

Received: October 2023 Accepted: December 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58262/ks.v12i1.144>

## The Relationship of Turkey with the Countries of the Black Sea Region After the Cold War

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### *Abstract*

*The research explores the relationship of Turkey with the countries of the Black Sea region in the period after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It also investigates Turkey's orientation towards employing soft power in order to be able to harmonize with the Black Sea countries, which differ in political, economic, and cultural terms, since all of these countries previously belonged to what is known as the Warsaw Pact, while Turkey was the only country among them affiliated with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in addition to the differences in races, religions, and economic system that these countries followed. The study also addresses Turkey's success in developing its foreign policy in line with the new political reality and moving away from the policy of neutrality and isolation, as some have described, and shifting to initiative and participation policy.*

**Keywords:** *Soft power, Turkey's new regional role, NATO expansion, fundamental changes in Turkish foreign policy.*

### 1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union caused the world to turn from a bipolar world to a unipolar world. As a result, many republics emerged and became independent of the Soviet Union. Thus, Turkey lost its role in defending NATO, and many political analysts agreed that Turkey's strategic role had ended. But in reality, and with Western support, Turkey aspired to play a new role in the region.

Turkey worked to develop its political tools through the use of soft power and to move beyond the framework of politics that is based on isolation and neutrality to that based on action and initiative to gain the trust of these countries and build bridges of cooperation between them in a way that serves the security and stability of the region.

### 2. Research Design

This section involves the research design, including the problem aims, and methodology. The research framework is also included in this section.

#### 2.1 Problem of the Study

To what extent is Turkey able, in light of the changing balance of power, to create a new position for itself in the Black Sea region, and to what extent do these countries accept the new

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Turkish role?

## **2.2 The Aim of the Study**

The research aims to shed light on Turkish foreign policy at this stage, and how the course of events in the Black Sea region affected Turkey's decisions, and whether it was able to achieve the goals it sets for the region.

## **2.3 Methodology**

The research applies a descriptive approach to describe the state of Turkish foreign policy and the extent to which it is affected by internal politics. It also adopts an analytical approach to determine Turkey's movements in the Black Sea region and the reasons behind this movement and whether Turkey succeeded in using soft power. The comparative historical approach is also used to compare Turkish politics before and after the Cold War.

## **2.4 Research Framework**

The research tackles the historical background of the region and the Turkish roots that go back to the Ottoman Empire, which controlled almost all of the region, and how the ethnic, religious and historical roots became entrenched, through which Turkey can regain its position by deepening these roots and working to revive them through its initiatives and assistance. Turkey's internal problems and their impact on foreign policy were also discussed, in addition to Turkey's competitive position with the Russian Federation in terms of the economic aspect, leading to deepening its historical impact through cultural initiatives.

## **3. The Relationship of Turkey with the Countries of the Black Sea Region after the Cold War**

The end of the Cold War and the weakness and disintegration of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the nineties of the twentieth century, placed Turkey in the position of the strongest state in its regional environment in terms of its large population mass and geopolitical advantages. The first of these great opportunities that these circumstances provided for the growth of Turkish power was due to the exposure of a large Turkish world that had been hidden in the Soviet Chamber for seventy years (Deni, 2016).

Hence, Turkey began to sense a new regional role for itself after it almost lost its strategic importance to the West as a front line in the face of the Soviet communist tide. The end of the global competition between the two poles provided room for medium-sized powers such as Turkey to engage more actively in security and regional institutions, issues, and challenges. Ankara sought to open new arenas for the foreign political agenda, which was redefined and expanded at this stage. The weakness for the Soviet Union and its subsequent collapse led to the emergence of wide geographical areas surrounding Turkey in which it could exercise regional roles, especially under the policy of President Turkut Ozal, who enjoyed political charisma compared to his peers as a result of his pursuit of a policy based on openness, economic reform and his attempts to strengthen civil rule and political stability, in addition to his search for a new status for Turkey, especially after 1991, as the so-called neo-Ottomanism, prevailed at this stage to crystallize a new perspective for foreign policy that is based on interest in the regions that were part of the Ottoman Empire (Qaddoura, 2021).

After decades of isolation and Turkey's dependence on Western alliances in regional policies, the term "strategic regional role" began to appear for the first time, which means Turkey's active

involvement in a regional policy of its own in areas with which it shares an identity, cultural and historical heritage, and in areas that contain promising economic interests that Ankara needs in light of the reform and openness plans drawn up by Ozal. Thus, Turkish foreign policy opened up to several regions, including the Black Sea region (Qaddoura, 2021), basing its policy on Western support for its secular model in confronting the Iranian Islamic model in exchange for exploiting its role in besieging Iranian and Russian influence in the region. On this basis, the representative of the American administration stated: “The United States strongly supports the superiority of Turkish influence over Iran. This is in our interest” (Deni, 2016:169).

