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The Turkish Thesis: 
Dialogue among Civilizations and Linguistic-Operational Corridors

Gokhan Bacik

Turkey has occupied an attention-grabbing position in the lexicon on the dialogue among civilization. The mainstream discourse on this subject keeps citing Turkey as an important actor. Political elites in Turkey also present their country as an indispensable actor. But what is the philosophy behind Turkey’s claim of importance? Is Turkey really a critical state that cannot be overlooked in dialogue among civilizations? Are there concrete facts to defend the Turkish thesis? If so, what are they? This article presents the inner logic of the Turkish thesis. It employs communication theory to test the Turkish thesis and also sheds light on the causal link between a highly fuzzy formula that is dialogue among civilizations and the international system.

Introduction

Since 9/11, dialogue among civilization has once again come to the forefront of world politics. Even the event itself was interpreted as another proof that displays how such a dialogue is necessary. However, dialogue among civilizations is a fuzzy formula in an enormously complex phenomenon. Putting aside the goodwill that the formula repeats, it is not clear from this formula how it will be practiced, who are the agents and what is the proper process. In this sense, dialogue among civilizations stands as a metaphysical formula.

Any phenomenon in world politics generates its own lexicon, a determinant of new meaning. However, the role of language is not a mechanical one. The language-dialogue nexus betrays the role of cultural space (Herscher, 2002).
Cultural space is the specific topoi in which an event is processed by culture. The formation of actors' reactions and their epistemic gloss takes place in this space. However, the invitation extended by culture and language opens doors to different consequences. To begin with, states have their own security cultures that must be seen as the sources of their singular responses to the same cases. Snyder depicts security culture as an articulate approach by the elite to security-military affairs, which is in fact the wider manifestation of the distinctive mode of strategic thinking that somehow becomes public opinion (Lantis, 2002). This definition implies that security culture is a superior version of public opinion. The societal roots of security culture necessitate different readings of world events.

This brings societal differences into the machinery of international relations, a machine that, thanks to the settled power-based relations among nations, grinds unchanged and apparently unchangeable. In consequence, even the very reportage of a notorious world event acquires diverse meaning sets as different security cultures construct it according to their predilections.

Similarly, the dialogue among civilization thesis had paved the way for a special lexicon that houses the only verbal fund allotted to us for analyzing it. This lexicon is surprisingly not broad in scope. It is packed with several recurring words, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Islam, Christianity, and civilizations, and more philosophical terminology as well as Kant. The most frequent word with negative meaning is probably Al-Qaeda. Interestingly, despite major efforts to establish a positive ranking, the United States has a very high frequency of both negative and positive meaning markers. Turkey has also occupied itself strenuously with attracting a positive ranking in this lexicon. Her positive ranking has been repeatedly endorsed by different actors.

Actors use language both as a means for communication and as a meaning-making template (Cabrera, 2001). Language is not a simple instrument for communication; it is also a shaper of meaning. Absolutely aware of this fact, states will try to amplify their weight and appearance on the relevant scene by increasing the frequency of their verbal impact on the relevant lexicon. Since the relevant lexicon seeks to determine actors' meaning sets, states care about how they are pictured in this lexicon, as well as about the frequency of their marks upon it. Naturally, states prefer a positive meaning along with frequent lexicon entries.

As stated above, Turkey has occupied an attention-grabbing position in the lexicon on the dialogue among civilization. Accordingly, the mainstream discourse on this subject has always kept citing Turkey as an important actor. Yet, this importance is argued by Turkey as a kind of official agenda. But what is the philosophy behind Turkey's claim to importance? Is Turkey really a critical
state that cannot be overlooked in dialogue among civilizations? Are there concrete facts to defend the Turkish thesis? If so, what are they? Or is it another metaphysical assumption to mention Turkey as a critical state in this process?

Inspired by such questions, in this paper, I will first try to present the inner logic of the Turkish thesis. Then, by employing a method based on communication theory, I will try to test if the Turkish thesis can be defended on some grounds. In so doing, I believe this paper can contribute rescuing the Turkish thesis from highly metaphysical plane. It is hoped that this will also shed light on the causal link between a highly fuzzy formula that is dialogue among civilizations and the international system. Finally, the discussion around the Turkish thesis may display how different actors, i.e. mainly the Western, can easily endorse Turkey's potential role in this vein. In other words, such an analysis may clarify the mechanism of the converged expectations around the Turkish thesis.

