

## Turkey-Kazakhstan relationship in the military sphere: Outcome and Outlook?

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The main objective of this paper is to explore the peculiarities of Turkey and Kazakhstan relationship in the military sphere. Initially, paper provides a short review of Kazakhstan's perceptions of Turkey as a regional power. Bilateral military interactions are examined in retrospect. And finally, outlook of these relations for Kazakhstan is shortly observed.*

### **Introduction**

Turkey is a regional actor, by virtue of its strategic location and strong military, which plays a significant role in global security issues and has a substantial experience in global stability. Having one of the largest armies in NATO, Turkey has always been a key country in a militaristic context. However, the end of the Cold-war era prompted Turkey to change its approach to the international affairs and develop new strategies in intra-regional and inter-regional relations.

Since the Soviet Union's dissolution Turkey has put visible efforts in order to gain a foothold in Central Asian region. Up to the moment Turkey has been engaged in a wide range of relationship with Central Asian states, particularly with Kazakhstan. This network of ties includes some economic initiatives of trade, investments, communications, and inter-parliamentary relations. Moreover, broader links have been established in the sphere of cultural cooperation and education. Almost all aspects of such a diverse cooperation are widely observed in media and examined in academic publications of both countries. Exception is military relations between these states and as far as military security

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cooperation has a direct impact on the state's national security, this aspect, I believe, deserves more intent attention and of great importance for Central Asian states. Therefore, I have an intention to analyze Kazakh-Turkish relations in the sphere of security, particularly military-technical cooperation, but mainly from the perspective of Kazakhstan.

### **Turkey as a regional power: a view from Kazakhstan**

Very few states possess a more complicated geographic neighborhood than Turkey does. It has Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Greece, Bulgaria, and Cyprus as neighboring countries, and shares its borders with Russia, Ukraine, and Romania in the Black Sea. Located at the cross-roads of three continents, Turkey is usually accepted to be a part of the Middle East and consequently to the North Africa, a considered part of Europe, and is linked to the Mediterranean region,. This geographic location by itself is an enviable military asset, as far as it gives an opportunity to act either as a bridge or as a barrier over critical routes of transportation, both maritime and overland. Most of policymakers, experts and analysts very often emphasize Turkey's potential in influencing politics in the Balkans, the Black Sea and Caucasus, the Middle East and the Mediterranean and describe it as a regional power, especially in military terms. (Soysal, 2004) In this context, particularly after the end of cold-war, Turkey has actively taken active military roles within the context of NATO or UN umbrella in regional disputes of Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus. The recent developments in the Middle East brought Turkey's position to agenda during the crisis Between Israel and Lebanon and by sending troops to Lebanon as a part of the UN Peacemakers strengthened the 'prestige and image' of Turkey as a country with peaceful intentions. (Keyman, 2006)

Similarly, if we have a look from a different point of view, Turkey is a country squeezed on the margins of several regions. And according to Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory, Turkey, locating between different Regional Security Complexes turned out to become an important insulator, which "tries to handle its complicated situation through a more active policy than that traditionally adopted by insulators". (Buzan, 2003) For instance, Turkey's active interplay with regional states during the conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 reveals this feature of Turkey's active foreign policy dynamics.

Therefore Turkey's experience in multidimensional foreign politics is valuable for Central Asian republics, and particularly for Kazakhstan, which is also forced to apply multi-vector policy due to its geostrategic location. Namely, potential threat from the instability in Afghanistan, tense relations of US and Iran, India-Pakistan conflict, "Eastern Turkistan issue" of China are of the greatest concern for Central Asian republics with little but growing experience in dealing with security problems.

