

Opinion – The Plain Sight Threat to NATO, Turkey, and Turanism

Written by Andrew Latham and Audun Sundeen

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ANDREW LATHAM AND AUDUN SUNDEEN, JUL 17 2023

Since the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey as president, an ideology has led to NATO member confusion as subsequent Turkish noncompliance in NATO meetings and denials of expansion leave commentators struggling to explain the claims beyond rogue status or Neo-Ottomanism. These analyses of the situation fail to provide an explanation due to the slow rise of a strong Turkish irredentist ideology in plain sight, threatening NATO unity and potentially changing the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. Turanism has influenced Turkish geopolitics since the 19th century and now has mainstream government support. With a tight Turkish election ending as a victory for Erdoğan, and an increase of seats of the Turanist MHP party, Turanism will play an increasingly important role in Turkey's and NATO's future.

Turanism started in Finland in the late 19th century during its fight for independence. The ideology arose in a swirl of disproven pseudoscience and eugenics racial categorization. Turanism promotes the idea of a racial group known as the "Turanic race", which includes all Turkic, Uralic, Tungusic, and Mongolic peoples due to their common origin in Inner and Central Asia (every part of that statement is disputed). Turanism advocates unification of the "Turanic" peoples in a single state or confederation and a return to a more "primal" form of the groups uncorrupted by other groups, usually outright advocating or including touches of Turkic neo-paganism or Tengrism. The ideology quickly became popular amongst the emerging Young Turks, whose political party the Committee of Union and Progress openly supported Turanism. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turanists volunteered to join what they viewed as fights for the Turanist struggle. Figures such as Enver Pasha, used Turanism as a motivation for participating in and orchestrating the Armenian Genocide.

In the current era, the main party representing Turanist ideology is the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which has followed Pan-Turkic/Turanist beliefs since the 1950s. The youth/militia wing of the party known as the Grey Wolves was particularly notorious for being involved with paramilitary death squads in the Turkish political violence of the 1970s. The party had a schism in 2016 over the current leader's support of Erdoğan and the MHP's participation in the ruling coalition, now the vote count in recent years hovers around 11% with a recent gain of a seat to 50 seats in the last election. After the 2020 Azerbaijani victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, a huge upsurge in Turanist support occurred in the Turkish public, Turanist slogans and ideas flooded Turkish social media, and politicians quickly fanned the flames.

Unlike similar ideologies present in Turkey, Erdoğan has a mechanism to implement these ideas and a way to progress towards Turan. That is through the Turkic Council, recently renamed to the Organization of Turkic States. Erdoğan has openly said that he wishes to have the Turkic Council become a geopolitical, economic and military alliance. To reach his goals, Turkey has made extreme overtures to be involved with Central Asia in the void left by Russia in the wake of Ukraine. Even more successful than improving ties with Central Asia, the cooperation and ties with Azerbaijan have increased exponentially since 2020.

Turkey stymied NATO with denials of expansion and cooperation with Russia and other groups opposed to NATO positions. While Erdoğan skipped NATO meetings or went to one a month, he visited the Turkic Council three times a month to discuss strengthening economic and political ties. The potential Turanist state, even if solely Pan-Turkic,

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would include large swaths of Russia, Iran, China and multiple NATO members such as parts of Romania. If the Organization of Turkic States continues to strengthen its authority and power, it looks to become analogous to a NATO or CSTO organization itself, or an alternative EU. The further centralized, the closer to the Turanist Union and the easier to use as a counterbalance to the West. If Erdoğan continues down this path, why would he want expansion of NATO or victory against Russia? It leaves him further isolated in his path to creating a new counterbalance to NATO. A new alliance would also provide Erdoğan with the avenue to pursue Turkish claims in Cyprus, Armenia, Syria and beyond without interference from NATO members and no pressure on his authoritarian ambitions.

The reason these moves arise is not merely a Pan-Turkic ambition; it comes from the accession of countries such as Hungary to the observer status of the council. Hungarian nationalism is highly involved with Turanism, the idea being that Hungarians as Magyars are descendants of Central Asian nomads and declare themselves “eastern”. CODA has an amazing article by Katia Patin on the rise of Turanism in Hungary. Hungary is an observer state of the Turkic Council with Orbán visiting every session since 2018. A Turkic Council and full Turanist vision of Hungary would distance itself from Europe and provide Orbán with a perfect counterbalance to EU and NATO dominance in the region, with possible bargaining power to seek its irredentist claims as a part of Turan. Especially as leveraging Russia to gain more international support for illiberalism has declined massively in political capital in the wake of the Ukraine war. Embracing Turanism, which was a key undercurrent of Hungarian fascism, provides an international route for an increasingly isolated Hungary from its neighbors. For a Central Asia boxed in by Russia, China, and Iran with an increasingly united front in favor of Chinese interests, fear of the situation in Xinjiang, and current national ideologies built around ethnonationalism, Turkey seems a good future partner. The Organization of the Turkic States gained official recognition as an international organization. The Secretary General claimed that fifteen other states look to join as observers and may lead to the United States of The Turkic World.

In fairness, there have been roadblocks to the total success for Turanic ambitions so far. Chinese economic and military encroachment and funding prevent Turkey from gaining a dominant foothold in Central Asia. The lack of action to help the Uyghurs has eroded trust in Turkey from other potential Turanic countries and caused a lack of political power. Continued CSTO dominance in Central Asia and Russian interference in the prevention of irredentist claims in Armenia also erode perceived power. Despite setbacks, Turkish advances towards the new alliance continue, and NATO powers have done little to counterbalance the Turkish drift towards a new ideology that threatens their disappearance from NATO altogether.

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