

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MID-02-221113.html

Turkey pushes crossroads politics

By Pepe Escobar

1/22/2013

While everyone is concentrated on the possibility of a tectonic shift in US-Iran relations, and while a solution may be found for the Syrian tragedy in another upcoming set of negotiations in Geneva, Turkey is silently toiling in the background. Let's see what these sultans of swing are up to.

We start on the internal front. Abdul Mejid I, the 31st Ottoman sultan (in power from 1839 to 1861) always dreamed of a submerged tunnel under the Bosphorus linking Europe to Asia.

It took "Sultan" Erdogan, as in Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to make it happen, when last month he inaugurated – on the 90th anniversary of the founding of Ataturk's Republic - the US\$3 billion, 76-kilometer Marmaray rail system which, in the hardly hyperbolic words of Mustafa Kara, mayor of Istanbul's Uskudar district (where the tunnel comes out), will "eventually link London to Beijing, creating unimagined global connections". [1]

It certainly helps that this technological marvel fits right into China's extremely ambitious New Silk Road(s) strategy which, just like the original Silk Road, starts in Xian, and aims to cross to Europe via, where else, Istanbul. [2]

So the fact remains that "Sultan" Erdogan simply has not been downed by the Gezi Park protests last June. All the ruling party AKP's mega-projects - supported by millions in rural Anatolia,

ignored for decades by the secular elites in Istanbul - are alive and kicking.

By 2025, more than a million commuters will be using the Marmaray. The third Bosphorus bridge, close to the Black Sea, is being built - despite Alevi fury that it will be named after Selim The Grim, a sultan who ordered the slaughter of thousands of Alevi. Same for the new six-runway airport northwest of Istanbul. And then there's the 50 km "crazy canal" (Erdogan's own definition), linking the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea, so monstrous tanker traffic may be diverted away from the Bosphorus. The Turkish green movement insists this could destroy whole aquatic ecosystems, but Erdogan is unfazed.

That oily Kurdish factor

In the wider world, Turkish foreign policy is now on overdrive. And inevitably, it's all related to energy.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu earlier this month hosted Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Ankara. Then he went to Baghdad and met Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Davutoglu also visited Washington; he wrote an editorial published by Foreign Policy praising the US-Turkish "strategic partnership", now facing "an increasingly chaotic geopolitical environment"; and he made sure to support US-Iran negotiations.

Earlier this week, Davutoglu teamed up with Erdogan for a high-level meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in St Petersburg. Next week he'll be in Tehran.

The question is what does Ankara want from Washington for so eagerly supporting a US-Iran normalization?

The key is Iraqi Kurdistan. Ankara wants Washington's blessing for the now famously fractious 250,000 barrel-a-day oil pipeline from northern Iraq, bypassing Baghdad. This pipeline would add to the perennially troubled Kirkuk-Ceyhan, controlled (sort of) by Baghdad; currently operating at best at one-fifth of its official capacity of 1.6 million barrels a day, bombed virtually every week, and with zero maintenance.

It's not as much about the oil (which Turkey badly needs) as a political/economic alliance that ideally translates into more Kurdish votes for the ruling AKP party in the 2014 Turkish elections.

The (insurmountable) problem is the Obama administration has no intention - at the present negotiation junction - to provoke Tehran by allowing a Turkish project that most of all provokes Iran's ally Baghdad. That's just another instance that everything of consequence happening in Southwest Asia nowadays involves Iran. [3]

So it all depends on how far the US-Iran rapprochement will go - leaving Ankara unable to alienate Baghdad and Tehran at the same time. Ankara, though, is also aware of huge potential benefits down the line. That would mean much more oil and gas flowing from Iran than the

current long-term annual contract for natural gas via the Tabriz-Ankara pipeline if - and when - Western investment start pumping again into Iran's energy industry.

That Wahhabi-Likudnik axis

President Obama gets along very well with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan. But while Obama has nothing but praise for Erdogan, for the House of Saud the name "Obama" is now worse than any plague. And Erdogan is not exactly that much popular.

Erdogan enthusiastically supported Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, while the House of Saud's hero is coup plotter General Sisi. In Syria, Erdogan once again supports the Muslim Brotherhood-linked "rebels", while the Saudis, with Bandar Bush ahead of the pack, de facto finance and weaponize all sorts of nasties including the al-Qaeda offshoot Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Erdogan has evolved an extremely fractious relationship with Israel, while the Wahhabi-Likudnik anti-Iran/Syria axis has never been stronger. [4]

It's easy to forget an Ankara-Damascus-Tehran alliance was in place before the foreign-imposed Syrian civil war. That was part of Davutoglu's "zero problems with our neighbors" doctrine, then morphed into "all kinds of problems". The House of Saud obviously did what it could to undermine the former alliance with the carrot of more trade and investment in Turkey. It worked for a while, when the myth of an "Arab Spring" still held sway, and Turkey and the Saudis were even coordinating their support for assorted Syrian "rebels".