On the other hand, Turkey is viewed as a regional power with substantial "baggage" of knowledge and experience in struggling against terrorism, dealing with organized crimes of drug trafficking, human trafficking and illegal migration. Particularly, a Kazakhstani scholar Dr. Bulat Sultanov focuses on necessity of studying the international

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practice of Turkey in counter-fighting the terrorist attacks, organized crime and arms smuggling. (Sultanov, 2006) Moreover, Turkey's membership to NATO and other European structures is of great attractiveness for Central Asian republics. Having one of the largest armies in NATO, Turkey has always been a key country in strategic terms. This provided Turkey with an opportunity to participate in important international events and collaborate with a great number of states and organizations. Moreover, Turkey is considered to be an important strategic partner whose significance will increase proportionally to its relations with European Union (EU). Membership in EU will open new prospects for both, Turkey and its counterparts in Central Asia.

In the new strategic context, characterized by the growing threat of international terrorism, China's increasing economic and military power, and recent shift in foreign policy of neighboring Russia, Turkey's role as a reliable military partner for Kazakhstan could not be overstated. Kazakhstan's military could call on the Turkish counterparts in the process of army modernization and developing counterterrorism capabilities due to: 1) the high level professionalism and quality of Turkish armed forces; 2) Turkey's experience in counterterrorism and peacekeeping operations at international level; and 3) Turkey's traditional strategic partnership with the United States and its close ties with NATO and the EU. The visit of the President of Turkey Ahmet Necdet Sezer in 2000, which paved the way for signing an agreement on military cooperation, was evaluated as a step for improving bilateral relations between two countries.

### **Development of bilateral relationship in the military sphere**

In the early 1990s Turkey's ability and potential to become a model for newly independent republics of Central Asia was widely discussed not only in academic but also in political circles in the West. (Robins, 1997) However, despite all efforts to promote closer relations and to become a model for the Central Asian states in terms of liberal market economy, religion, and political regime, Turkey's efforts were mainly focusing in military issues. (Hatipoglu, 2005) Immediately after the disintegration of Soviet state and military at the threshold of the post-cold war era, the national security and military aspects of state-building efforts were of the greatest urgency throughout the Central Asia. The newly formed government of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK) in early 1990s was no exception.

Along with the efforts of building its nationhood, preventing decline of living standards, introducing market economy, gaining international recognition Kazakhstan had an extremely difficult mission to work out totally new security and defense concepts, and form own military forces. Formation of Kazakhstan's armed forces seemed as "a mission impossible" at the moment of chaos and collapse of old political, social, economic and military system of a newly independent Soviet republic. Thus, on the very eve of official disposal of the Soviet Union in December 1991 Kazakhstan hosted a number of 440 000 Soviet military personnel, overwhelming majority of which had Slavic origins. This extraordinary make-up of the army composition resulted from the Soviet epoch policies which limited attendance of non-Slavic ethnic groups in strategic branches such as strate-

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gic rocket, naval, and air defense units. According to General Igor Radionov's statistics, Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, and Tatars comprised 97 percent of the officer corps of Soviet military on Kazakh soil by 1990. (Radionov, 1990) This fact revealed the acute problem of shortage in experienced officers and leadership staff that would shoulder vital tasks to form the armed forces of independent Kazakhstan. Despite these negative factors, on 7 May 1992, by the decree of the President, Ministry of Defense the Armed Forces of Kazakhstan was established. (KazPravda, 1992) According to the Military Balance statistics given in 1993 Kazakhstan's army comprised of 44 000 troops. Further decline to 40 000 for the armed forces in total was estimated in 1995 which was caused mainly by deterioration of army conditions, widespread infectious diseases, insufficient food supplies, worn-out Soviet equipment, and bad reputation of military service among the younger generations. (Barylski, 1996) In addition to economic solutions to these problems, better military education and training has also been remaining as a vital part of the military building process in Kazakhstan since 1992. Although the lack of professional training and educational staff caused obstacles to MOD in preserving existing schools and institutions (actually very few in quantities and deteriorating in quality) could prevent MOD from establishing new ones. International military cooperation was accepted as an effective tool for adopting international experience and gaining international standards and Turkey was among the very first countries who offered assistance in the field of military education, defense and security.

