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TÜRKİYE AND CENTRAL ASIA: STRATEGIC ALLIANCES SHAPING THE FUTURE

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse the cooperation and relations between Türkiye and the Central Asian republics in recent years and to focus on the developments during this period and the future of relations. The cooperation process will be examined through basic factors such as organisations focusing on the Turkic world and relations in the military and economic fields. In this context, the areas of cooperation and relations that have gained importance in recent years will be emphasised.

Keywords: Türkiye, Central Asia, partnership.

Introduce

The end of the Cold War initiated a process of restructuring the international system. In this process, Türkiye shaped its foreign policy on the basis of 'compatibility with Western alliance systems' and 'protection of the status quo'. However, during the Cold War, Türkiye realised that it was unsustainable to build economic, political and military relations with the West on the basis of 'geostrategic importance'. After the end of the Cold War, as European countries in particular turned to a 'safer' environment, Türkiye was confronted with the problems created by new areas of conflict that emerged on three sides.

Türkiye was the first country to recognise Central Asian countries such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and to establish diplomatic relations with them. The independence of the Central Asian republics has added a new dimension to Turkish foreign policy, and Türkiye's relations and co-operation with these countries based on common language, history and cultural ties have developed rapidly in many areas. The basis of this co-operation is the search for common benefits.

This article analyses Türkiye's Central Asia policy and the relations between Türkiye and the Turkish republics from the post-Cold War period until today. In the following sections of the article, we will analyse the political, economic and cultural relations during this period in detail. In addition, Türkiye's foreign policy objectives and the regional significance underlying Türkiye's Central Asia policy will be discussed. The article also provides an outlook on the future of Türkiye's relations with Central Asia.

Historical background and development

Relations between Türkiye and Central Asia are of great importance for the emergence and development of Turkish history. The interactions between Central Asia and Anatolia have developed in different ways throughout history, depending on the conditions of each period and geographical factors. The social, cultural and political relations between the Turkish migrants from Central Asia and Anatolia and the Turkish communities remaining in Central Asia continued uninterrupted until the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union required a new perspective on relations between Türkiye and the Central Asian Turkic republics. Because during this period, Türkiye had the opportunity to establish direct relations with the independent Central Asian states, and these relations developed in many areas such as energy, economy, trade and cultural relations. This was an important factor that shaped Türkiye's foreign policy strategies and regional influence.

The Treaty of Friendship and Fraternity signed with the Soviets in 1921 marked an important turning point in international relations at the time. The signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Fraternity with Turkey by the Soviet Union began to break Turkey's international isolation and opened the doors to new foreign relations. Moreover, this treaty signalled strategic cooperation and mutual recognition between Turkey and the Soviet Union. This rapprochement between the two countries became a factor that influenced the regional balance. This treaty was implemented by the Soviets' decision not to support the communist movements in Türkiye and Türkiye's decision not to support the Turanist movements in the Soviet Union¹. This agreement, which lasted until the end of the Cold War, marked the beginning of a period in which Türkiye was unable to maintain its international policy. In this context, Türkiye's accession to the Western bloc led it to neglect the need to develop a strategic policy towards the regions of the other bloc, such as Central Asia. The international dynamics of this period shaped Türkiye's foreign policy decisions and determined its role in international relations.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 marked an important turning point between Turkey and the Central Asian countries. During this period, visits took place at the level of heads of state. However, instead of completely excluding Moscow, a more wait-and-see attitude was adopted. The Turkish public, on the other hand, raised expectations, which was reflected in Türkiye's recognition of the Turkic Republics. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev visited Türkiye in September 1991, and this visit was decisive for the start of talks that had not previously been on the agenda.²

Türkiye recognised these countries and agreed to establish diplomatic relations with them even before the collapse of the USSR was officially announced and even before the countries concerned applied for recognition of their independence. In this way, Türkiye was the first country to recognise the Central Asian and Caucasian republics. The rapid emergence of Central Asia on the international agenda has sometimes led to relations based on sentiment rather than rational policy.

Türkiye's Central Asia policy

Central Asia is a region of great geographical and strategic importance that opens up a new dimension in Türkiye's foreign policy. This region has a position that increases Türkiye's strategic effectiveness, provides opportunities for access to energy resources and opens the door to various co-operation opportunities. Moreover, Turkey considers the countries of Central Asia as friendly and fraternal countries and aims to develop strategic alliances.

