

# **TURKEY-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS: A STRATEGIC OVERVIEW**

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The opinions expressed in this report are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the Near East Institute.

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## **TURKEY-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS: A STRATEGIC OVERVIEW**

### **Abstract:**

This report provides an overview of Turkey's bilateral and multilateral relations with the Central Asian states following the introduction of the presidential system. The timing of the report is warranted by the major political changes that are taking place in the Central Asian states with two largest of them changing political leadership. Turkey's relations are also playing into a larger geopolitical context, where Russia and China are cooperating over the scope and scale of regional integration. The report offers important insights for academic and policy audience who are looking to understand regional and country-specific context.

Keywords: Turkey, Central Asia, Bilateral Relations, Multilateral Relations

### **Özet:**

Bu rapor, Türkiye ile Orta Asya ülkeleri arasındaki iki taraflı ve bölgesel ilişkilere genel bir bakış sunmaktadır. Gerek Orta Asya ülkelerinde son dönemlerde yaşanan çeşitli siyasi değişimler, gerekse Rusya ve Çin gibi küresel güçlerin bölge üzerinde kurguladıkları entegrasyon süreçlerini hayata geçirmeleri, Orta Asya'ya tarihi ve kültürel anlamda özel bir önem atfeden Türkiye için bölgenin önemini arttırmıştır. Rapor, Türkiye için ekonomik, kültürel ve siyasi alanda fırsatlar sunan bir bölge olarak değerlendirilen Orta Asya ekseninde yaşanan dış politika tartışmalarına katkı sunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Orta Asya, İkili İlişkiler, Çoklu İlişkiler

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## TURKEY-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS: A STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, Turkey has engaged with Central Asia through small and medium size enterprises, which were mostly managed by businessmen from inner Anatolia who ventured into untapped new markets, exporting food, consumer goods and services.<sup>1</sup> *Ülker* became a household name after its products made an appearance on the supermarket shelves, and doner kebab became a staple food for many young people.

With the introduction of the presidential system in Turkey and a more aspirational regional foreign policy, Turkey became more present in Central Asia bringing a much more focused effort on expanding bilateral relations with the countries in the region. This also coincided with the growing expansion of China and Russian cooperation in the Chinese-led New Silk Road project that fell neatly into a larger “Belt and Road Initiative”. Such geopolitical developments have opened up room for active inclusion on the part of Ankara and participation with stronger economic presence.

Another reason for more active involvement stems from the fact that Central Asia, Kazakhstan in particular, offered Turkey, Russia and Iran an alternative avenue to broker peace in Syria. Astana Process of post-conflict reconstruction brought more actors to the negotiation table than the UN or EU-led efforts. So for Turkey, Central Asia offered an avenue to reflect its geopolitical priorities and pursue strategic goals in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East.

This report will provide an overview of how Turkish involvement has changed from a cultural exchange symbolized by the “doner kebab” to a high profile regional diplomacy backed by sharing of technology, expertise and skills with its regional counterparts.

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<sup>1</sup> Stratfor, “Turkey’s Growing Involvement in Central Asia”, 2012, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/turkeys-growing-involvement-central-asia> (Accessed on 8 December 2019).

## CENTRAL ASIA AND TURKEY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

We can divide Turkey-Central Asian relations into three major periods after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet Union, the bond had been severed since Turkey and Central Asia belonged to different ideological camps: Turkey embraced capitalism whereas Central Asian states belonged to the Soviet Union. However, in 1991 these five states found themselves independent and began to formulate their own foreign policy. Turkish government was the first state to officially recognize their independence paving the way for cooperation and the restoration of the historical, linguistic and cultural bonds with the five newly-independent states. The first period was largely driven by strong desire of Turkish government to restore these ties with their former 'brothers'. Ankara narrative was based on 'Turkic Unity' and pan-Turkic identity claiming the right to assist the former Soviet states in their transition towards market economy and democracy. With the prospects of EU membership lingering in the background and strong US support, Turkey felt confident in its ability to bring Central Asian states to the same level of development. However, as Turkish businessmen flocked into Central Asia they found a relatively cold reception among the local governments and population who resisted to be treated as a 'younger brother' and take advice from the 'know-it-all' 'older sibling'. As a result, the first period ended around the year 2000 with Central Asian states practicing independent foreign policies, rather than adhering to a common trajectory with Turkey on the basis of a pan-Turkic identity.

The second period began around the year 2000 and revealed a more pragmatic approach of the Turkish government towards their Turkic brothers. Instead of large regional forums, Turkey preferred to work through bilateral relations and invest in certain economic niches of the Central Asian states. In doing so, Turkey began competing with Russian interests.

In the third period, after the rapprochement with Russia in 2016 and much stronger involvement of Turkey in the Middle East prompted by the ongoing conflict in Syria and other security-related concerns, Turkey began to cooperate with Central Asian states within a much larger, regional framework of Russia-China cooperation. Although Turkish government does not advertise its involvement, it nonetheless became a 'silent, but salient' partner.

The following section provides an overview of each period before discussing in detail the dynamics of bilateral cooperation. The concluding

part highlights a number of priority areas for the future of Turkey – Central Asia relations.

### ***The Turkic Unity***

The collapse of the Soviet Union created an invigorating opening for Turkey to reconnect with the Central Asian states, which had been conceived in the national imaginary as “brothers”. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan came to the focus of Turkish foreign policy after years of Soviet rule which paid inadequate attention to the authenticity of ethnic cultures, thus preventing the possibility for independence together with a colonial economic structure with very little capacity to produce consumer goods. In this context, the Turkish government embraced the role of the reformer; It wanted to introduce its model of secular, capitalist and democratic state and act as an example to be followed for the other countries in the region.

Indeed, 70 years of Soviet rule divided the Turkic nations into three separate entities. Muslim minorities in China retained their language, but kept the Arabic script. Central Asian countries went through two linguistic reforms; one in 1924 that transformed Arabic script into Latin and then in 1936, which shifted the written expression into Cyrillic. As a result, Central Asian countries were ‘cut off’ from Turkic communities in Turkey, which relied on Latin script as its primary mode of expression. Besides that, Soviet Union imposed a Soviet identity and treated ethnic traditions and customs as a sign of underdevelopment that had to be eradicated. Ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks had to speak Russian language, preach the Soviet ideology and hide their true beliefs if they wanted to have any career prospects in the state-controlled institutions. Since there were no private or non-state entities, minorities in the Soviet Union had to comply with the Soviet principles in order to survive. Only banal expressions of culture were allowed. Each ethnic group was able to showcase its ethnic dances and songs, disseminate fairy tales, dress in ethnic clothes and speak the local language in the private realm in addition to Russian. Three regions were no longer capable of forging cultural ties, since they had to rely on interpreters and intermediaries to communicate with each other.