In 1990, Turkey tried to regain its national and historical ambitions in the Black Sea region by organizing a (global) conference whose slogan was “Unifying the Turkish nation from China to the Balkans” (Al-Shmmari and Nimah, 2014: 2), in which the participants focused on the necessity for the Turkish nation to regain its unity in light of the presence of Turkish minorities. However, the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union was not limited to the Asian arena, but rather it activated the Turkish role in other arenas, as the Soviet collapse removed a major restriction on the Turkish foreign policy movement and gave it a greater opportunity and freedom to maneuver and immerse itself in international relations, whether at the regional or international level (Al-Shmmari and Nimah, 2014). Turkey is well aware of the support provided to it from the West compared to the regional countries (the Russian Federation and Iran), and this is what prompted it to enter into conflict and enter into competition with neighbouring regional countries, and gave it confidence in presenting itself as the “big brother” and the living “ideal model” for these countries (Al-Alyawi, 2019: 43).

The Western support provided to Turkey and the acceptance by modern republics of Turkey’s foreign policy was linked to several factors that greatly contributed to the acceptance of the Turkish role in the Black Sea region, including:

1. The geographical proximity factor facilitated the communication process, making these countries closer to Turkey, as they are only separated by the Black Sea border and a few land borders.
2. Historical and cultural, as well as ethnic and religious, ties and the resulting cultural and societal rapprochement.
3. Turkey's constant awareness of the course of events and knowledge of the problems of most of these newly independent countries has made it well aware of how such problems are dealt with and thus enable it to find appropriate solutions to them and provide advice in addition to providing material and moral assistance.
4. In addition to this, the success of Turkey’s previous political experience in establishing a modern state following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (and these circumstances are similar to the situation that these countries were going through at that time), as well as Turkey’s adoption of a secular, democratic system different from the previous system, inspired these countries, and experienced it on their lands, especially Azerbaijan.
5. The presence of Turkey as a member of NATO could provide a great opportunity for countries that wish to join this alliance, by getting them closer to Turkey to facilitate their joining process and thus changing their economic system towards a free market economy.

It seems that what contributed most to accepting the Turkish role abroad was the willingness of the newly independent republics to accept all the modern manifestations that freed them from Soviet dependency (Al-Alyawi, 2019: 43).

In addition to this, the internal changes that Turkey has experienced since the 1990s

contributed to the major transformation in Turkish foreign policy, as the Turkish conviction of the necessity of engaging in the neighborhood has increased because there are opportunities and benefits that cannot be accessed and exploited except by strengthening bilateral relations and regional participation (Youssef, 2005). Therefore, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the legitimacy and sovereignty of these republics' independence from the former Soviet Union through its initiatives to establish international diplomatic relations in various fields in an effort to impose its identity in the region as a big brother and an ideal model of secularism and democracy (Khudayir, 2019).

When Suleyman Demirel visited the United States of America in 1992, Brent Scowcroft, National Security Advisor to former US President George Bush (Zauter, 2006), praised the Turkish role as a wonderful example of an Islamic democratic state (Khudayir, 2019). It seems that this role was completely consistent with the new policy of the United States of America which aimed at consolidating the unipolar international system through the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which in turn ensures that the Russian threat does not return to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics, according to the point of view of the United States of America.

On the other hand, consultations took place between the Russian and Chinese sides after the visit of Chinese President Jiang Zemin (BBC News, 2023) to Moscow in April 1997. Both sides expressed their concern about the expansion of NATO and the military blocs, and they did not rule out Russia establishing a military alliance that includes countries independent of the Soviet Union, and, consequently, the removal of Turkish influence. This prompted Ankara to require obtaining approval for its application to join the European Union in exchange for expanding NATO, which is a great gain for Turkey because it will contribute to activating its regional role and building its strategic depth. Therefore, Turkey is considered the largest beneficiary of this expansion despite its impact on its relationship with Russia.

However, Turkey's approval of NATO's expansion will at the same time strengthen its relationship with the countries newly independent of the Soviet Union, especially since these countries have a desire to join NATO. The alliance has indicated on several occasions that possibility of including Georgia as it is the force most in conflict with Russia, and as a result, the alliance began to rely on the Turkish role, as it is a vital member of the alliance.

Turkey sought to attract the countries of the Black Sea region to NATO so that it could expand to China's borders, besiege them, and prevent the possibility of the emergence of an alliance between Russia and China and control the energy regions in the area (Al-Alyawi, 2019: 43).

