



A rapidly growing Chinese economy has bestowed on energy-exporter neighbors of Turkey, to the East.

The Sino-centric Fault-lines of Turkish Geopolitics*

Türk Jeopolitiğinin Sinosentrik (Çin merkezli) Fay Hatları

Oğuz DİLEK

Özet

Türkiye, Çin'in merkezinde olduğu dünyaya doğru sınırları yakınsayan, bu yüzden de Avrupa'dan uzaklaşan, yeni bir coğrafi alan içerisinde kendi güvenliğini tanımlamaya başladı. Kafkasya'nın ve Ortadoğu'nun enerji-zengini ülkeleri ile kurduğu geniş çaplı ticaretle Çin, Türkiye'yi çevreleyen ekonomik coğrafyaya hiç olmadığı kadar cazibe kazandırdı. Dönüşen bu yeni 'komşuluk' alanında Türkiye'yi yakinen ilgilendiren iki neden, yan yana, ortaya çıkmıştır. Birincisi, Batı'nın iktisaden sıkıntılı olduğu bir dönemde, Türkiye kendisine ilave ihracat olanakları ve mali kaynaklar sunan bir ekonomik korugana sahip. İkincisi, Türkiye'nin gönenci İran ve Rusya gibi ülkelere bağımlı hale gelmektedir ki bu ülkeler en başta demokrasi olmak üzere Türkiye'nin kimlik unsurlarından bazıları ile derin bir ihtilaf halindedir.

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Abstract

Turkey has recently started to situate its security into a new geographical expanse with borders inching closer to the emerging China-centered world, and away from the European Peninsula. China by forming voluminous trade links with energy-rich Middle Eastern and Caucasian states has made the economic geography around Turkey's borders appealing more than ever. Two outcomes lying face-to-face transpired from this new neighborhood. First, Turkey now enjoys an economic shelter that provides additional export outlets and foreign financial resources at a time of great distress in the West. Second, now Turkey's material wellbeing is contingent on countries, such as Russia and Iran that squarely disagrees with some dimensions of Turkey's identity, with democracy being one of them.

Keywords: Turkey, Geopolitics, China, Economic Crisis, Energy Security, Eurasia, Middle East

Economic Roots of a Geopolitical 'Re-Orientation': Imagining Turkey in the Orient

At the turn of the 19th Century, some sea changes related to the rise of West disentangled those threads of fabric that previously held the *Pax Ottomana* together. With this happened, Turkey was no longer at center of anything but found itself caught at the intersection of the West and East. From this development did come along a time-honoring debate, cutting across a wide array of fields from Turkish literature to politics, on how to meaningfully read Turkey's place in

world. This debate, furthermore, has always been closely associated with domestic power struggles, competing visions of security and ideological stances.

Tuncer Kılınc, the former General Secretary of the National Security Council, became first to vocally praise the idea of cooperation with neighbors to the East as a substitute for NATO and the EU.¹ After a brief moment of pursuing a "catholic wedding"² with the EU, Tayyip Erdoğan also seemed to be flirting with the idea of being a bridge between the West and East. Gaining traction in the AKP's geopolitical thinking as well, this "re-orientation" went all the way to joining in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a dialogue partner last year, and semi-officially asking for full-membership a short while ago.³

One way of explaining this changing mindscape is offered by the proponents of classical geopolitics.⁴ They accentuate Turkey's ambivalent 'locale' as what has always given Turkey a relative ease in moving into, and away from, easterly and westerly directions as it fits. To the extent that geographical location of a country determines its political identity, Turkey has indeed never been quite sure about its national identity insomuch as the location of the country uncertainly falls somewhere in-between the West and the East. Critical geopolitics, going a long way to take constructivist arguments into this discussion, questions this order of business between 'location' and 'identity.' To the proponents of this approach, it is more accurate to go the other way around.⁵ It is the identity and self-perception of a nation that (geo-) graphs the surface of global map.

This paper, on the other hand, seeks to connect altering geopolitical mindset of the AKP (also) to structural forces that connect geographical applications to the configuration of global economy. Geopolitical imagination always occurs within a specific material context, which extends limits and always defines the borders in which a nation visualizes itself, its immediate surroundings and the world beyond.⁶ Precisely, national role conceptions never fail to interpret geography in a way that corresponds with the (geo-) economic realities of time. By economic reality one should understand all sort of global economic faultlines—from the main exporting markets to the direction of financial flows, from proximity to the major commercial/energy lifelines to that of the most prominent energy reserves of the global capitalist system.⁷ All of these material considerations unavoidably introduce inputs to the political process by which a nation construct its geographical perceptions.

Turkey has always sat on such fault-lines that, whenever shifted, also prompted substantial changes within the overall formation of global geopolitics. Within the last two centuries, the first shift of tectonic plates culminating in a system-wide upheaval occurred in the early 19th Century. The Ottoman Empire crumbled along these same geopolitical fault-lines that emerged from Europe's rise to global mastery over commodity production and commerce. Turkey was born across these new tectonic boundaries and soon moved towards the economic and security structures of the West, thereby breaking traditional commercial bonds with its eastern neighbors. Indeed, all the changes that really mattered to Turkey's wealth and security in the second half of the 20th century emanated from the political and economic landscape of either Europe or the US.