In addition, the Soviet experience created monocultural economies, with each Central Asian state providing raw materials to processing centers, mostly located in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Uzbekistan supplied over

90% of the cotton needs to the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan grew wheat and provided ferrous and non-ferrous metals. Tajikistan was the source of aluminum, fruits and vegetables for the rest of the Soviet republics. Turkmenistan delivered natural gas to Russian industrial enterprises. Kyrgyzstan supplied gold and meat and was heavily involved in supporting agriculture in Uzbekistan by regulating its water supplies and sharing energy from hydropower with the Central Asian neighbors. Most of the consumer goods were produced in the 'European part of the Soviet Union' (Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) and the economic production of agricultural goods and raw materials was characterized by large enterprises that were monopolistic and inefficient. These enterprises which employed the majority of the population reflected the Soviet industrialization strategy, which assumed that the Soviet Union must build the means of production (machines to produce goods) for the workers and the Communist Party to decide what can be produced by them. Consumer goods were not at the heart of the industrialization but an outcome of the planning process. The



needs of the individuals were agglomerated by the State Planning Committee (*GosPlan*) and these goods were then sold in the local markets. Choice was scant and selection was limited. As a result of such planning, lives of the Soviet citizens were similar, prompting jokes and comedies of how people walked into someone else's apartments without

realizing that it's not their own.

Turkey aimed to correct these evils. It offered both a celebration and a revival of cultural ties and economic supply of the much-needed consumer goods. Central Asia became familiar with the *Ülker* products, Turkish textiles, and other household items. Most of such trade happened through local shuttle-traders, people who traveled to Turkey to buy goods in bulk to then sell in the markets back home. Turkish goods were considered to be of a higher quality than Chinese goods and were cherished by the local population. However, in the first period (pre-2000), trade did not reach the potential and remained relatively low since governments were not involved in promoting strong economic bilateral cooperation.



In order to facilitate its growing engagement and exchange with the Turkey established three mechanisms of cooperation. Firstly, in 1992, it created the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı*, TİKA) to facilitate nation-building processes in the region. In the following years, it also urged the Central Asian states to join the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which was founded by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey in 1985 to promote trade and investment opportunities. The last mechanism, International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) was established in 1993 to ensure protection of cultural heritage. Culture has also been on the agenda of the Summits of Turkic Speaking Countries' Heads of States, which met regularly since 1992. Curiously, although official language of this organization is Turkish, Russian language remains the lingua franca in those summits.

TURKSOY was established by Azerbaijan and four Central Asian states with the exception of Kyrgyzstan in 1993. Over 25 years several other Turkic-speaking entities also gained an observer status in this organization, among them are Gagausia (Moldova), Turkic republics within the Russian Federation, and Northern Cyprus. Described as the 'UNESCO of the Turkic World', the organization is managed by a Secretary-General who executes the decisions of the Permanent Council consisting of the Ministers of Culture from the respective states. TURKSOY provides an important platform for cultural and academic exchange and has its own TV and radio.

A substantial list of events has been organized by TURKSOY in different locations since 1997. Each year over 300 artists from over 20 countries come together to contribute to the TURKSOY painting collection, which traveled to nearly 100 cities in and outside of the Turkic world.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the 'UNESCO of the Turkic World' has organized Opera Days, Photography and Sculptor Gatherings. They also supported academic exchange between literary journals, historians and specialists in cultural heritage. In addition, Turksoy has also held several competitions, including the ones on short

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<sup>2</sup> Center for Eurasian Studies, "Speech by Ambassador Alev Kilic, Director of Center for Eurasian Studies", Turkic Council and Cooperation in Eurasia in the Light of Developments across the Region, AVİM: Ankara, 2015, p. 20 [http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon\\_24Feb\\_Eng2.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon_24Feb_Eng2.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

stories. All of these efforts were compounded by the translations of over 100 titles into Turkic languages that were distributed among the Turkic world. During the 1990s, members of the Turksoy conducted prestigious ceremonies to celebrate the revival of cultural ties, public concerts, and limited academic exchange.



Another mechanism largely proposed by Turkey was the enlargement of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Founded with a mission of promoting sustainable economic development, the ECO immediately accepted the five Central Asian states and Afghanistan to be its full members on par with Iran, Turkey and Pakistan. In the context of ECO, there are eight important areas of cooperation: trade, transport, energy, tourism, economic growth, social welfare, partnerships, and capacity building. Similar to the working of the European Union (EU), ECO Heads of State decide on the strategic direction in each category and the Council of Ministers then works out strategic plans with Regional Planning Council responsible for Action Plans and the Council of Permanent Representatives working on the implementation process together with various expert groups, committees and working groups. It is important to note that although all Central Asian states were interested in economic development after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this organization had limited significance since its major value was in representing ECO members as a unified voice in international bodies, such as the United Nations (UN).

The last instrument that was spearheaded by the Turkish government in the first period was the TIKA. It played the role of a development organization and operated under the auspices of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Before 1995, TIKA's primary area of engagement was Central Asia. Turkey wanted to literally introduce its own model of political economy in the Central Asian states: 'TIKA's aims in those years [before 1995] are the procreation of the own social structure of the Turkic Republics, their construction of an identity in a sustainable way, and the remedy of deficiencies of their technical infrastructures'<sup>3</sup>. Although Turkey became involved in education,

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<sup>3</sup> TIKA, "About Us", 2018, [https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/page/about\\_us-14650](https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/page/about_us-14650) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

tourism and health, local population displayed strong reservations on the basis of a growing sense of distinct national identity.

### ***Formalization of Cooperation***

The second period began in the early 2000s when the Central Asian states themselves started to propose and engage in various formal structures to forge Turkic unity without the leading role of Turkey.

In 2008 the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries (*TurkPa*) was initiated by Kazakhstan's first president Nursultan Nazarbayev who wanted to formalize cooperation between states and share legal norms to assist each other in transitioning to a market economy and democracy.<sup>4</sup> Azerbaijan offered to host this community, which in the same year acquired the status of an International Organization (IO). In the first session of TurkPa, the Chairman-in-Office and the Speaker of the Parliament of Azerbaijan stressed not only the importance of harmonization of legal principles to reflect common cultural affinity, but also the importance of large-scale economic cooperation to give an opportunity for regional cooperation that creates an interdependent and mutually supporting economic union<sup>5</sup>. TurkPa minimized the risks of international pipelines that ran across the Caucasus linking Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkey. It also allowed these countries to stand together against separatist challenges and gain political support in international forums.