The very first step in the area of defense, security and military relations between Kazakhstan and Turkey was made in 1993, when the bilateral "Agreement on Cooperation in the field of military education" was signed. This paved the way for an "Agreement on Cooperation in the field of military education, science and technology" in 1994. In 1996 the parties also signed an "Agreement on Cooperation in the field of technology and defense industry". Since then, the relations with the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kazakhstan (AFRK) have been expanding in several directions.

The first aspect of Kazakhstan and Turkey's relations is the military-technical assistance, that provided gratis by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). Between 1998 and 2005, military-technical assistance totaled more than \$ 5 million and substantial military equipment and materiel have been supplied to Kazakhstan in the framework of this aid.<sup>1</sup>

Another significant feature of bilateral relations has been Turkey's contribution to education and training of Kazakh military since 1993. At present more than 300 Kazakh officers graduated from the War Academies of the Turkish Republic. Starting October 2004, Turkish language courses were set up at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages under the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Last year, training of Kazakh officers at the medical courses of the Gulhane Military-Medical Academy has been initiated and Turkish specialists have trained the Kazakh battalion of Special Forces in military education centers of Kazakhstan. Under this program, more than 400 Kazakhstani military officers have been trained and acquired new skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Data is provided by the Department of International Collaboration, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Cooperation in the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program constituted another international aspect of bilateral ties between Turkey and Kazakhstan. Starting 1999, each year Kazakhstan sends 5-6 of its military officers to attend the training courses at the NATO Partnership for Peace Training Center (PFPTC) in Ankara - the first training center established in the NATO member-countries. Additionally, Kazakhstan, as well as the other states of Central Asia, the Balkans and the Caucasus, hosted a Mobile Training Team of Turkish PFPTC for the series of seminars on counterterrorism and peacekeeping operations in 2002. Moreover, a group of Turkish military officers were engaged in training of KAZBAT, the first Kazakh peacekeeping battalion, sent to Iraq as a part of coalition stabilization forces in 2003. Turkey's capabilities and skills in providing joint military training and operations under the aegis of NATO are great value to Kazakhstan - the first country to deploy its peacekeeping unit at international level among Central Asian states. And even though the past decade did not bring much achievement to the bilateral relations, the projects in all sphere, and military-security, in particular, will give a systemic effect in coming years. (Kushkumbayev, 2006)

### **Why cooperation is needed? Outlook for Kazakhstan**

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union all newly independent states of Central Asia felt urgent need in foreign assistance in military build-up process. Due to its geographic proximity (the length of a Russian-Kazakhstani land border is 6, 846 km, the longest segment in the world), military capabilities and long-lasting cooperation based on the firm ground of the Soviet past, Russia is the largest provider of military security umbrella in the region. However it is not the only partner of regional states in the sphere of military and security relations. In addition to its close ties with Turkey at military agenda, today Kazakhstan is receiving military-technical aid from different states, including the United States, Germany, France, South Korea and China. As Kazakhstan starts building a mobile army to deal with domestic, regional and international threats, it will increase the military spending for training, consulting and assistance projects from the foreign states. Any state with highly developed defense-industrial complex would strive for involvement in these military modernization projects and gain guaranteed shares in the potential market.

In conclusion, I suggest that an approach of closer cooperation in military technical sphere is practicable and will entail benefits for Kazakhstan, and Central Asia in general. Turkish experience in regional stability and its approaches to security issues offers relevant lessons and insights, and may contribute to Kazakhstan's efforts to strengthen its army, improve its capabilities in struggling with terrorism, and maximize its potential in dealing with threats to its security and stability. In its turn, Kazakhstan will be highly capable in providing stability and security through preventing potential threats, and will contribute to the regional security of Central Asia. Thus, all actors involved in the process of regional security system formation, such as Russia and China, will also benefit from Kazakhstan's potential to do so.

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