperation in general even more unclear" [7]. Therefore, Seljuk Colakoglu resonated that there was no prospect for any kind of BRI and MC infrastructure plans integration.

## Conclusion

However, Russian invasion in Ukraine (02.2022) has had tremendous strategic implications that have profoundly affected Eurasia's power balance making CA control genuine "apple of the lot" for China, US/EU and Turkey, as Russia clout there is dramatically diminished. Of course, Moscow is currently attempting maintain its geopolitical leverage on central Asian countries by proposing establishing with the latter a "trilateral gas union", in a win-win project that satisfies also Beijing "thirst" for non liquefied natural gas. The Kremlin has also convened the "XIV Russia-Islamic World International Economic Forum", pursuing Russia's trade, economic, scientific, technical, social and cultural ties improvement between herself and the "Organisation of Islamic Cooperation" (OIC) countries (05.2023), and the first "Caucasian Investment Exhibition" (05.2023) in Moscow's attempt to link the Caucasus -lying between the Black and Caspian seas- with the Middle East (ME) and Africa.

The latter event coincided with Beijing convening of the "China-Central Asia economic summit", to discuss furthering Chinese investments in the region in order to develop BRI's rail transport projects linking CA countries with China. Such an outcome could obstruct the West-CA project of improving their mutual energy, economic, and political cooperation, targeting Beijing and Moscow partnership against the West, primarily Washington. However, Chinese and Russian interests collide for supremacy, particularly in regions like CA, the ME and Africa. That brings us back to the MC project, since, from Beijing's perspective, having a trade route that Russia does not dominate (as in the case of the Northern Corridor) and the United States cannot directly interdict (as in the case of the traditional maritime route), is of strategic value to China (8).

This of course, leaves geopolitical maneuvering space for Turkey vying to pursue economic bonds with its fellow Turkic countries in CA, and primarily improve its strategic positioning in the Eurasian chessboard. Nevertheless, MC project (although major components are complete) face challenges like underdeveloped infrastructure and transfer services, border crossing delays, periodic political instability and Turkey's economic instability. It seems that "Russia's invasion of Ukraine may have set the Middle Corridor on the right track, but its destination may still be some distance away" [9].\_

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