In 2009, Turkic states created an even more formal organization, the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (or *Türk Keneşi*). The Turkic Council is a regional association whose goal is to strengthen the unity of the Turkic peoples. Members of the organization are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Turkey. The formation of the Council was

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<sup>4</sup> Center for Eurasian Studies, "Speech by Ambassador Halil Akinci, First Secretary General of the Turkic Council", *Turkic Council and Cooperation in Eurasia in the Light of Developments across the Region*, AVIM: Ankara, 2015, p. 26 and 7, [http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon\\_24Feb\\_Eng2.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon_24Feb_Eng2.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>5</sup> TurkPa, "Speech of Mr. Ogtay Asadov, Chairman-in-Office of the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries (TURKPA), Speaker of Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan", [https://turkpa.org/en/content/events/plenary\\_ses/i\\_plenary\\_ses/300\\_speech\\_of\\_mr\\_ogtay\\_asadov\\_chairmaninoffice\\_of\\_the\\_parliamentary\\_assembly\\_of\\_turkicspeaking\\_countries\\_turkpa\\_speaker\\_of\\_milli\\_majlis\\_of\\_the\\_republic\\_of\\_azerbaijan](https://turkpa.org/en/content/events/plenary_ses/i_plenary_ses/300_speech_of_mr_ogtay_asadov_chairmaninoffice_of_the_parliamentary_assembly_of_turkicspeaking_countries_turkpa_speaker_of_milli_majlis_of_the_republic_of_azerbaijan) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

agreed to at the Summit of the Heads of Turkic Speaking States in Nakhchivan in 2009<sup>6</sup>. Established in Azerbaijan, this organization aims to bring together Heads of States to resolve problems and set the vision. The



first summit was hosted by Kazakhstan in Almaty in 2011 where four presidents of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey met together under a specific theme, the economy. Each of the following summits were

again thematically organized prompting leaders to forge cooperation in education (2012), culture and science (2013), transportation and connectivity (2014), tourism, information and media (2015), youth and national sports (2018), respectively. The formal goal of the Turkic Council is to revive the historic ties and weave them onto the modern Silk Road. Each of the headings reflected these attempts.

In the short time of the Turkic Council's existence several initiatives were realized, including the initiation of the First World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan, the launch of the *Turkic Universiade*, and the founding of both the Turkic Academy in Astana and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation in Baku.<sup>7</sup> In the economic sphere: Joint Turkic Investment Fund, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines were completed.<sup>8</sup> Heads of States also aimed to bring private sector into

<sup>6</sup> Center for Eurasian Studies, "Speech by Ambassador Ali Kemal Aydın, Deputy Undersecretary of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey", Turkic Council and Cooperation in Eurasia in the Light of Developments across the Region, AVIM: Ankara, 2015, p. 11, [http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon\\_24Feb\\_Eng2.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon_24Feb_Eng2.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Center for Eurasian Studies, "Speech by Ambassador Ramil Hasanov, Secretary General of the Turkic Council", Turkic Council and Cooperation in Eurasia in the Light of Developments across the Region, AVIM: Ankara, 2015, p. 9, [http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon\\_24Feb\\_Eng2.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon_24Feb_Eng2.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020)

<sup>8</sup> Center for Eurasian Studies, "Speech by Ambassador Ali Kemal Aydın, Deputy Undersecretary of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey", Turkic Council and Cooperation in Eurasia in the Light of Developments across the Region, AVIM:

cooperation and even requested to design a tour package across the Silk Road to facilitate cooperation.

Such strong cooperation was the result of the competing regional initiatives undertaken by other regional players, which fostered Turkic states to look for authentic models. Particularly, the United States were pushing for a “New Silk Road” attempting to integrate the region with the Middle East, especially Afghanistan. After Hillary Clinton presented her vision in 2011, the US moved Central Asia to the Central Command to emphasize their regional vision and began to heavily sponsor programs and initiatives that would facilitate economic, cultural and social integration. The plan had four major areas: regional energy markets, trade and transport, customs and border operations, businesses and people-to-people exchanges.<sup>9</sup> The first initiative, regional energy markets, mostly involved linking electric grids between the Central Asian states, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US also aimed to facilitate trade relations by creating ‘hardware’, i.e. the roads and infrastructure, as well as software, such as agreements between states to ensure fluid exchange of goods, services and the people through the borders. Previously, customs and borders were heavily controlled against drug trafficking and the amount of trade between Central Asian states and Afghanistan was minimal. As a result, the third initiative aimed to increase the amount of trade even at the expense of drug trafficking in the region with the assumption that interdependence will slowly decrease the profitability of the illicit trade. Lastly, to ensure cooperation between businesses and people in the region, the US sponsored a set of business forums, exchange programs and university scholarships for Afghan entrepreneurs and students to take advantage of the opportunities abroad. For many experts however, the series of initiatives in the New Silk Road were pale in comparison with the amount of \$40 billion that China brought to the region.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the disparate and incongruent attempts to delink the region from the Russian sphere of influence was seen as idealist, if not naïve.

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Ankara, 2015, p. 13, [http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon\\_24Feb\\_Eng2.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Turkkon_24Feb_Eng2.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>9</sup> US Department of State, ‘US Support for the New Silk Road’, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/index.htm> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Delaney, “Lessons for China in failed US Silk Road Initiative”, *South China Morning Post*, 8 May, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2092218/lessons-china-failed-us-silk-road-initiative> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

China also presented its version of the New Silk Road under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its global design and strong financial backing enabled China to rival any alternative initiatives. The BRI aims to integrate the Asia-Pacific with Europe through maritime routes (the Belt) and ground transportation (the Road), which includes the construction of roads, railways, pipelines and air traffic. In order to implement it, China offered various payment schemes, investment opportunities, and loans to Central Asian governments without conditionality attached to the agreements. Driven by the 'win-win' cooperation and equipped with the promise of the full respect of sovereignty principle, China became an alternative investor in the region in ideational terms. In practice too, China was a convenient source of funding for the region, because:

1. It created projects with turn-key nature, i.e. Chinese companies that would be engaged in implementing a project would bring all the materials, workers and resources from China and deliver the result in the shortest amount of time. Central Asian governments were then presented with the outcomes and invited to use them.
2. If and when Central Asian states could not invest the same amount of money into the projects, China would offer flexible payment schemes, including loans-for-oil payments, where the Central Asian states would simply pay back the loan with their natural resources in exchange for China building a pipeline. Alternatively, China would provide the funding that would come with additional perks of social infrastructure, i.e. a new hospital or a new school in the area where it is heavily involved in.
3. Lastly, Chinese agricultural companies that are present in the region would share technical expertise and recruit local farmers into growing foods that would be in demand in China, leading to a significant increase in income levels among the local populations.

While the heavy involvement of Chinese companies in the region had positive impact on energy security and diversification of export routes for Central Asian resources, it also caused strong backlash among the population who saw China as a country encroaching on their sovereignty. Several protests were organized across the region, some of which turned violent (Zhanaozen protests in 2011 in Kazakhstan with eight people shot

by the police), some of which were peaceful (10,000 students signing a petition against the Chinese companies operating in Kazakhstan), and others which were very tense and brought a country on the verge of internal conflict (such as in Tajikistan when China asked for territory when the loan was not paid). The Central Asian governments were aware of the domestic challenges and had to tread carefully between Chinese presence and popular attitudes prompting them to look for alternative cooperation mechanisms.

