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## Turkey: The sultans of swing

By Pepe Escobar

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At the sixth al-Jazeera forum in Doha in mid-March, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu gave a remarkable speech. He argued that the great 2011 Arab revolt was "necessary in order to restore the natural flow of history". According to him, "abnormalities" had to be corrected; the carving-up strategy of colonialism (which, for instance, severed historical links between Damascus and Baghdad); and the Cold War (which, for instance, made enemies out of Turkey and Syria). The time had come, he said, when an ordinary Arab can change history.

Davutoglu also stressed that the Middle Eastern masses - "who want respect and dignity" - must be heard. He emphasized the need of transparency, accountability, human rights, the rule of law, and that "the territorial integrity of our countries and the region must be protected" - referring specifically to Libya and Yemen.

Then there was the Leaders of Change summit in Istanbul, also in mid-March. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan described Turkey as "a democratic social state based on social justice". He also did not mince words when criticizing the West for not really supporting the great 2011 Arab revolt - or at least procrastinating; and he warned about the temptation of invading Libya as the US invaded Iraq. If there were any regime change in Libya, it should come from within, not via foreign intervention.

Erdogan also had time to destroy the failed concepts of end of history, clash of civilizations and the war on terror, while Davutoglu chastised the West for believing that "Arab societies didn't deserve democracy, and needed authoritarian regimes to preserve the status quo and prevent Islamic radicalism". Their conclusion: what's going on in the Middle East today holds out the promise of showing the way towards a "global, political, economic and cultural new order".

Now that's the kind of talk when you want to position yourself as a regional leader and the ultimate bridge between East and West. Erdogan already held the moral high ground among the Arab world's masses; he had explicitly called, from the beginning, for president Hosni Mubarak to step down in Egypt. Soon everyone from Casablanca to Muscat was talking about the Turkish model as the blueprint for the new Arab world. But then came Libya.

Turkey had billions of dollars invested in Libya, not to mention over 20,000 workers (evacuated in a matter of days). Ankara also clearly saw how the West was making a major power play for a possible new Libya. From inside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey forcefully condemned United Nations resolution 1973 while being at the forefront of sending humanitarian help. And all this while Turkish business already prepared their return to Libya.

These moves spell out a very skillful diplomatic game - to say the least. The question, thus, is inevitable; what is Turkey really up to?

Full power ahead

Before 2050, Turkey will be the third European power and the ninth world power - with more people than Germany, a first-class army, and a capability to display plenty of soft power via its good universities, a strong and diverse economy, technical know-how and the ruling party's ability to "sell" its brand of democratic Islam. Soon Turkey may become a full-time member of the hot BRICS group of emerging powers (Brazil, Russia, India,

China and South Africa). Last year, at a summit in Brasilia, the coming of "BRICTS" was seriously discussed.

No wonder eyebrows have been seriously raised. Western misconception, fueled by centuries of historical baggage, fears Erdogan of the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) party as a neo-Ottoman sultan - and aspiring caliph - leading an informal empire ranging from the Eastern Mediterranean to Western China, from the Balkans to the Middle East (and he might even - God forbid - go for the reconquista of Jerusalem ...)

Even before the great 2011 Arab revolt, the US State Department's eyebrows had been particularly affected. One of the WikiLeaks cablegate's most explosive revelations was the labeling of Erdogan as unreliable and even "anti-American" - as he is a practicing Muslim cultivating serious and political ties with Iran, not to mention being too independent from Washington in all regional matters, from Iraq to Central Asia.

President Barack Obama was forced to place a courtesy call to Erdogan last December. In other times, that call would subtly imply that any Turkish president who really supports the US should not fear a military coup. But these are multi-polar times ... If only the State Department had bothered to understand the sophisticated Turkish take on a region the Sublime Porte (the palace entrance to the chief minister of the Ottoman Empire) dominated for half a millennium.

Go East, young Turk

The point was never that America is losing Turkey - or that Erdogan is a neo-Ottoman caliph (whatever that means ...) The point is to understand what Turkey's strategic depth is all about. It's all in a book: *Stratejik Derinlik: Turkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position), published in Istanbul in 2001 by Ahmet Davutoglu, then a professor of international relations at the University of Marmara, now Turkey's foreign minister.

Davutoglu hails from Konya, in the south central steppes of Anatolia, where the great 13th century Sufi poet Rumi is buried (Rumi, by the way, was an Afghan, born in Balkh, although "Rumi" means literally "Anatolian"). Konya also happens to be the heart of the AKP party. But much more than expressing the worldview of a new political/religious elite from Anatolia and cities in the Black Sea defying the traditional, secular elites of Istanbul and Ankara, the book by the "neo-Ottoman Kissinger" is an organic expose of current Ankara geopolitics.