Turkey has set certain goals within the framework of its new foreign policy towards the Black Sea region, which are as follows (Deni, 2016):

1. Maintaining the security and stability of the region.
2. National support for the development of the full sovereignty of those countries by contributing to the consolidation of the structure of modern states, independence, and achieving democracy and prosperity.
3. Supporting the efforts of these countries to establish democracy, develop their economies in accordance with free market laws, and continue political reform, including human rights.

Regarding the responsibilities, Suleiman Demirel remarks that Turkey had to play an active role in ensuring that these countries were linked to the outside world. Turkey also had the responsibility of helping the new countries in their quest to reach their true identity. These

activities included the establishment of many economic initiatives that helped maintain the stability of the region. Thus, it contributed to world peace and helped the new countries establish closer relations with the outside world. The Turkish government believes that its responsibilities also include helping the new countries to become respected members of the international community. For this reason, it was the first to recognize independence, and it developed a list of principles that would guide its relations with these countries. Accordingly, Turkey called on these countries to adhere to several principles, including (Oran, 2011):

1. Non-interference in internal affairs.
2. The sanctity of borders.
3. Respecting the integrity of the lands.

Turkey, for its part, announced that it will manage its relations with these republics on the basis of “respect” in addition to applying these principles. (Oran, 2011)

The changes that occurred in Turkish foreign policy in the early nineties of the twentieth century, and the interest abroad after Atatürk’s policy of isolation during the Ozal era did not last long. With the sudden death of Ozal, Turkey once again witnessed the weakness of the civilian wing in front of the military wing. So, Ozal’s project of the Turkish interest in expansion was disrupted, and the one-world period that Erbakan, who had a broad Islamic ambition to establish Islamic relations, spent, was not enough for him to start his project at all (Al-hamy, 2017).

By the end of the nineties, Turkish foreign policy began to witness major transformations until it began to change from a single orientation towards the West to a multi-dimensional orientation towards the Islamic countries, the Caucasus, the Balkans, Central Asia, the Arabs and the West. However, Turkey did not neglect its policy with the West in all aspects, even when the new government (the Justice and Development Party) took over, represented by Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose slogan was “openness to enlightenment and closure to darkness” (Deni, 2016). What confirms this development in Turkish policy is what happened after the events of September 11, 2001, as Turkey was the only country that succeeded in progressing on the level of political reform without compromising on its security requirements, which made Turkey a model for other countries. Its attempts to solve global problems with its neighbors are based on... "The principle of zeroing out problems". This means changing the image of a country surrounded by problems to one that has good relations with everyone, and this is what gives Turkish foreign policy the ability to maneuver and follow a multi-dimensional foreign policies and paths. In light of the dynamic international circumstances, it is not possible to follow a single policy. Instead of Turkey being a “source of a problem,” it is, on the contrary, a “source of a solution to problems”, and a country that is proactive in offering solutions through the attractive center it represents that contributes to establishing global and regional peace. It becomes a central country, not a bridge country connecting two parties as in the previous stage. It changes its rigid policy and diplomatic stagnation to permanent movement and communication with all countries of the world that are important to Turkey (A-Najm, 2020).

Before Ozal government, Turkey was not in a state of isolation, but rather was operating within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), affiliated with the United States of America; its foreign policy was somewhat restricted by virtue of its joining one party rather than the other. On the other hand, foreign policy was not a priority for Turkey because it was preoccupied with dealing with its internal issues. The period between Ozal government

and Erdogan government witnessed many internal conflicts between secularists, Islamists, the military authority, and the civil authority. This led the country to return to its previous state (i.e., before Ozal). These internal problems prevented development and change in Turkish foreign policy. These events paved the way for the beginning of a new phase of progress and prosperity in politics, both internally and externally, after the Justice and Development Party took power in 2002.

#### **4. The Cultural Dimension in the Relations of Turkey with the Countries of the Black Sea Region**

Political independence in the new countries inevitably led to the search for greater economic independence, and the desperate need for foreign aid led them to depend on Russia until the early 2000s, including their need for technical assistance. It was clear that Turkey was not able to meet these needs due to its internal problems, in addition to the fact that the Turkish economy was not in a position to provide the required financial and technical assistance to the new countries in the Black Sea region (Oran, 2011). This was not only because of the lack of capabilities compared to those in Russia and China, but because of the foreign policy of Ankara which was directed towards the Middle East at that time (Agiazarian, 2013).