The Turkish Thesis

The Turkish thesis mainly proposes that the world is a bipolar system in which the mega-cultural blocs, Islam and the West, are determining actors' behaviors. Thus, it is vital to understand how this cultural bipolar model necessities a different *modus vivendi* between the poles. According to the thesis, communication in such a model is different, and not all states can offer a functional operational corridor between the West and the Muslims. And Turkey stands as the most fitting candidate to sustain such a dialogue among various cultural zones.

As the Cold War experience taught us, polar opposites are naturally skeptical about each other, and this skepticism shapes their policies. A similar skepticism is mounting in the post-9/11 era between the West and the Islamic world. The post-9/11 era created a new political demarcation between cultural and even civilization zones, and Turkey stands in the middle of them. To a large extent, the war on terror is raging on the cultural fault lines of the global society. A new bipolar structure has come to the fore, resembling the former Cold War bipolarity. Today, the battleground of the war on global terror is somewhere between the developed Western states and the underdeveloped Muslim states. Important spatial elements of the war, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, are important Islamic places. Even though it is denied on a daily basis, different publics around the globe understand the war as a conflict mainly between the Christian West and the Muslim East. The foundation of Turkey's uniqueness is built on the basic characteristics of this new geopolitical fault line. In this sense, the rise of Turkey differs from other changes in mental maps. Turkey's difference
is related to a more structural change in the world mental map now operating on
the boundary between the West and the Muslim worlds.
Thus the critical question is evident: How to sustain a trust-based
communication in such a skeptical milieu? One of the plausible answers is that
some actors must be found to sustain an operational corridor between the poles.
However, such a role can be occupied only by actors who are endorsed by the
two rival poles. Otherwise, messages would be overshadowed by the bipolar
skepticism. Indeed, the Muslim world is skeptical about the Western powers’
messages and operations. But still, since dialogue among civilizations necessitates
a large measure of international cooperation, a functional communication
between Islam and the West is vital. That communication, the Turkish thesis
further proposes, can best be conducted through a state which is to some extent
endorsed by all sides; Turkey stands as the most fitting candidate for such a role.
Thus the new division between Islam and the West is the main mechanism of
world politics that recognized Turkey as a unique state with the potential of being
the operational corridor between the two poles.

Bipolar Semantics

This line of thinking employs a symbolic geography that operates differently from
the methods of classic political geography. On this model, geography loses its
dominant role and becomes a contingency of the human mind. And the human
mind is the actor with the capacity of creating new geopolitical meanings for
certain events. Certain events change people’s understanding of the world. That
change is also, however, another type of geographical change, one that takes place
in the human mind. Nevertheless, despite their non-ontological existence, such
mental changes can pave the way for drastic developments in international politics.
As P. H. Liotta (2005) pointed out, mental maps are important, as they serve
to illustrate the distinctions and recognitions essential for actors constructing
their strategies. Thus, changes in mental maps are as important as changes in
political maps. In this way, geography has become a variable category, as Martin
Walker (2000) noted, and it has several different layers. The effects of 9/11 on
world politics refer to such new forms of change in geopolitics as having paved
the way for a new mental map. The uniqueness claim, which is the summary of
the Turkish thesis, originated from this mental map.

The recognition of various civilizations being in contact with each other
implies that this contact may take in various forms. Logically one may list several
options such as cooperation, or reminding Huntington’s clash. But more than the
mode of contact important is how this civilization-level form at world politics
produces certain results: (i) If civilizations are the correct units of contact,
then where are the new frontlines/boundaries? Each analysis creates a special geography based on new boundaries, and those boundaries give important hints about states' potential behaviors and policies; (ii) How does this contact reflect itself at the cultural level in world politics? An event does not take place in a vacuum. How different cultural attributes attach to the civilization level contact is of significance; and, (iii) Remembering that this phenomenon is taking place on a global level, what are its non-military, i.e. cultural and ideological, instruments? The construction of the Turkish thesis is closely related to the answers to these questions, for on that thesis, Turkey is endowed with a unique significance in the dialogue among civilizations process.

Historically speaking, the rise of inter-cultural boundaries as major parameters of world politics is not new. Despite the nation-state demarcations of the international system, ideological or cultural breaks can easily become effective prime factors of politics. In the late 1940s, President Harry Truman expanded the U.S. mission to the worldwide fight for freedom against communism. It was a clear attempt to create certain global boundaries and frontlines against the communist enemy. The mental map of world politics operated on the boundary between the free world and the communist block for years. A similar approach is practiced now (Bostdorff, 2003).