Davutoglu places Turkey at the center of three concentric circles. 1) Balkans, Black Sea basin, Caucasus. 2) Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. 3) Persian Gulf, Africa and Central Asia. Thus he places Turkey as the privileged gateway for accessing the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

In the former bipolar world, Ankara was a passive actor - a mere weaponized arm of the US/NATO. Now Turkey is a key player in the Middle East; as Davutoglu puts it, "this is our home". As influence areas go, Turkey may claim no less than eight: Balkans, Black Sea, Caucasus, Caspian, Turkic Central Asia, Persian Gulf, Middle East and Mediterranean.

Many may not know - although the Pentagon does - that Muslims control no less than eight strategic bottlenecks for global naval traffic: Dardanelles, Bosphorus, Suez, Bab-el-Mandeb, Hormuz, Malacca, Sonda and Lombok, plus the condominium in Gibraltar.

To put this all in perspective Davutoglu even comes up with a formula: neo-Ottomanism + pan-Turkism + Islam = Great Turkey.

Neo-Ottomanism links to Arab lands but also the Balkans; pan-Turkism links to Central Asia; and Islam links to the whole dar-al-Islam, the lands of Islam, from Morocco to Indonesia. This is what Russian strategists would call the "near abroad". So as much as Germany is the central and autonomous power in Europe, Davutoglu stresses that Turkey performs the same role further east. It's all based on cultural and economic vectors - soft power, not weapons.

There are doubts about strategic depth (see Danger signs in Turkey's strategic depth Asia Times Online, June 22, 2010 [[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/LF22Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/LF22Ak01.html)]). But the key point is that, in economic terms, Turkey would love nothing better than to become the new China. For this to happen, it's essential to configure Anatolia as the ultimate Pipelineistan strategic crossroads for the export of Russian, Caspian-Central Asian, Iraqi and Iranian oil and gas to Europe.

That's exactly where Turkey meets its top trade partner, Germany. But it may be a long and winding road ahead. A Transatlantic Trends 2010 poll (see here [<http://www.gmfus.org/trends/2010/analysis.html>]) revealed that only 38% of Turks and 23% of Europeans believe Turkey will ever be accepted into the European Union (EU). This does not mean that Turkey has given up on Europe; it's now applying a different strategy.

Crucially, Davutoglu ranks the partnership between Turkey and Iran as equivalent to France and Germany. It's under this marker that should be analyzed the link between Ankara and Brasilia at the UN Security Council last year against Washington, London and Paris over the ultra-strategic Iranian nuclear dossier.

Davutoglu's circle in Ankara is very much aware that the Orientalist-named Middle East has been for over half a millennium the privileged arena of an Ottoman-Safavid rivalry.

Syria - close to Iran - is a critical case. Ankara has been advising Damascus to reform - and fast. In the words of Turkish President Abdullah Gul, "There can be no closed regime on the Mediterranean coast. [President Bashar] Assad is aware of this, too ... We are sharing our experiences with him and we do not want chaos in Syria."

At the same time, Ankara knows very well the House of Saud is freaking out with the increasingly closer relationship between Ankara and Tehran. Yet it helps that Gul lived in Jeddah for many years and knows how the Saudis think. Plus the fact that the Ottomans knew everything one needed to know about the power of sectarianism in the Middle East. A firm realpolitik signal is that Ankara did not oppose the Saudi invasion of Bahrain (well, just a little).

#### An explosive neighborhood

Now momentarily buried by all the turbulence related to the great 2011 Arab revolt, a crucial regional fact is that Ankara now sees Tehran as the golden door to Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. This means certified extra turbulence ahead for Washington, Jerusalem and US Arab client states, as Turkey has become a forceful, inescapable actor in both the Iranian and the Palestinian question (no wonder after the Mavi Marmara episode Erdogan became informally known as "the King of Gaza").

A sound Davutoglu maxim though is "zero problems with the neighbors". And what a dodgy neighborhood that is. In Turkey, there are more Azeris than in Azerbaijan; more Armenians than in Armenia; more Albanians than in Albania and Kosovo; more Bosnians than in Bosnia; and more Kurds than in Iraqi Kurdistan. These are all potential powder kegs.

For example, Ankara is very active economically in Iraqi Kurdistan - but at the same time there are ample suspicions that the US Central Intelligence Agency and the Israeli Mossad may be behind renewed Kurdish attacks against Turkish forces in southeast Anatolia.

Irbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, is awash with Turkish clothes and beer (while in Shi'ite Basra, in southern Iraq, made in Iran Saipa and Peugeot cars rule and Iranian pilgrims make the economy of Karbala and Najaf turn). Turkey is a top investor in hotels, real estate, industry and energy in Iraqi Kurdistan; 55% of total foreign investment, including Turkish oil company TPAO, which is developing two Iraqi gas fields. Turkey and Iran fiercely compete for greater influence in Baghdad.

The Russians are coming

As I noted in previous Pipelineistan stories, Turkey also has to play a finely balanced game involving its Caucasian neighbors - while it simply cannot afford to antagonize Russia.

In a nutshell, former Cold War enemies Turkey and Russia are trying, together, to find a way to manage the Caucasus and Central Asia - but with their sights also set on the Middle East and the Balkans. This complex evolution implies limiting US expansion and controlling radical Islam, everything subordinated to Pipelineistan. For Washington, it's hard to stomach that Russia and Turkey are now strategic partners.

Moscow needs Turkey to pump out energy to Europe and the Middle East while also thwarting the Western obsession of building Pipelineistan bypassing Russia. After all, Russia wants to monopolize European energy markets, Eurasian producers and supply routes. No wonder this is bound to cause a lot of tremendous problems for the Turkey-Russia strategic partnership.

Ankara knows that Moscow knows it carries a lot of leverage with Europe as a key natural gas transit country. Brussels desperately wants the troubled Nabucco pipeline - which should link Erzurum to Vienna. Moscow for its part wants the South Stream pipeline via Bulgaria. A possible solution would be Nabucco carrying Turkmen gas that would arrive in Turkey via Russia; but, the Europeans and Americans object, that is no diversification at all.

Russia is already Turkey's number one trade partner; 70% of its exports are in energy, 20.5% in metals and 3% in chemical products. Russia represents 25% of the foreign market for Turkish construction companies. Turkey is a tourist Mecca for Russians (no visa is necessary). A \$20 billion made in Russia nuclear power station - already ratified by the Turkish parliament - will be built in Turkey, to be completed by 2019.

All this is now possible because pan-Turkism - the push to agglomerate the Turkic world from the Adriatic to the Wall of China, all the rage during the 1990s - is over. It was after the 2008 Russo-Georgian-Ossetian war that everything crucially changed. Moscow won. Georgia kissed goodbye to NATO. And Ankara got the message.

The new configuration does make a lot of sense. In energy terms, Turkey depends on Russia for almost 80% (Gazprom supplies 63% of its gas and 29% of its oil). In 1997, they signed a deal for Blue Stream - Pipelineistan crossing the Black Sea and arriving in Samsun in Turkey; the Western arm arrives from Bulgaria. Now there's even room for a Blue Stream-2, a gas pipeline linking Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus and maybe Israel.

Relax and float downstream

But the really juicy Turkey-Russia game is South Stream. From the Russian port of Berezovaja, South Stream crosses Turkish territorial waters in the Black Sea to the Bulgarian terminal of Varna, and beyond to Italy and Austria.

Well, it was a juicy game until Moscow started toying with the idea of replacing South Stream with a trans-Black Sea liquefied natural gas (LNG) project. (See South Stream may disappear Asia Times Online, March 18, 2011 [[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/MC18Ag01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/MC18Ag01.html)]). What this proves is how volatile is the Turkey-Russia energy relationship.

On a (shaky) parallel track, Ankara is also on board the alternative - the ever-elusive Nabucco. Nabucco is crucial not only because of its huge projected capacity, but because it involves extremely complex negotiations to sign deals with Turkmenistan, Iran or Iraq that could potentially turn everything upside down in Pipelineistan. So now it's no secret that Ankara dreams of regional cooperation and improving relations with Europe under the matrix of energy. Iran for its part wants to export more gas via Turkey - not only out of its own, giant South Pars field but bringing Turkmen gas as well.

Call it a permanent fixture of the New Great Game in Eurasia: Ankara playing alongside Tehran to provide Europe with Iranian and Turkmen gas. Both have serious geopolitical affinities. Both are fighting Kurdish separatism. Erdogan and Ahmadinejad know only too well that the only alternative to the US-supported Caucasian corridor to get natural gas to Europe is Iran - which is linked not only to the Turkmen side of the Caspian but also to the huge Turkmen Daulatabad fields (near Mashhad in Iran) and their connection to Erzurum.

What will it take for Washington to face the fact that Tehran holds an unparalleled geopolitical role for Ankara? As a Caspian nation, Iran facilitates the transport of Turkmen gas to the European networks without having to solve the ultra-complex juridical status of the Caspian itself (is it a sea? Or is it a lake?) Bottom line: if Turkey does not court Iran it will lose the bandwagon of Turkmen gas flowing to Europe; and that would mean Europe being even more dependent on Russia.