With the end of the Cold War, a process of restructuring the international system was initiated. In this process, Türkiye shaped its foreign policy on the basis of 'compatibility with Western alliance systems' and 'protection of the status quo'. However, during the Cold War, Türkiye realised that it was unsustainable to build economic, political and military relations with the West on the basis of 'geostrategic importance'. After the end of the Cold War, as European countries in particular turned to a 'safer' environment, Türkiye was confronted with the problems created by new areas of conflict that emerged on three sides.

Following the dissolution of the USSR and the independence of Central Asia, Türkiye was the first country to recognise these states, open embassies and carry out investments and projects. The independence of the Central Asian republics has added a new dimension to Turkish foreign policy and Türkiye's relations and co-operation with these countries, based on common language, history and cultural ties, have developed rapidly in many areas.³

Türkiye played an important role in guiding the Central Asian Turkic republics on the international stage at the time of their independence and helped them establish relations with international institutions such as the UN, the IMF and the World Bank. In addition, Türkiye was seen as a source of inspiration for the transition of these countries from a socialist to a liberal system. During this period, the so-called "Turkish model" attracted a great deal of attention in the international community and was viewed favourably by the media, academia and political observers.⁴

Türkiye's relations with the Turkic Republics have developed rapidly since 1991. During this period, a number of visits have taken place at the level of presidents, prime ministers and ministers, cooperation protocols have been signed, mutual embassies have been opened, offices of the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) have been established and summits of Turkic-speaking countries have been organised. In addition, Turkey has provided eximbank loans to the Turkic states from its own resources, offered training opportunities in many areas, provided humanitarian and technical assistance and economic support. This process demonstrates Türkiye's closer co-operation and solidarity with these countries.⁵

In the years 1992-1993, Türkiye endeavoured to establish intensive cooperation with the Central Asian republics. After 1994, however, this process began to change due

to changes in both Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy. During the presidency of Turgut Oezal and the prime ministership of Sueleyman Demirel, Türkiye was on the way to closer integration with the Turkic world. With the beginning of Demirel's presidency, however, these efforts slowed down. Prime Minister Tansu Çiller and her government made the European Union a foreign policy priority. During this period, Türkiye's foreign policy priorities shifted towards closer relations with the EU. These changes affected the dynamics of Türkiye's relations with the Turkic Republics and reduced the momentum of close co-operation with these countries.⁶

Since the Ak Party (Justice and Development Party) came to power in Türkiye, Türkiye's relations with the Caucasus and Central Asia have been intensively revitalised. During this period, economic and political competition between Russia, the USA, China, Türkiye, Iran and the United States developed into the most important factors in the region. The US policy of "transporting oil and natural gas from the region to international markets through Türkiye", which the US supported from 1995 onwards, developed in line with Türkiye's interests in the region. This led to a convergence of American and Turkish policies towards the region. Since the early 2000s, this process led the countries of the region, especially Russia, to view Türkiye as an implementer of US policy.⁷

Following the resignation of Ahmet Necdet Sezer as President of Türkiye in August 2007, the then Foreign Minister Abdullah Guel took over as President. During Abdullah Guel's term of office, Türkiye's foreign policy principles were coordinated by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the leader of the AK Party, and his chief advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu. In particular, Ahmet Davutoğlu's approach of strategic depth characterised Türkiye's foreign policy from 2009 onwards, which is known as the "zero-problem" policy". This policy was also highly influential in Central Asia.

After Abdullah Guel became president, he paid special attention to Central Asian countries. His former position as foreign minister gave him an advantage in this respect and he had the opportunity to better represent Türkiye to the outside world. During his time in office, Guel tended towards an active foreign policy. Within this framework, he tried to realise the Turkic Union project in Central Asia without attracting the reactions of rival powers such as the USA and Russia. However, this project was seen by some as a Russian-sponsored project to distance the US from Central Asia. Furthermore, opponents of the EU and the US saw the project as an extension of the "Greater Middle East" project. Both approaches argued that Türkiye's ability to dominate the region was [limited](#).

After 2008, Türkiye focused on the Middle East. Since 2011, events such as the "Arab Spring" and the "Syrian Civil War" have been at the centre of Turkish foreign policy. However, following the unfavourable course of relations with the Middle East and especially after the [FETO](#) coup attempt in 2016, Türkiye's foreign policy focus shifted back to Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁸

Since 2016, new areas of bilateral and regional cooperation have emerged, particularly in the economic and energy sectors, and Turkic identity is being

emphasised more strongly in official statements. Increased visits between Türkiye and the Turkic states, Kazakhstan's mediating role in the "aircraft crisis" and the rebuilding of relations with Uzbekistan under Shevket Mirziyoyev reflect the driving forces behind Türkiye's growing interest in the Turkic world.