Be that as it may, Turkey's international behavior began to stray from its customary route in the first decade of the 21st century in response to kaleidoscopic changes caused by the rise of China. A rapidly growing Chinese economy has bestowed on energy-exporter neighbors of Turkey, to the East, an additional purchasing power

to consume foreign goods/services and that of surplus financial resources to re-invest abroad.⁸ Then came along Turkey's shift of axis from 2008 onwards with a strong economic rationale behind.

The year of 2008 witnessed two related developments. First, a financial turmoil surfaced to hamper western economies,⁹ undermining their previous vitality to Turkish financial and commercial well-being and, second, a new era ushered in Turkey's foreign policy, defined by pursuing reconciliation with formerly hostile nations in the close-by areas. Insomuch as that, according to this paper, Turkey's foreign policy mottos of the late—zero-problem with neighbors, neo-Ottomanism, or obtaining a strategic depth—are manifestations of these structural changes that tie Turkey to its eastern neighbors and beyond.

Finally, this brief analysis is neither critical, nor supportive of Turkey's foreign policy currently led by Ahmet Davutoğlu. In fact, the aim is to show that so long as the current shift of economic power continues to hold ground, away from the West and towards the southern rims of Asia, the center of weight in Turkey's geo-economic thinking will carry on shifting towards east as well. Ahmet Davutoğlu, for that matter, only decided the timing and the intensity, but not the direction of, Turkey's changing foreign policy orientation.

The Rise of China

The changing contours of the global political economy can be encapsulated in a statistical data provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁰ From 1980 up until 1990, the US and the EU, combined, created an expansion of 56 percent in the volume of nominal global gross domestic product (GDP), whereas China's role was a negligible 1.5 percent. The Chinese share in overall global GDP growth was 8 percent between 1990 and 2000, and 15 percent from 2000 up until the breakout of the financial crisis in 2008. These numbers are 56 percent and 40 percent for the European and American economies, respectively, in the same time intervals. In



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its most exuberant phase, from 2008 to 2012, a 33 percent growth in the global economy emanated from the crisis-defying Chinese domestic economy; meanwhile, the US and the EU's share of the total growth descended to a 15 percent.¹¹

The OECD's future projections are also in key with what is just said about how the world has changed over the last two decades.¹² If nothing else, the commodity production in Chinese national economy is expected to be roughly correspondent with the combined total of American and fifteen European economies in 2030.¹³ This same report also brings this following sharp contrast before our attentions. Accordingly, in 2010, Chinese and Indian economies, together, were not even the half of the seven of the richest OECD countries on earth. By 2030, thanks to their high tempo economic growth, combined sizes of these two Asian economies are believed

to surmount G7.¹⁴ The same report claims that China and India will together account for more than half of all global savings in 2030.¹⁵ It is to mean that thanks to their trade surpluses, these two will be of paramount importance, as the last resorts of payment, to fix widening global current account imbalances in the near future.

Another widening fracture on the overall formation of global capitalist system, is, that an ever-expanding portion of merchandise production will be designed for and sold to the Asian economies in the following decade.¹⁶ In the past, the classical consumption-production mode was based on tailoring commodities in the East's markets, offering cheap labor, for the needs of western consumers. Such distribution of labor between the East and West will soon change, as two thirds of global commodity production by 2030 will be sought-after by young Asian consumers. Only

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two years ago share of emerging Asian markets from global demand was a dwindling 14%. This figure is expected to become 25% in 2020 and exceed 40% sometime around 2030.¹⁷

China, India and some other economies in Asia have been transforming world economy's three principal legs—that are wealth accumulation/saving, consumption and production—with a scale and speed that is only comparable to the global transformations in the early 19th Century. In so doing, they are also reconfiguring the economic geography of which Turkey is part. William Engdahl has much to say about this, China and Turkey are in discussions to build a new high-speed railway link across Turkey ...The prospect of an unparalleled Eurasian economic boom lasting into the next Century and beyond is at hand. The first sinews of binding the vast economic space have been put in place or are being constructed with these rail links... More and more the economically stressed economies of the EU are beginning to look east and less to their west across the Atlantic for Europe's economic future.¹⁸

Turkey's New Economic Geography

The global economic power balance, gaining a whole new appearance, after this said abrupt reversal of positions between the West and the 'rest', has repercussions for Turkey, too. Putting it lucidly, Turkey's geopolitics has become 'unimaginable' as of the late without including in scope eastern-bound geographies (i.e. the Middle East, Central Asia or Caucasus). Because China's rise has revolutionized the pricing, transportation or the production of a single group of commod-

ity—hydrocarbon resources, which gave oil-rich neighbors of Turkey an additional purchasing power to buy from, and surplus wealth to invest in, abroad. All these have meant to render Turkey's West-centered geopolitics short of providing all that the Country needs (export, financial investment and so forth) to survive a world-wide economic recession as a swiftly developing economy. Hence Turkey's reckless pursuit of gaining a foothold within the adjacent regions, while turning away from Europe.