Now it's a totally different configuration. Only in Turkey we find assorted Islamists, secularists, the left and assorted liberals all in agreement that the House of Saud is a pretty nasty bunch. And not by accident "Sultan Erdogan" - who allegedly wants the return of the Caliphate - has been derided non-stop all over pan-Arab media, which for all practical purposes is 90%-controlled by Saudis.

Ankara seems to have finally realized it must be very careful regarding its Syria position. Not very far from its borders, Syrian Kurds are fighting Saudi-supported jihadis.

Worse; scores of al-Qaeda-linked jihadis-to-be - a Mujahideen International - are congregating in a network of safe houses in southern Turkey, including Antakya, the capital of Hatay province, before being smuggled over the border to mostly join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Predictably, NATO is not amused. [5]

It's all about Pipelineistan

Turkey's number one foreign policy aim is to position itself as a critical energy crossroads for any oil and natural gas coming from Russia, the Caspian, Central Asia and even the Middle East to Europe.

Yet Turkey has been squeezed by two conflicting Pipelineistan narratives. One is the never-ending soap opera Nabucco, which basically means delivering natural gas to Europe from just

about anywhere (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Iraq, even Egypt) except Russia. And the other is the South Stream pipeline, proposed by Russia and crossing the Black Sea.

Insisting in its role as a neutral bridge between East and West, Ankara hedged its bets. But after the European financial crisis took over, Nabucco was, for all practical purposes, doomed. What's left now is the so-called Nabucco West - a shorter, 1,300 km pipeline from Turkey to Central Europe - and the much cheaper Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), just 500 km from Turkey across the Balkans to Italy.

The consortium (including BP, Total and Azerbaijan's SOCAR) developing the huge Shah Deniz II field in Azerbaijan ended up choosing TAP. So Nabucco is now virtually six feet under.

To say that's been a nifty deal for Moscow is a huge understatement. TAP does not threaten Gazprom's hold on the European market. And besides, Moscow got closer to Baku. Dick Cheney must adjust his pacemaker for another heart attack; after all his elaborate energy plans, Moscow and Baku are nothing less than discussing transporting Russian oil through the notorious Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which Dr Zbig Brzezinski dreamed up to exactly bypass Russia. On top of it, they are also bound to reverse the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline to pump Russian oil into Azerbaijan.

Additionally, that's the end of Turkish (and European) pipe dreams of having wacky "gas republic" Turkmenistan supplying energy across the Caspian through the Caucasus and Turkey to Europe. For Moscow, this is non-negotiable; we control the transit of Central Asian energy to Europe. Moreover, Turkmenistan already has better sturgeon to fry - via its ultra-profitable gas pipeline to China.

The bottom line: Russia getting even more ascendant in the Caucasus equals Turkey - which imports nearly all of its oil, coal and natural gas - becoming even more energy dependent on Russia. Russia supplies nearly 60% of Turkey's natural gas - and rising. Iran supplies 20%. Moscow is sure Turkey will soon overtake Germany as its biggest energy client.

That's certainly what Erdogan was discussing in detail this past Wednesday in Moscow. And then there is Turkey's ambitious plan to build 23 nuclear power plants by 2023. Guess who's ahead? Moscow, of course. Not only as builder but also as primary supplier of nuclear fuel. No package of Western sanctions seems to be on the horizon.

So Ankara seems to be (silently) hectic on all fronts. Erdogan is carefully cultivating his friend Obama - positioning himself as a privileged sort of messenger. Erdogan supports Iran's civilian nuclear program - which instantaneously placed him as highly suspicious in the eyes of the Wahhabi-Likudnik axis of fear and loathing. That's the key reason for the widening estrangement between Ankara and Riyadh.

Ankara's desire to be a key actor in an eventual US-Iran rapprochement springs out of a simple calculation. Faced with tremendous political, economic and security barriers, Turkey may only fulfill its wish of becoming the privileged East-West energy transit corridor with Iran by its side.

Notes:

1. Asia and Europe to get Bosphorus rail link as Marmaray opens, Hurriyet Daily News, October 28, 2013.
2. New Silk Road starts with Xian, South China Morning Post, October 29, 2013.
3. Deal or No Deal, Iran's Stock Keeps Rising, Al-Akhbar English, November 20, 2013.
4. The Wahhabi-Likudnik war of terror, Asia Times Online, November 20, 2013.
5. The secret jihadi smuggling route through Turkey, CNN, November 5, 2013.