Lastly, Russia also had its own proposal for the Silk Road, which mainly revolved around security mechanisms and economic cooperation to preserve its influence in the region. Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), initially spearheaded by Kazakhstani President Nazarbayev, was taken by President Putin who began to introduce agreements that would formalize economic relations between Russia and the Central Asian states into a common market. While not all Central Asian countries supported the idea, Russia was nonetheless able to form a block with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Belarus. Each of these states formally joined the Union, although Russia no longer remains the key trading partner for Central Asian states. Russia also revived military cooperation under the auspices of other regional organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Commonwealth of Independent States. In this context, Russia upgrades military installations and links them to its national system not only as a deterrence but also to ensure compliance of Central Asian leaders with its strategic goals.<sup>11</sup> So whilst it continues to suffer from the lack of strong financial backing, Russian Silk Road project is nonetheless based on strong political leverage over the elites and on security provisions.

With these conflictual proposals in mind, it seemed imperative for Central Asian states to remain independent and equidistant from every external proposal. Cooperation with Turkey and other Turkic nations allowed Central Asian governments to diversify their political autonomy and ensure a relative balance between foreign visions over the future of the region.

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<sup>11</sup> Dmitry Stefanovich, "Russia's Military Cooperation Goals in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, 31 January 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/russias-military-cooperation-goals-in-central-asia/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

## CENTRAL ASIA AND TURKEY: MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

In the present era, domestic imperatives shifted foreign policy priorities for Turkey. Geopolitical considerations, which brought Turkey-Russian rapprochement and its stronger involvement in the Middle East, including conflicts in Syria and Iraq, made Turkey an important actor behind several international initiatives, which inadvertently reflected in its regional policies in Central Asia.

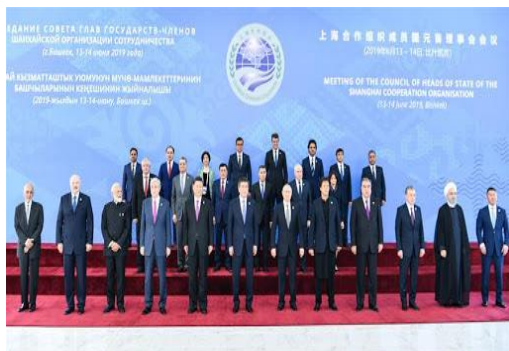
First, Turkish-Russian-Iranian common stance in the conflict in Syria allowed Kazakhstan to serve as a platform for post-conflict reconstruction. Astana Process, a set of negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition began in January 2017, which ran in parallel with the US and the UN-supported talks. Strong involvement of three key external parties brought more stakeholders to the table in Astana and ultimately made these talks more effective. The parties agreed to form a Constitutional Committee, which would work out a founding document after the conflict is over. The talks also brought to the table all the neighbors of Syria, except Israel, as full members or observers further reflecting the prestige of the platform. With the US withdrawal from the Middle East announced by President Trump by December 2018, more countries began to see three regional players as the only possible guarantors to the post-conflict reconstruction in Syria. In the 13<sup>th</sup> meeting held in August 2019, Kazakh diplomats hosted major stakeholders, including representatives from the United Nations to follow up on the agreements reached in April 2019 during the 12<sup>th</sup> round of negotiations. Constitutional Council remained on paper although parties agreed to form it during the Syrian National Dialogue Council in Sochi in January 2019. US withdrawal from the conflict in Syria was also high on the agenda, since issues related to the future of the de-escalation zones (particularly Idlib, Northern Homs province, Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, and Deraa and Quneitra provinces) and territories controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which mostly consists of the Kurdish terrorist group, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and greatly aggravates Turkish security in the region. Russia, which supports Syrian regime also wanted the SDF to join the Assad's forces and become part of the government army. So it was imperative for Turkey to negotiate with the United States and coordinate US withdrawal in line with Turkish interests. As a result, Turkey began to actively engage in military operations to ensure that the SDF does not pose any threat to Turkish national security, both



domestically and abroad. The move was also sanctioned by the fact that another rebel group, *Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham* unilaterally occupied Idlib in violation of the agreements between Russia and Turkey, in which Turkey guaranteed safety in that de-escalation zone. So the Astana Process allowed all three parties to meet regularly and negotiate ongoing disagreements. In addition, from the beginning, the Astana Process was not conceived in opposition to Geneva talks spearheaded by the UN and the US, but as a complementary mechanism (at least in the mind of Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs). This position attracted UN officials and the overall support of other parties. As a result, Astana Process today remains the only international and the most inclusive mechanism of post-conflict resolution in Syria.

### **Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

Economically, the Central Asian states and Turkey also cooperate under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and continue to formalize international economic cooperation in other bodies. Turkey received the status of the Dialogue Partner in the organization in 2012 (but



the official ratification of the status had been completed in 2017). As a dialogue partner, Turkey can be more active in areas related to control of international crime, terrorism, as well as economic and cultural connections. However, with the stalling of the EU

accession process and Turkey's transition to a Presidential Republic, President Erdoğan made his aspirations to become a full member in the SCO more vocal. In 2017 as India and Pakistan joined the organization, Turkey announced that the center of gravity in the world is shifting to Asia, prompting European analysts to question the future of NATO if one of its members joins both organizations<sup>12</sup>. President Erdogan's statement

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<sup>12</sup> Jan Gaspers, "Turkey's SCO Ambition Challenge EU and United States", The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 14 July 2017,

prompted a reversal in the Chinese position, which at the beginning did not openly support Turkish membership in the organization, but with more vocal support of Chinese position, Chinese government openly declared full support of Turkey becoming a member of the SCO.

Turkey and the Central Asian states (except for Turkmenistan) are also members of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), which is a global alternative to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and operates under the major control of China. With 75 full members and 25 pending, AIIB has become a formidable source of investments in the wider region. In its short lifetime, it has sponsored 53 projects worth USD10 billion. Turkey also benefitted from membership, which allowed it to improve energy security. For example, the project that expanded the gas storage capacity near Lake *Tuz (Tuz Gölü)* allowed Turkey to deliver natural gas from 14 million to 18 million consumers.<sup>13</sup> Another project aims to improve energy sustainability by targeting transition to renewable energy within the country and utilize geothermal energy in Aydın province.<sup>14</sup> AIIB acts as a source of financing allowing local private companies to benefit from loans and develop facilities and infrastructure in line with the project requirements. By the end of January 2019, AIIB invested USD1.4 billion in the Turkish economy in addition to the investments it made in Azerbaijan, which will allow the two countries to link their gas infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> Alternative sources of energy alleviate Turkish dependence on Russia and the Middle East as well as allowing the country to transition to cleaner energy sources. Among other Central Asian states, only Tajikistan managed to benefit from AIIB cooperation, which sponsored road repair works at Tajik-Uzbek border facilitating trade and the movement of goods, people, and services between