The BP's statistical review on global energy order reveals that between 2000 and 2012, China alone generated a 35 percent increase in the global demand for gasoline.¹⁹ The EIA claims that this hefty demand from China and some other latecomer economies, such as India, will unlikely be a one-of for a foreseeable future.²⁰ In fact, they will account for the half of growth in global energy consumption through 2035.²¹ The price of oil, as a result, rose from \$25 per barrel in January 2000 to \$118 per barrel in February, 2013, in spite of the ongoing recession in the global economy.²² The mentioned price pressure, built on the global oil market by China, has become one of the most critical factors in the shifting tectonic plates on which Turkey's security and economic prosperity has been based.

First, the rise of China tightened the supply of energy and swiftly reshuffled the deck between energy producers and consumers, rendering the latter group vulnerable to the former.²³ For Turkey, estimates the EIA, well over 60 percent of its natural gas and roughly 90 percent of the country's oil flows from regional players such as Russia, Iran, northern Iraq and the Gulf Emirates.²⁴

The Deputy Minister of Energy envisions that, in tandem with its flourishing domestic economy, Turkey's demand for energy will almost double by 2030.²⁵ Meaning, Turkey's reliance on its neighbors' energy wealth will gather greater depth, but not wane, in time.

Second, increases in the market prices of oil and gas prompted by China's rise substantially transformed Turkey's strategic environment by increasing the power projection capabilities of oil-rich states. The overall resources that Turkey committed to defense spending, in 2011, are about 18 Billion Dollars, which is approximately the same amount that Turkey spent on defense in 1996.²⁶ Iraqis and Saudis now spend twice as many resources on their militaries as they did a decade ago. Moreover, the pace of Russia's military build-up has tripled from 1999 to this day. United Arab Emirates, an incomparably less populated country, has a defense budget that easily rivals that of Turkey's.²⁷ Even Iran, under the siege of a crippling embargo, is developing a domestic nuclear arsenal with the help of increased earnings from energy exports.

The third set of fault-lines on which Turkey sits appeared from 2000 onwards in international commerce. A select group of energy producers, accumulating immense trade surpluses, now enjoy an enhanced capability to consume imported merchandises and buy foreign financial instruments. Reading from Trading Economics' time series, it is obvious that the China-induced increases in the price of oil, from 25 Dollars in 2000 to its current level in 2013 (118 Dollars), has catapulted the Middle Eastern consumer markets.²⁸ In this said time interval, Russian, Iranian, Iraqi and United Arab Emirates' demands for imported goods/services have grown approximately five times bigger.²⁹ The only country that has not shown any further interest in foreign goods/services is Saudi Kingdom in the region. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, has spent six times more on imports compared to a decade ago.

According to the Turkish Statistics Institute (TurkStat), the top six consumer markets in the West—Germany, the UK, Italy, France, Spain and

the US—absorbed almost 50 percent of Turkey's exports in 2002. This figure slipped, however, to around 29 percent in 2012.³⁰ Again in 2002, Iraq, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Azerbaijan had a combined share of 9.38 percent of Turkey's overall exports. Then, 28 percent of all Turkish exports in 2012 were shipped to these six markets with oil wealth, culminating in parity between Turkey's eastbound and westbound merchandise trade.³¹ The rise of China, as such, impacted Turkey's international affairs between the East and the West in many groundbreaking ways.

On the one hand, China's ascendance has reconfigured Ankara's international engagements in the last decade, by making the country dependent on the export outlets and oil wealth of particular states such as Iran, Russia and/or Saudi Arabia. Ankara will have to, and actually already did, give partnership with these states serious consideration in the interest of ensuring its own energy security and economic development. The mental map in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's most recent speech, in which he expressed a desire for joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, overlaps with the diverging vector that Turkish foreign policy has already followed over the last decade.

Yet such partnership on matters of great material significance between Turkey and oil-rich nations in nearby regions occurs in the absence of a corresponding sense of togetherness in the world of ideas. As Ankara also experienced in the wake of the Arab Spring, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia are in their own ways openly against what Turkey currently aims to diffuse across the Middle East -- namely, democracy. It seems that for now as well as the foreseeable future, Turkey will be stretched in opposite directions between identity and material well-being.

Conclusion

For much of the last two centuries, Turkey experienced a painful process of integration into the West. It was almost always a personality split between Turks' self-role as a nation that for cen-

turies guarded the gates of Islam against Europe and the pressing need for modernization, which, paradoxically, demanded an across-the-board Europeanization. Today, yet again, the earth is on the move with China's rise. As a direct result, there have been perceptible displacements across the tectonic plates on which Turkey has

maneuvered for the last two centuries. In the following decades, Turkey will continue to browse through these emerging fault lines to seek greater international prominence, but, perhaps, not without experiencing circumstances wherein its search for material gains is precluded by political dimensions.

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ENDNOTES

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- Bu yıl "güzel şeyler olacak" demedim mi ben, bak Moya takvimi ile dünyanın sonu gelmedi, Tanrı parçacığı bulundu, Papa seçildi, iyi başladı yıl anlayacağız!