An important milestone that strengthened Türkiye's Central Asia policy was the "Re-Asia Initiative" announced in 2019. This initiative includes Türkiye's commitment to pursue a more effective and comprehensive foreign policy in Asia. Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced this policy for the first time during the 11th Ambassadors' Conference on 5 August [2019](#). As part of the "Re-Asia Initiative", strengthening Türkiye's relations with the Asia-Pacific region reflects a strategy in which the Central Asian Turkic states play an important role.

During the AK Party's rule, strengthening relations with Central Asian countries was seen not only as an alternative link to the West, but also as a necessity of a multidimensional foreign policy strategy. During this period, Turkey focussed on Asia in line with its goal of becoming a global player.

Bilateral relations

The complexity and diversity of relations between Türkiye and the Central Asian Turkic republics has been characterised by a variety of factors in bilateral relations, while they form a common perspective in multilateral platforms such as the Turkic Council. The perception of Türkiye by each country, the priorities of its foreign policy and the specific conditions have determined the character of bilateral relations. Therefore, it is not possible to take a holistic approach to Türkiye's Central Asia policy.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan occupies a special place in Türkiye's Central Asia policy. Kazakhstan has achieved political and economic stability and played an active role on the international stage, which has had a positive impact on its relations with Türkiye. Especially under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, relations between Türkiye and Kazakhstan have strengthened, military and economic cooperation has increased and strategic agreements have been signed. Türkiye- Kazakhstan plays an important role in the development of cultural and economic relations with the Turkish world. Finally, political changes in Kazakhstan and regional dynamics have given a new impetus to Türkiye-Kazakhstan relations, and factors such as military co-operation and Kazakhstan's support for Türkiye have contributed to the further deepening of relations.⁹

Kyrgyzstan

Relations between Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye have developed since 1991, but political instability and the change of power in Kyrgyzstan have had an impact on relations.

Important steps were taken in 2011, such as the visa waiver agreement and the establishment of a High-Level Strategic Cooperation [Council](#). Kyrgyzstan received Turkey's support on border issues and helped Türkiye in emergency situations. However, the strengthening of the [FETO](#) (Terrorist Organisation in Turkey) in Kyrgyzstan and its perception operations against Türkiye have affected [relations](#).

Uzbekistan

After the AK Party came to power in 2002, Türkiye's policy towards Uzbekistan, as well as towards other Central Asian countries, gained momentum. Since then, various steps have been taken to improve the deteriorating relations. Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Uzbekistan on 19 December 2003 made a positive contribution to improving relations. However, the "Andijan events" in May 2005 and Türkiye's criticism of the Uzbek government for human rights violations brought relations to the brink of a new crisis. During this crisis, President Karimov cancelled President Abdullah Guel's visit to Tashkent.¹⁰ Relations between Türkiye and Uzbekistan did not develop at the expected level under Islam Karimov, but President Shevket Mirziyoyev, who took office after Karimov's death, endeavoured to strengthen bilateral relations with other Central Asian countries, including Türkiye. Mirziyoyev endeavoured to create a special model of relations with Türkiye. High-level talks between the two countries began with President Erdoğan's visit to Uzbekistan in 2016, followed by Mirziyoyev's visit to Türkiye in [2017](#). As a result of these meetings, the establishment of a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council between Türkiye and Uzbekistan was agreed.

Turkmenistan

Türkiye was the first country to recognise Turkmenistan, and the special code "01" was assigned to Türkiye on diplomatic number plates to underline the importance Turkmenistan has for Türkiye. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were quickly established and high-level reciprocal visits took place. Although relations were seemingly interrupted with the death of Turgut Oezal, they took a more positive course with the beginning of the Erdoğan era, and mutual agreements and visits contributed to the normalisation of relations.¹¹

As a result, Türkiye's Turkistan policy has developed significantly, relations with the region have been strengthened and opportunities for co-operation in various fields have been created. Although the relations of each Central Asian country with Turkey are different, Türkiye's importance and efforts for the region have contributed to the development of relations.