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<http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2017/07/14/turkeys-sco-ambitions-challenge-eu-and-united-states> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, "Turkey: Gas Storage Expansion Project", *Project Implementation Report (#3)*, [https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/\\_download/2018/turkey\\_gas-storage.pdf](https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/_download/2018/turkey_gas-storage.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, "Project Summary Information", [https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/2019/\\_download/turkey/turkey-effeler-July-17-2019.pdf](https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/2019/_download/turkey/turkey-effeler-July-17-2019.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>15</sup> "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank Approves \$600 mln Loan for Azerbaijan-Turkey Gas Pipeline", *Hürriyet*, 22 December 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/asian-infrastructure-investment-bank-approves-600-mln-loan-for-azerbaijan-turkey-gas-pipeline-107613> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

the two states. It also allowed Tajikistan to rehabilitate *Nurek* hydropower plant, strategic infrastructure, which was the point of contention between the Central Asian neighbors. AIIB ensured safety of the dam that supplies electricity and water not only to Uzbekistan, but also to Afghanistan and remains bears a regional importance. These investment decisions facilitated the growing dominance of China and its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (see above). But both Turkey and the Central Asian states benefit from the improved transport corridors, particularly the Middle Corridor, which links Central Asia with Turkey — shortening travel time by 15 days.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, stronger economic ties between Turkey and China can improve economic relations between Turkey and the Central Asian states. Currently, the region takes just 1.5% of foreign investments of Turkey.<sup>17</sup> Coupled with the fact that TIKA, the Turkish aid agency also re-routed its work towards the Middle East and Africa, financial presence of Turkey remains relatively minimal. According to official statistics from Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkish trade volume with the region was nearly 6 billion USD in 2018 and the total investments of Turkish companies in the region reached 15 billion USD.<sup>18</sup> The Ministry also continued to report that: “the total value of projects realized by Turkish contracting companies in the region has exceeded 86 billion USD. Nearly 4 thousand Turkish companies have been operating on the ground.”<sup>19</sup> However, with most investments concentrated in the construction industry, the overall share of Central Asia in Turkish trade and investments has been minimal. In order to boost ties, Turkic states created a Turkic Chamber of Commerce and Industry in August 2019 and began to promote bilateral cooperation over multilateral fora.

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<sup>16</sup> Seçkin Köstem, “The Power of the Quiet? Turkey’s Central Asia Strategy”, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 3 October 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/power-quiet-turkeys-central-asia-strategy-24069> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, ‘Turkey’s Relations With Central Asian Republics,’ [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, ‘Turkey’s Relations With Central Asian Republics,’ [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

## BILATERAL COOPERATION

Bilateral cooperation allows Turkey to become more prominent in the particular economic sectors, as well address specific security concerns. Bilateral cooperation is mainly administered through the High Level Strategic Cooperation Councils and Strategic Partnership Agreements, which Turkey signed with all Central Asian states, except for Turkmenistan, which officially takes the position of neutrality.

### *Kazakhstan*

Kazakhstan hosts the second largest diaspora of Turkish citizens after Germany. Although it does not seem evident when one walks the streets of large cities, most of Turkish citizens are employed in construction, food, and service industries. However, the large number of Turkish sores, ethnic cafes and bakeries, as well as Turkish-run hair salons show that Kazakhstan does host a large population of Turks in the country.

Kazakhstan and Turkey established Strategic Partnership in 2009 and formed High Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2012. The highlight of the first meeting was an adoption of the “New Synergy Joint Economic Program” that covered three years of cooperation from 2012-2015. In total, the program held 14 investment projects worth USD1.5billion.<sup>20</sup> As a result, two countries managed to link their railway networks from Zhezkazgan-Beyneu to Akhalkalaki (Georgia) - Kars (Turkey).<sup>21</sup> In the second meeting of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council, two countries brought together 400 participants in the bilateral business forum and inked 19 projects worth USD800 million. The protocol on the “Implementation of the New Synergy Program” was also adopted to boost bilateral trade to USD10

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<sup>20</sup> Lidiya Parkhomchik, Hayal Simsek, Zhuldyz Kanapiyanova, Meiramgul Issayeva, “A Brief Look on the New Synergy Joint Economic Program after Second Meeting of High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council,” Weekly E-Bulletin No. 17, Eurasian Research Institute, [http://www.ayu.edu.tr/static/aae\\_haftalik/aae\\_bulten\\_en\\_17.pdf](http://www.ayu.edu.tr/static/aae_haftalik/aae_bulten_en_17.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Lidiya Parkhomchik, Hayal Simsek, Zhuldyz Kanapiyanova, Meiramgul Issayeva, “A Brief Look on the New Synergy Joint Economic Program after Second Meeting of High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council,” Weekly E-Bulletin No. 17, Eurasian Research Institute, [http://www.ayu.edu.tr/static/aae\\_haftalik/aae\\_bulten\\_en\\_17.pdf](http://www.ayu.edu.tr/static/aae_haftalik/aae_bulten_en_17.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

billion per year.<sup>22</sup> In order to diversify economic cooperation, the two countries adopted a second New Synergy-Joint Economic Program, and the 2017-2020 Action Plan Protocol at the 10th Turkey-Kazakhstan Intergovernmental Joint Economic Commission Meeting in 2017. Government of Kazakhstan is interested in receiving investments and expertise in strategic sectors outlined in its state programs. New Synergy project continued to work with large holdings from Turkey and included 26 projects in the areas of textile, agriculture, tourism and food.

In the most recent Kazakh-Turkish Business Forum held in Ankara in



November 2019, more than 400 Turkish companies and over 100 Kazakhstani businesses signed 18 agreements worth USD1.5 billion.<sup>23</sup> Although bilateral trade have never reached USD10 billion, both countries continue to create opportunities to boost trade by bringing together business people and providing them with favorable conditions under the “New Synergy” projects. The most recent “New Synergy” program

was extended to 2018-2020 and was adopted during President Nazarbayev’s visit to Turkey, where Nazarbayev personally congratulated President Erdogan with the introduction of the new presidential system of government. The program is supported by an Action Plan that consists of

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<sup>22</sup> Lidiya Parkhomchik, Hayal Simsek, Zhuldyz Kanapiyanova, Meiramgul Issayeva, “A Brief Look on the New Synergy Joint Economic Program after Second Meeting of High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council,” Weekly E-Bulletin No. 17, Eurasian Research Institute, [http://www.ayu.edu.tr/static/aae\\_haftalik/aae\\_bulten\\_en\\_17.pdf](http://www.ayu.edu.tr/static/aae_haftalik/aae_bulten_en_17.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Rasana Gasimova, ‘Turkey among Kazakhstan’s Key Strategic Partners’, *AzerNews*, 14 November 2019, <https://www.azernews.az/region/158402.html> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

65 specific points of cooperation in the areas of trade and investment, industry, transport, education, healthcare and tourism.<sup>24</sup>

The majority of cooperation takes place in the economic sphere. Turkish companies are represented by big holdings in Kazakhstan occupying an important niche in the construction sector. According to official statistics, there are nearly 2000 Turkish companies working in Kazakhstan, among which 31 of them are large, 53 are medium and 1,855 are small.<sup>25</sup> These companies have brought over USD25billion of investments in nearly 500 highly prestigious projects, such as “airports, energy and copper facilities, roads, bridges, expo fair construction and an artificial island”.<sup>26</sup> Kazakhstan supplies Turkey with raw materials, including but not limited to grain, oil and natural gas, and metals in return for Turkish consumer goods and construction materials.