But more important is the creation of various operational corridors across the new boundary. That step is critical in terms of the general strategy of the dialogue.

It is clear, however, that the Western actors cannot guarantee the construction of a dialogue corridor in a system that contains entities as radically different as are the West and Islam. Western actors have weak legitimacy in the Muslim world. This circumstance requires Western actors to speak through representatives within the Muslim front. Therefore, some Muslim actors are co-opted to keep open a reliable and functional operational corridor between two sides. Turkey's actual or potential role should be understood as a contingency of the radical division in contemporary world politics. The Turkish thesis proposes that Turkey can man the operational corridor between the Muslim world and the West.

The Cold War experience is a helpful illumination of the communication strategy between blocks, for it, too, depended on a bifurcated system in which international actors were divided into two different ideological camps. Naturally, the actors in the opposed camps were skeptical about one another. As William A. Glaser illustrated (1956/7), the Cold War 'semantics' had it that the lead actors (the United States and the U.S.S.R.) acted according to a 'two-valued orientation' (p. 694). Glaser borrowed this terminology from semanticists like Samuel Hayakawa and Johnson Wendell. Glaser glosses the Cold War as a two-
valued orientation of antagonists: In view of that, a simple dualism shaped both Soviet and American argumentation. Both sides’ narratives were constructed with polar concepts such as truth v. falsehood, good v. evil, peace v. war, freedom v. tyranny. Both sides internalized the either-or mentality that dominated the communication between them. Glaser considers this nothing short of normal, it being a standard expression of human nature; people quickly adopt such attitudes in situations of conflict. In other words, this is the semantics of conflict. Conflict forces a special semantics that rests on the categorical rejection of the other’s message.

On such a model, actors would quickly reject the possibility of truth in the other side’s message. Each side would take the other’s message to be mere propaganda. Admittedly not as radical as the Cold War era’s semantics, the post-9/11 era has nevertheless been tempted into espousing some bifurcated semantics. A new cultural or civilizational fault line has opened a rupture that forms the basic boundary between the West and the Muslim world. And a two-valued orientation semantics is increasingly dominating their relations.

Since Huntington’s (1993) declaration, the idea that the great division in the system and the dominating source of conflict is cultural has gained broad acceptance. Culture-based analyses abound to explain the causal dimension of actors’ behaviors. Thus, despite the demise of the Cold War, the two-value orientation semantics has retained its dominance in a different form. Of prime importance are the patterns of behavior in the bifurcated-semantics model. What is the proper way of communication, alongside that model, between the conflicting sides? If skepticism towards the other side is the blueprint of interaction on a bifurcated model, each side is committed to it. That makes vital a cooperative actor from the other camp. Logically, an in-group actor has credibility with the other actors in the same group that an ex-group actor does not. Proxy-dialogue therefore becomes an attractive alternative option. However, finding a co-operative actor in the other camp is not an easy task.

Yet, a co-operative actor/country is useful in different ways: (i) It is likely be more convincing in its own group of countries; (ii) It lends an important element of legitimization of the other group of countries; (iii) Remembering that spatial characteristics are always important in international politics, it would increase the operational geographic capacity of the other group of countries; and, (iv) It ameliorates the culture-based division of politics, easing tension among the conflicting actor-countries. But to repeat: important in securing this co-operative actor is to determine which country has the capacity to handle the complex operation of keeping open a corridor of dialogue between two the conflicting groups of countries.
The Cold War Analogy

A historical case study would clarify the picture. The role that Turkey wants to play in the sharply separated worlds of Islam and the West brings to mind the case of Poland during the Cold War era. In the Cold War semantics, Poland played that role between the communist and the capitalist camps. The analysis of Poland's role, in terms of American concerns and objectives in the Cold War, sheds light on how some states may play vital roles in two-value-oriented structures. Once the Polish case is analyzed, it will become apparent that the United States tried to use Poland as the operational corridor for pursuing its policies towards the communist camp. But, why was Poland, not another socialist state, chosen for this role? As already noted, the preferring of an actor from the other camp for the operational-corridor role is a difficult task. It has two prerequisites: (i) A country should impress the major powers with its capacity to occupy that role; and, (ii) The country itself should be desirous of that role. Poland stood out as the amply equipped actor for such a role in the Cold War semantics.