Economic relations between Türkiye and Central Asia

The Central Asian Turkish republics, which gained their independence after the collapse of the USSR, received support from Türkiye during the economic

transformation process. During this period, when the economic system was changing, they developed trade and investment co-operation with Türkiye. Due to institutional shortcomings, these countries established emotional economic relations with Türkiye based on ethnic, cultural and religious similarities. While Western countries generally invested in countries with natural resources, they channelled their other trade through Türkiye. Moreover, they conducted most of their foreign trade with both the former Soviet countries and Türkiye. However, in later years, especially after 1995, these countries increased their trade with Western countries by creating the necessary institutional infrastructure. Although the emotion-based economic relations with Türkiye have decreased during this period, Türkiye is still an important trading partner for the economies of these countries. Despite Türkiye's economic cooperation potential with Central Asia, the share of Turkish exports to these countries in total exports was only 3.81% in 2021, while the share of imports remained at a low level of 1.48%. This situation shows that the existing potential has not yet been fully utilised.

Kazakhstan

Economic cooperation between Türkiye and Kazakhstan has developed rapidly in recent years. As of 2021, Türkiye ranks 13th in Kazakhstan's exports with a share of 2.8% and 4th in Kazakhstan's imports with a share of 2.8%. These data represent an important part of the trade between the two [countries](#). However, it is not only trade but also mutual investment that have laid the foundations for economic cooperation. Turkish entrepreneurs, especially those operating in Kazakhstan, are active in many different sectors, such as construction, trade, banking and finance, hotels, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, oil and food. The number of companies with Turkish capital in Kazakhstan is over 3,700, and one in ten foreign investors comes from [Türkiye](#).

Given the economic potential and opportunities for co-operation between the two countries, it is predicted that economic relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan will become even stronger in the future. This co-operation will not only contribute to economic development, but will also be an important example of regional stability and co-operation.

Kyrgyzstan

Economic relations between Türkiye and Kyrgyzstan have developed rapidly in recent years. According to the Turkish Ministry of Trade, Kyrgyzstan ranks 5th in terms of exports to Turkey in 2021 with a share of 5.5% and 4th in terms of imports with a share of 5.8%. Türkiye also plays an active role in investments in Kyrgyzstan. However, these investments are generally medium-sized and small investments and not strategic investments. The weakness of Kyrgyzstan's economic infrastructure and political instability prevent large-scale investment. While Türkiye imports agricultural products, raw leather, precious stones, gold and silver jewellery



and mineral fuels from Kyrgyzstan, it imports products such as light industrial products, chemicals, plastics, engineering products, agricultural raw materials, furniture and accessories from Kyrgyzstan. This cooperation contributes to the economic development of both countries and further strengthens [relations](#).

Uzbekistan

Trade relations between Türkiye and Uzbekistan have developed considerably in recent years. In 2021, Uzbekistan ranks third with an 11.7% share of Türkiye's exports and fifth with a 7% share of imports. These data show that economic relations between the two countries are gradually strengthening. Despite some problems in the past, the volume of trade between Türkiye and Uzbekistan has increased significantly. Uzbekistan is one of Türkiye's largest trading partners in Central Asia and these relations offer great opportunities for both sides. It is expected that trade between the two countries will continue to increase, which will contribute to a further strengthening of mutual economic [co-operation](#).

Turkmenistan

Although it is difficult to obtain detailed statistics on Turkmenistan's economy, it appears that economic relations between Turkey and Turkmenistan are growing and diversifying. Türkiye plays an important role in Turkmenistan's foreign trade, especially thanks to the large projects carried out by Turkish companies. Turkmenistan is the country where Turkish construction companies carry out the most projects in Central Asia, and Türkiye is the country that invests the most in Turkmenistan. Turkish construction companies have carried out numerous projects in Turkmenistan in the fields of housing, industry, culture and sports facilities and occupy a leading position in this sector. Data from the Turkish Ministry of Trade shows that Türkiye ranks first in imports from Turkmenistan with a share of 26% and second in exports with a share of 8% to China in 2021. These data show that economic relations between Turkey and Turkmenistan have significant and growing [potential](#).

Economic relations between Turkey and the Central Asian countries harbour considerable growth potential for both sides and will be further strengthened by the projects of Turkish contractors and the increase in trade volumes.

Cultural relations

Cultural relations between the Turkish communities have always been deeply rooted. However, the long-lasting Chinese and Russian occupation in Central Asia separated the Turkish tribes and communities from each other for a long time. The Turkish republics that gained independence after the collapse of the USSR emphasised the importance of cultural integration. In addition to political relations, cultural relations between Türkiye and the Turkish republics have steadily



increased and become institutionalised. Türkiye's efforts in this field have played a key role in creating this [dynamic](#).