Overall, the two countries have concluded more than 80 bilateral agreements. High level of cooperation is also reflected in the number of visits. President Nazarbayev visited Turkey in 2007, 2009, 2012, and 2016, whereas his Turkish counterparts came to Kazakhstan in 2010, 2012, 2015, and 2017.<sup>27</sup> Although most of the visits were held during multilateral fora and included bilateral meetings, it still signifies a relatively strong level of cooperation and involvement.

Bilateral cultural cooperation is also happening in other spheres. In 2017 Kazakhstan hosted the international exposition EXPO-2017, where Turkey organized the ‘National Day of Turkey’. In addition, Turkish embassies in Latin America and Africa provide visa services to citizens of countries where Kazakhstan does not have any representation.

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<sup>24</sup> Rasana Gasimova, ‘Turkey among Kazakhstan’s Key Strategic Partners’, AzerNews, 14 November 2019, <https://www.azernews.az/region/158402.html> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “Turkey’s Cooperation with Kazakhstan to Broaden after New Set of Deals”, *Daily Sabah*, 14 September 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/2018/09/14/turkeys-cooperation-with-kazakhstan-to-broaden-after-new-set-of-deals> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Anna Gussarova and Maris Andzans, “Political and Security Relations: Mapping Central Asia’s Relations with Other Asian States”, *Policy Paper No. 2*, SEnECA Program, [https://www.seneca-eu.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SEnECA\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_02\\_2018.pdf](https://www.seneca-eu.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SEnECA_Policy_Paper_02_2018.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020).

Despite relatively strong formal intergovernmental cooperation, there are problems in joint cooperation. Specifically, Turkish companies have been implicated in corruption and its labor in the construction industry has antagonized local population, which in the past led to the sparks of localized violence. Kazakhstan continues to host the second largest diaspora of Turkish citizens after Germany and such perceptions merit attention. It is also important that cooperation is extended beyond the official government contacts to include business-to-business partnerships for a more viable approach in terms of economic synergy.

### *Uzbekistan*

Before 2016 Uzbek-Turkish relations were relatively inactive due to the political stance adopted by the then President Islam Karimov. Karimov did not want to join any organizations, forums or agreements that would and could bind his freedom to make sovereign decisions. Karimov's regime rejected fast transition to market economy and was transforming Uzbekistan based on the evolutionary model with strong state control in major areas of public life, including the economic sector. With large percentage of population involved in agriculture, Karimov tried to maintain the agricultural profile of the country, while financing the local production of foreign machinery and restricting international trade and competition. Such import-substitution model, price-controls and restrictions on foreign exchange allowed the regime to keep relative economic stability, but prevented the population from acquiring wealth through trade and entrepreneurship. Karimov's Uzbekistan was largely a closed country with strong state intervention and control. Foreign policy also reflected the domestic stance and prevented Karimov from integrating into supra- and trans-national organizations. Instead, Karimov preferred to develop bilateral relations for specific projects, such as strong cooperation with the United States against terrorist networks in Afghanistan, or hosting Korean and American car industries to develop domestic capabilities. External investments were scarce and limited.

High level of suspicion towards Turkey were also warranted by the fact that Turkey hosted the strongest opposition figure, Muhammad Salih and refused to extradite him in 1993 fearing unfair trial. As a result, Karimov rolled back educational exchange and 1400 students came home from

Turkish universities.<sup>28</sup> The regime also expropriated the assets of Demir Holding, a large investment group that owned a number of retail stores in the country.<sup>29</sup> In 1999, Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan experienced a rare shock when two terrorists targeting government officials exploded six cars injuring 120 and killing 16 people. These vicious terrorist attacks were the first ones in Central Asia and presumably were conducted by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a terrorist organization that wanted to introduce Islamic Caliphate on the territory of Uzbekistan. Although many of its leaders were subsequently destroyed or fled to Afghanistan, the eradication of IMU was an important priority for Karimov's regime. However, Turkey refused to extradite two suspects fearing an unfair trial, which prompted Uzbek government to introduce a visa regime and suspend cooperation with the TIKA. In 2005 Uzbek government killed peaceful protestors in Andijan province and Turkey joined the UN and blamed Uzbekistan for the massacre.<sup>30</sup> In return, Uzbekistan refused to join any Turkish-led initiatives, including the Turkic Council in 2009. Uzbek official establishment refused to sit under the same table with Turkish officials, as a result, Turkish leaders were unable to participate in joint meetings, including TURKSOY when they were held in Uzbekistan.<sup>31</sup> The breakthrough in Uzbek-Turkish relations came in 2012 when the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs met with Uzbek counterpart in the United Nations and the two parties agreed to cooperate and even adopted a plan for 2013-2015.<sup>32</sup> In 2014 the two presidents met in Sochi Olympics. After this meeting Turkey re-appointed its Ambassador to Uzbekistan. Bilateral cooperation became more pertinent after the terrorist attacks in Istanbul Airport in 2016, when one of the suspects involved in killing 42 people came from Uzbekistan and was an Uzbek

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Lemon, "Erdoğan to visit Uzbekistan in further sign of improving ties", *Ahval News*, 28 April 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-uzbekistan/erdogan-visit-uzbekistan-further-sign-improving-ties> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Altay Atli, "Turkish Businesses Getting Set for Uzbek Bonanza", *Asia Times*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2018/07/opinion/turkish-businesses-getting-set-for-uzbek-bonanza/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Edward Lemon, "Erdoğan to visit Uzbekistan in further sign of improving ties", *Ahval News*, 28 April 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-uzbekistan/erdogan-visit-uzbekistan-further-sign-improving-ties> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Görkem Dirik, "From Hostility to Fraternity: Turkish-Uzbek Relations", *Daily Sabah*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2019/06/21/from-hostility-to-fraternity-turkish-uzbek-relations> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



citizen. In the same year, another terrorist act in *Reina* night club on the New Years Eve that left 39 people dead also involved an Uzbek citizen who happened to be a member of ISIS.<sup>33</sup> As a result, in 2016 Erdogan paid an official visit to Tashkent, further opening up space for cooperation and announcing its desire to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>34</sup> Despite political disagreements, Uzbekistan continued to trade with Turkey selling its cotton, making Turkey the 5<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner.