Therefore, it has become clear that Turkish economic relations with the countries of the Black Sea region, which was in political and economic isolation for 74 years, proceeded on an emotional level and not on a practical one. However, these countries are found in Turkey, which was close to them in many ways and was fully prepared to provide guidance and assistance, a living model. Thus, Turkey began to strengthen its economic relations with these countries by concluding trade and economic agreements. Other agreements were also concluded, including the process of regulating land transport, civil aviation, communications, technical cooperation, banking services, protecting and encouraging foreign investments, consular and legal assistance, raising visa requirements, and cultural cooperation. Turkey was at the forefront of establishing the legal foundations for these relations (Oran, 2011).

Turkey also tried to control the energy outlets coming from the eastern Black Sea (Central Asia) to be a crossing point for energy to be delivered to Western countries, and this caused a clash with the plans of Russia, which wants to keep it away from its old colonies (Al-Jazrawi, 2001). However, Turkish policy became active during that period, as Turkish trade began to grow very quickly with the Black Sea region until it began to compete with the Russian Federation (Oran, 2011).

#### **5. The Economic Dimension in the Relations of Turkey with the Countries of the Black Sea Region**

The Turkish governments gave priority to historical, civilizational, and cultural depth in their relations with the countries of the Black Sea region (Khalaf, 2020). Nevertheless, they did not rely primarily on activating the cultural aspect of their foreign policy with the countries of the Black Sea region because cultural relations with the countries of this region witnessed different degrees of rapprochement. Therefore, Turkish cultural relations in the region have been examined on various levels of linguistic, educational, media, and religious content. This is what made the content of cultural relations vary depending on the cultural, linguistic, and religious composition of these countries, in addition to the extent of the availability of common ties between these countries and Turkey. Interest in the cultural component in the relations with



these countries is linked to the formation of the Turkish elite itself (Turkish minorities abroad) and the extent of this elite's interest in the cultural component as an entry point to activating relations with the countries of the region. This has led to the completion of cultural relations that have been described as unstable since the emergence of the region. Although the Turkish system is considered a secular system, the Turkish political leadership agreed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the countries of the Turkish world to employ religion to serve Turkish foreign policy and increase Turkish influence, as Turkey can benefit from the presence of Turkish minorities in these republics and have strong relations with them to activate cultural relations and extend more cultural and religious ties with these countries (Khalaf, 2020). On this basis, Turkey decided to establish the TIKA Agency (Oran, 2011).

It is worth mentioning that the developments that took place in the Black Sea region after the end of the Cold War did not benefit Turkey, as it became clear at the beginning, as it resulted in political liberalization, ethnic conflicts, privatization, accession to Western organizations, and the rise of organized crime and unrest. This environment allowed the Kurdistan Workers' Party to become Active in the region, in addition to the secession movements and hot wars that broke out in the region. Thus, the state of instability continued (Oran, 2011). In order for Turkey to get rid of these problems and maintain a state of stability, Turkey had to overcome its internal difficulties because it would then be in a good position to benefit from the new opportunities provided by the war on terrorism, and this depends to a large extent on Turkey's internal development and its ability to overcome its internal problems (Larrabee and Lesser, 2003).

## **6. Conclusion**

The above discussion illustrates that Turkey was able, thanks to its use of soft power and the presence of an aspiring political figure, represented by the presence of Mr. Turgut Ozal at the helm of government in Turkey at that time, to revitalize the political movement and move it from the circle of isolation to the circle of openness, by strengthening diplomatic work, and this helped Turkey, after the end of the Cold War, to manage the situation in its favor. It worked to seize all available opportunities that resulted from the fall of the communist regimes and the disintegration of the Soviet Union from a political vacuum, economic weakness, and security deterioration to build good relations with the new republics that began to become independent from the Soviet Union, in addition to Bulgaria and Romania.

Turkey also worked to present itself to these countries as the big brother and the ideal model that they could trust and help them establish their new republics. In order to strengthen its position towards them, it took the initiative to recognize them, and thus it was the first country to recognize their independence from the Soviet Union. It also worked to provide the necessary support to the countries of the Black Sea region to establish new systems, including reliance on the free market and the adoption of democratic systems. Thus, Turkey was able to build bridges of cooperation in the Black Sea region by gaining the trust and respect of these countries that expressed their satisfaction and acceptance of the Turkish role in the region.

The end of the Cold War and the resulting struggle of the major powers to fill the political vacuum and instability made Turkey more interested in the Black Sea region to the extent that it became one of its political priorities. In addition, the transportation routes in the region found on a global level can provide Turkey with new markets, especially after Turkey has lost most of its markets due to the wars that occurred in the region during the 1990s.

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