Co-operation in the cultural field has been achieved through institutions established by the Turkish republics. Organisations such as [TURKSOY](#) (International Organisation of Turkish Culture), the Turkish Academy and the Turkish Foundation for Culture and Heritage have supported and developed these [relations](#). At the same time, Turkish institutions such as [TIKA](#) (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, the Maarif Foundation and the Yunus Emre Institute have taken on an important role by organising cultural activities.

Cultural relations between Türkiye and the Turkish republics are multifaceted. Co-operation, especially in the field of education, is an important part of these relations. Within the framework of projects such as the "Great Student Project" and "Türkiye Scholarships", students from the Turkish republics are offered educational opportunities. These students are encouraged to return to their home countries and serve there. In addition, the schools opened in Türkiye not only contribute to the education systems and economies of the countries concerned, but also to cultural integration. While the students receive a free education, the students at the university learn about the culture of their own country and interact culturally with each other.

Cultural co-operation between Türkiye and the Turkish republics initially began with bilateral agreements, but later developed into institutional activities. Various projects in the fields of science, culture and art contributed to the development of these relations. Organisations such as TURKSOY, the Turkish Academy and the Turkish Foundation for Culture and Cultural Heritage pioneered work in this field. In addition, cultural cooperation between Turkey and the Turkish republics is being further strengthened by new institutions such as the Organisation of Turkish States. Türkiye's bilateral relations with the individual Turkish republics are also supported by cultural activities. In this context, the schools opened by Türkiye and various activities contribute to the further deepening of cultural relations.

Opportunities and challenges

Türkiye's relations with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have gradually strengthened over time. These relations, which have existed since 1991, have accelerated in recent years and taken on a more institutionalised dimension. This period gained momentum as the global opportunities became clear. In particular, since 1992, the EU's Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor (TRACECA) project has attracted attention in the region. This project aims to revitalise the historic Silk Road. In contrast, the "One Belt, One Road" project announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 takes a different approach and clearly defines the routes. Both projects offer great opportunities for the Central Asian countries and Türkiye. These projects enable Central Asian countries to diversify their

economies and transport their goods/services to Europe. Türkiye plays an active role in these projects as it is located at the intersection of land transport routes connecting two continents.

There are some difficulties in ensuring the security of transport and energy routes in the Central Asian region. There are problems such as frozen conflicts, border disputes and unresolved issues in the region. More co-operation and diplomacy on international platforms is needed to solve these problems. The Turkic Council and other [organisations](#) of the Turkic-speaking world are likely to play a more active role in solving such problems.

Another important problem in the region is inadequate infrastructure. There are infrastructure problems in many Central Asian countries. Türkiye is trying to share its experience and knowledge with the countries of the region to solve these problems through organisations such as [TURKPA](#) (Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States) and TİKA. The projects implemented by TİKA, especially in the fields of agriculture and good governance, make a positive contribution to the development of the region. It is to be expected that such co-operation projects will be increasingly continued in the future.

Conclusion

It is a fact that the international structuring of Turkey's relations with the Central Asian countries is still in the process of development. This process has been organised within an institutional framework since the mid-2000s in order to further strengthen relations between the regional countries and Türkiye. These institutional structures are of great importance for deepening existing co-operation and assessing opportunities that may arise in the future. They also have the potential to inject new dynamism into the region's political and economic relations, which have so far centred on Russia and China.

The European Office of the Turkic Council, which operates primarily in Budapest, reflects the determination to ensure greater co-operation and interaction between the Turkic world and Europe. This office aims to contribute to the further strengthening of relations between the countries of the Turkic world and Europe. Institutions such as the Turkic Council can make a positive contribution to the development and stability of the region by better coordinating co-operation in the region, promoting the development of joint projects and facilitating the deepening of cultural relations.

Türkiye's relations with the Central Asian countries have more potential in the future. Projects, especially in the areas of transport and energy, will contribute to the economic development of the countries in the region and create new trade routes.

Türkiye's relations with the Central Asian countries are therefore of both historical and strategic importance. It is expected that these relations will continue to

strengthen in the future and contribute to the development and stability of the region. In this context, the maintenance of institutional structures and co-operation projects are important steps towards strengthening regional co-operation.

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