By positioning Turkey as the ultimate energy bridge between East and West, Davutoglu acted like a Vegas high roller; if you're not a source you've got to find a way to become a player. Turkey imports no less than 93% of its oil and 97% of its gas. 55% of the imported gas is used to generate - very expensive - electricity.

The energy offer is there: from Russia, the Caspian, and the Middle East. And the demand is also there: from the European Union (EU) and from world markets via the Mediterranean. No less than 72% of the world's hydrocarbons are lying nearby. Is it any wonder that Ankara is having dreams over "strategic synergies"?

Where's my energy drink?

The key political question, once again, is that Turkey's new delicate positioning entails serious friction with traditional allies - the US, the EU and Israel - as it gets closer and closer to Russia, Iran and Syria, and as it asserts a leadership role (and is viewed as a model) across the fast-evolving Middle East.

Yet energy - not ideology - is the key. The Turkey-Brazil mediation last year over Iranian uranium enrichment; the good commercial relations with the Kurdistan regional government in Iraq; the good relationship with Azerbaijan involving agreements about the Shah Deniz gas field. All these developments are subordinated to an overarching theme: energy.

In this high-stakes game, some European governments are more skillful players than others. If you think former US president Bill Clinton was the king of triangulation, you haven't seen Italian Prime Minister Silvio "Bunga Bunga" Berlusconi yet. The triangular Pipelineistan relationship between Italy, Turkey and Russia is now a classic. At the Group of 20 meeting in Seoul last year, Berlusconi, Erdogan and Medvedev retreated to a key trilateral meeting just to talk Pipelineistan.

A Gazprom board member told the Roman daily La Repubblica that in exchange for Gazprom's expansion in Europe, Prime Minister Valdimir Putin opened to Berlusconi and the Italian ENI energy giant the exploitation of Caspian gas in Kazakhstan (ENI will particularly relish this now as it runs the risk of being shut down in the "new" Libya, with or without Muammar Gaddafi).

Turkey now wants to develop Pipelineistan not only along an east-west axis but a north-south as well; this means a complex web of relations with no less than nine countries - Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. Even before the great 2011 Arab revolt, serious negotiations were ongoing regarding an Arab Pipelineistan that could link Cairo, Amman, Damascus, Beirut and Baghdad. This would do more to unify and develop the new Middle East than any "peace process", "regime change" or, for that matter, peaceful uprising.

Yet a serious storm in the horizon may throw this Pipelineistan chapter on the rocks; it's the US missile shield project, in fact a triad of missile shields to be deployed in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The great 2011 Arab revolt may have pushed the issue to the background, but it has not disappeared.

Washington has blamed Iran as the rationale for installing a NATO-controlled missile shield in Europe. Healthy cynicism would instead point to an European shield actually aimed at Russia and an Asian shield aimed at China. But then there's the possibility of a NATO missile shield installed in Turkey - which would be aimed against Iran, and in a lesser measure, Syria. No wonder this Pentagon/NATO gambit, discussed last year at the NATO summit in Brussels, immersed Ankara in serious political turmoil.

Years after Davutoglu's book, a look at the official Turkish energy strategy, published a year ago by the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, reveals that transport of energy and gas is the pillar of five strategic themes. The new Turkish foreign policy does seem to be based on very realistic assessments around the key theme of energy. Whichever way we look at it, it's a complex maze of geopolitics and public and private investments. It may take much more than a missile shield to smash this strategy to pieces.

The fact is that Turkey's polycentric roles - as an energy bridge between East and West, as a model for the new Arab world, as a key player in the New Great Game in Eurasia - are now more crucial than ever. Sultans of swing - indeed.

Pepe Escobar is the author of Globalistan: How the Globalized World is Dissolving into Liquid War (Nimble Books, 2007) and Red Zone Blues: a snapshot of Baghdad during the surge. His new book, just out, is Obama does Globalistan (Nimble Books, 2009).

[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MD07Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MD07Ak02.html)

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Sultans Of Swing. 37 likes. We all have those moments of the course when we then one, skank one or miss that short par putt. Well now you can have your... Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content. Page created - January 22, 2019. People. The former Sultan of Swing is swinging alright, but it could be at the end of an incriminating rope whose noose is becoming ever tighter around his neck. Russia's air strikes in support of the Syrian government in its nearly five-year war against foreign-backed mercenary brigades are blowing the lid on the corruption at the heart of the Turkish ruling AK Party, and the Erdogan family business in particular. Turkmen commander Amer Abdullah of the Sultan Abdalhamit Brigade was quoted as saying: «We are trying to survive under unbearable brutality and we need Turkey's help.» He was referring to Russian air strikes, adding: «Every day our Turkmen brothers are dying. We expect the [Erdogan] government to support us.