In the years 1957-64, the United States deployed a special strategy toward Poland that included the extending of financial aid. The Americans believed that Warsaw might follow an independent foreign policy. The Americans even had some positive expectations that Warsaw might devise an anti-Soviet foreign policy that would serve Western objectives. Indeed, it made of Poland a model for other Communist regimes. America saw Poland as a unique role in the bipolar competition. It is even argued that certain Soviet plans could be frustrated in Poland. To identify how Americans perceived Poland, Kaplan (1975) quoted Clausewitz, who once defined Poland as 'the public road on which foreign armies jostle each other' (p. 149). In a sense, Poland was believed to have the capacity to short-circuit the Communist camp.

As the basic point of departure, the United States believed Poland to be different from other Communist states. Contributing to this was Poland's unique geography, history, and social structure. To begin with, the Poles were "religious and nationalistic" (Kaplan, 1975, p. 150.) Thus, they were naturally against the Marxist-Leninist ideology. And they had "an affinity with Western values and social organization" (p. 151). Those facts, for Americans, concluded that Poland had a capacity to use the same political language as the Western world's. As Kaplan (1975) noted, the basic purpose of the Polish strategy was to weaken international communism. A Communist state with an affinity with the Western world in terms of culture and ideology might offer a unique set of opportunities. Thus, Poland was believed to have all qualifications to be an operational corridor within Cold War semantics.
Focusing on a country like Poland was also rationalistic. Reminiscent of the magic question of medieval alchemy, how to make gold from iron, scholars working on persuasion chased the answer to the burning question: How to persuade others even if they are enemies? Morris Janowitz (1961), probably as he was contemplating the heyday of the Cold War period, argued that the influence of mass persuasion vitiated the force of modern weapons. Like many others, he studied the concept of persuasion in international relations within the context of the American-Russian competition. As he pointed out, the short-circuit recipe was not secret: persuade people in the opposite camp. Hence, for many, a corridor country like Poland that transmits American ideology was a clear route. It gave the Americans a shortcut to defeating Soviet ideology.

As stated before, the cooperative actor role should be coveted by the country that is to occupy that role. It was well before the Cold War that a peripheral notion had already started to affect the Polish geographical imagination. Accordingly, Poland was a peripheral state between two civilizations. The state between two worlds narrative was already an established idea among the Polish élite. For instance, in the writings of Michal Bobrynski (1849-1935), Poland was depicted as a peripheral country with an attraction to both republicanism and democracy. Bobrynski argued that the tension between republicanism and democracy caused the failure of political or social freedoms. In brief, Poland stood as an anomalous case. That distinguished it from both West and East. The term anomalous here refers to the hybrid nature of Poland. Bobrynski argued also that Poland was among the last nations to be integrated into Western civilization, due to her peripheral position (Wandycz, 1992). However, this late integration, or to some extent erstwhile exclusion, was seen as a historical mistake by the Polish élite. In 1943, Oskar Halecki, a world-renowned expert on the medieval history of Poland, severely blamed German and British historiography for 'neglecting' Poland. Major Western writings of history were, to Halecki (1943), also flawed by another great mistake that identified Poland with the history of Russia, treating the history of Poland as separate from that of the West. The intellectual argument was clear: Poland was part of the Western world, and its history was to be associated with the West’s.

Conclusion

The study of the Polish case sheds light on Turkey’s role in the post-9/11 era. Indeed, the Western élite has a mental map of Turkey that is reminiscent of the one it had of Poland. Accordingly, Turkey is on the fault line on new world map. More, Turkey is Muslim, but different from other Muslim states. Like Poland, Turkey is close to Western values and social organization. Like Poland’s élite, the Turkish élite
approve the model role, presenting their country as the model Muslim state with Western values. Consequently, Turkey is accredited as a state with the potential to function as an operational corridor between the West and Islam.

Thus, a country on the fault lines is the essence of the Turkish thesis. Based on this, Turkey presents herself as the country that best fits the new semantics of world politics.

However, if the crux of the Turkish thesis rests on the country's role as a Muslim state that bridges the chasm between East and West, two points should be made. First, Turkey should overcome her internal problems with democratization. The Turkish thesis will not be persuasive if Turkey's problems with democracy become deeper. Secondly, the major Western actors such as the United States and the European Union should become more sensitive to Turkey's democratization. If these actors want to use Turkey as an operational corridor with the Islamic world, they must take a more active part in Turkey's democratization. Major Western actors' reluctance to take a stand in support of Turkish democracy will certainly put all Muslims on alert. If the West fails to support the democratic bloc in Turkey, other Muslim states will develop reservations about her reliability as an operational corridor between Islam and West.

Endnote

For similar approaches to other states or cases, see Ditchev (2006) and Bialasiewicz et al (2007).

References