In 2016, after Karimov's death, the new President Mirziyoyev adopted a radically different approach to domestic development and foreign relations. When Shavkat Mirziyoyev came on an official visit to Turkey in October 2017, he had very emotional words that clearly showed the turn of tune in Uzbek foreign policy:

This 20-year break is already seen in our eyes, showing how much we have missed each other, the fact that we are understanding each other without pronouncing a word just by looking into each other's eyes means really a lot.<sup>35</sup>

Improvement of bilateral relations immediately followed: Uzbekistan simplified the visa regime for Turkish citizens and Turkey approved a visa-free regime for Uzbek citizens. Turkey re-introduced cooperation with Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and formalized relations by supporting Uzbek Presidency for Turks and Related Communities (YTB), which cooperates with the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It also fostered partnerships with the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), the *Yunus Emre* Institute and the Public Diplomacy Office.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Eşref Yalınkılıçlı, "A New Era in Turkish-Uzbek Relations", *TRT World*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/a-new-era-in-turkish-uzbek-relations-11649> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Fatıma Taşkömür, "How did Turkey-Uzbek relations improve after two decades of stagnation?" *TRT World*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/how-did-turkey-uzbek-relations-improve-after-two-decades-of-stagnation--11677> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Görkem Dirik, "From Hostility to Fraternity: Turkish-Uzbek Relations", *Daily Sabah*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2019/06/21/from-hostility-to-fraternity-turkish-uzbek-relations> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

In the economic sphere, the two countries signed over 50 agreements worth USD3 billion.<sup>37</sup> Although the scale of cooperation cannot be compared to that with China, which signed over 100 agreements worth USD20 billion, nonetheless, the progress made in the last two years is



evident in comparison with the state of economic ties 20 years before that. Economic cooperation took the following trajectories: on the one hand, Turkish private companies and investors are looking for opportunities. Specifically, Demir Holding is planning to re-enter the market. Dal Holding, a large construction and cement producer also

expressed interest. On the other hand, cooperation is also facilitated by the government bodies, including the Ziraat Bank, which already has over 13,000 individual customers and nearly 1,000 corporate clients.<sup>38</sup> Turkish Eximbank also offered loans to Uzbek National Bank and provided much needed funding for economic liberalization. In total, there are over 700 Turkish companies working in Uzbekistan, which have completed over 100 projects worth USD1 billion.<sup>39</sup> As in Kazakhstan, main business comes from construction companies, where Turkish firms are engaged in building sophisticated highlights and symbols for Tashkent city. Overall, in 2019 alone more than 200 Turkish companies registered their operations in Uzbekistan making the total number of Turkish business to over 1000.<sup>40</sup>

In the political sphere, Mirziyoyev also shifted his policies. Uzbekistan became a member of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States

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<sup>37</sup> Altay Atli, "Turkish Businesses Getting Set for Uzbek Bonanza", *Asia Times*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2018/07/opinion/turkish-businesses-getting-set-for-uzbek-bonanza/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Lemon, "Erdoğan to visit Uzbekistan in further sign of improving ties", *Ahval News*, 28 April 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-uzbekistan/erdogan-visit-uzbekistan-further-sign-improving-ties> (Accessed 20 August 2020)

<sup>40</sup> "Uzbekistan eyes closer ties with Turkey via magazines", *Hurriyet*, 23 July 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/uzbekistan-eyes-closer-ties-with-turkey-via-magazines-145172> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

and established a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council.<sup>41</sup> During the recent period, the two countries signed an agreement on labor migrants between the two states as Uzbek citizens changed their priorities from Russian to Turkish markets since Russia has significantly strengthened its regulations for labor migrants. Working permits in Russia require migrants to spend substantial amounts of money to receive medical tests for HIV, Tuberculosis, skin and psychological diseases. In addition, with Russian ruble toppling after the US sanctions, Russia no longer represents a favorable destination for the majority of Uzbek workers. Linguistic affinity with Turkey also allow Uzbek migrants to integrate into Turkish society much faster in comparison with Russia and Slavic communities.

Another important result of the political rapprochement is related to reinstatement of the Turkish development aid agency, TICA, which by 2018 was engaged in over 700 projects in Uzbekistan<sup>42</sup>. Turkish participation in the grass roots projects is also facilitated by cooperation between the cities of two countries. In September 2019, mayors of Tashkent and Ankara met to sign cooperation agreement based on 'fraternal ties' and concluded over 30 projects worth USD3.5 billion.<sup>43</sup>

Overall, the current trend point not only to a stronger bilateral cooperation at the official level, but also a much more prominent role of Turkish businesses and aid agencies on the ground.

### *Kyrgyzstan*

Kyrgyz-Turkish bilateral relations are conditioned on Kyrgyz relations with the United States, China, and Russia. Russia has the strongest influence in the country in comparison with each Central Asian state. Russian companies control the strategic industries. Russia also has two

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<sup>41</sup> "Uzbekistan is Turkey's New Strategic Partner – adviser", *Ahval News*, 2 May 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-uzbekistan/uzbekistan-turkeys-new-strategic-partner-adviser> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Fuad Shahbazov, "How Will Erdogan's Recent Visit to Uzbekistan Enhance Turkish-Uzbek Cooperation?" *The Diplomat*, 15 May 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/how-will-erdogans-recent-visit-to-uzbekistan-enhance-turkish-uzbek-cooperation/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>43</sup> "Uzbek, Turkey capitals sign memorandum on establishing fraternal relations," *AzerNews*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.azernews.az/region/156029.html> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

military bases in the smallest country of the region. In addition, the majority of Kyrgyz citizens who choose to become labor migrants and seasonal workers prefer to travel to Russia, rather than Turkey or other countries due to cultural and linguistic similarities. So Russia possesses a strong upper hand in policy choices. China is also present in the country with large infrastructure projects and has proposed convenient payment schemes in which the government does not have to pay upfront for project allowing Kyrgyzstan to have flexible payment methods. Kyrgyzstan suffers from the negative trade balance and exports gold and other natural resources to Kazakhstan, United Kingdom and Switzerland, with Russia and Turkey following suit. Russia and China are also the major importing countries to Kyrgyzstan. As a result, Turkish investors find it difficult to participate in large projects.

Such strong Russian involvement notwithstanding, an important shift in geopolitical priorities seems to be in the making with the newly elected



president Sooronbay Jeenbekov choosing Turkey as the first country to visit after his inauguration in 2017. Besides this, Turkey and Kyrgyzstan do share common political instruments that are established with other Central Asian states, such as the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (met for four times since its launch) and Turkey-Kyrgyzstan Business Forums. These two instruments allow the countries to promote stronger economic and cultural cooperation.

In the cultural sphere, Turkey holds a strong influence in education and health. Specifically, more than 3500 Kyrgyz students study in Turkish universities.<sup>44</sup> In addition, just as in Kazakhstan, Turkey and Kyrgyz governments established a university (the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University), which is funded by the two states. It functions in competition with the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University and American University in Central Asia. Nonetheless, in recent years the Manas University managed to find its

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<sup>44</sup> "Erdogan Assesses Kyrgyz-Turkish Relations and Their Further Development", *Kabar*, 10 April 2018, <http://kabar.kg/eng/news/erdogan-assesses-kyrgyz-turkish-relations-and-their-further-development/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

niche in preparing strong computer scientists and engineers with strong English skills and working knowledge of the Turkish language.

Local perceptions regarding Turkish services displaying a “higher quality” is also visible in the hospitality and health sectors. Turkish-built and managed hotels are often described as offering a much higher set of services compared to their competitors in the market. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the same can be said about hospitals that host Turkish-trained doctors. For those treatments that may be unavailable in Kyrgyzstan, Turkey is also a preferred destination, particularly since 2018 when the Turkish government increased the quota for free medical treatment to 150 Kyrgyz citizens (from 100).<sup>45</sup> High standards are also upheld by the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TİKA) that spent over USD20 million on projects in Kyrgyzstan with the overall Official Development Assistance reaching USD855 million.<sup>46</sup>

In economic sphere, although the amounts of bilateral trade are relatively small (USD 424 million in 2018), Kyrgyz citizens are increasingly attracted to Turkey as a work destination. While the majority of Kyrgyz labor migrants continue to choose Russia and Kazakhstan, Turkey does offer a viable alternative for those who have a command of the Turkish language. In addition, Turkey also changed the regulations to accommodate seasonal labor and allows citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to remain in Turkey for 90 days every six months out of the year as well as a possibility to have a reduced and simplified process of obtaining visas and work permits.<sup>47</sup> In order to boost economic ties, Kyrgyz speaker of the Parliament Dastanbek Dzhumabekov has asked Turkish counterparts to revise the status of Kyrgyzstan and grant it a GSP+ status, a particular type of the Generalized Scheme of Preferences, which can allow Kyrgyz companies to obtain 0% tariffs in exchange for implementing 27 conventions

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<sup>45</sup> “Dzhumabekov: Kyrgyzstan is Interested in Developing Kyrgyz-Turkish Relations”, *Kabar*, 7 December 2018, <http://kabar.kg/eng/news/dzhumabekov-kyrgyzstan-is-interested-in-developing-kyrgyz-turkish-relations/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>46</sup> Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, “Economic relations Between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan”, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/economic-relations-between-turkey-and-kyrgyzstan.en.mfa> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Khamza Sharifzoda, “To Russia or Turkey? A Central Asian Migrant Worker’s Big Choice”, *The Diplomat*, 2 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/to-russia-or-turkey-a-central-asian-migrant-workers-big-choice/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

related to good governance and be included into the Import-Customs Regime.<sup>48</sup>

### *Turkmenistan*

Bilateral relations between Turkey and Turkmenistan are conditioned by the fact that Turkmenistan does not commit to multilateral fora based on its position of permanent neutrality. As a result, bilateral cooperation concentrates on economic and cultural sphere. Economic cooperation is also sanctioned by the fact that Turkmenistan possesses natural gas deposits and is interested in pipeline diversification. Cultural cooperation is facilitated by the existence of the large Turkmen diaspora in Turkey that mainly occupies caretaking industry.

Turkmen policy of neutrality notwithstanding, Turkish-Turkmen bilateral relations have been relatively successful in comparison with relations of Turkmenistan with other countries. Particularly, in 2014 Turkish President Erdogan called Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov a “*Kadirli Dođanım*” (My Dignified Brother) stressing that it was the fourth meeting at the Presidential level in the past two years.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the two countries need each other. First, Turkish goods constitute the largest amount of Turkmen imports. In 2014 they amounted to 26% of the total.<sup>50</sup> Turkey also presents an attractive market for Turkmen oil and gas, as well as an alternative route for its exports to Europe and international markets. Currently, Turkmenistan has two options to export its natural resources, to Russia and to China. An additional route would allow Turkmenistan to balance the relationship with the two regional powers on a stronger footing.

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<sup>48</sup> “Dzhumabekov: Kyrgyzstan is Interested in Developing Kyrgyz-Turkish Relations”, *Kabar*, 7 December 2018, <http://kabar.kg/eng/news/dzhumabekov-kyrgyzstan-is-interested-in-developing-kyrgyz-turkish-relations/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>49</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, “Relations between Turkey and Turkmenistan Reached an Exemplary and Special Level”, 7 November 2014, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/3291/relations-between-turkey-and-turkmenistan-reached-an-exemplary-and-special-level> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Stratfor, “Turkey Makes Overtures to a Reluctant Turkmenistan”, 12 December 2015, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/turkey-makes-overtures-reluctant-turkmenistan> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

Initially, Turkey has offered Turkmenistan a *TurkStream* project, which aimed to tap into Turkmen natural gas exports from Russia, but this failed to materialize because of the strained Turkish-Russian relationship before 2016.<sup>51</sup> Turkey then shifted its priorities to Trans-Caspian project for oil and



to Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) for gas, in cooperation with Azerbaijan, which were also supported by the United States and its policy to diversify exports of natural resources away from Russia. While the future of the first proposal remains dim, the second proposal has a stronger potential. At the end of May 2018, TANAP has been inaugurated by the two presidents of

Turkey and Azerbaijan, which enables Azerbaijan to supply nearly 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas to Europe, as TANAP is connected to Trans-Adriatic Pipeline.<sup>52</sup> A USD6.5 billion worth pipeline that is nearly 2000 kilometers long is managed by a consortium of partners from the Azeri State Energy Company (SOCAR), Turkish pipeline operator BOTAS, BP and SOCAR Turkey. Turkmen participation in TANAP remains unclear since Turkmenistan have prioritized construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline, which should become operational in 2020. The pipeline capacity is likely to take care of all outstanding natural gas in Turkmenistan, which, unless new reserves are found, will not have enough gas to send via TANAP, but political risk of the pipeline, which goes through Afghanistan may undermine stability of the project and may shift Turkmen priorities back to TANAP. Regardless of TANAP, Turkmen

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<sup>51</sup> The project has been refurbished and in January 2020 Turkey and Russia announced renewed cooperation, see “Turkey and Azerbaijan mark completion of TANAP pipeline to take gas to Europe”, *Reuters*, 30 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-energy-tanap/turkey-and-azerbaijan-mark-completion-of-tanap-pipeline-to-take-gas-to-europe-idUSKBN1Y40CP> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>52</sup> “Turkey and Azerbaijan mark completion of TANAP pipeline to take gas to Europe”, *Reuters*, 30 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-energy-tanap/turkey-and-azerbaijan-mark-completion-of-tanap-pipeline-to-take-gas-to-europe-idUSKBN1Y40CP> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

participation in the *TurkStream* with Russia will strengthen bilateral economic cooperation in energy between two states.

Another important aspect of cooperation is vested in the construction industry. Turkish companies (more than 600 of them) are mostly working in construction to build sophisticated buildings in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. The new construction prompted Turkish President Erdogan to name the city as a 'shining star' due to the amount of new buildings constructed. In return, Turkmen president confirmed that Turkmenistan is giving multi-million dollar contracts to Turkish contractors. However, with the loss of the Russian market (Russia decreased the amount of gas it bought from Turkmenistan in 2016), it failed to pick up the tab. As a result, many foreign companies are not paid by the Turkmen government. Since most of Ashgabat was constructed by Turkish companies, they have probably faced the largest hit. Some of them reported saying that they have not been paid since 2016 and therefore scaled down or shut down operations.<sup>53</sup> Others filed law suits to receive payments together with other international holdings.<sup>54</sup> The shortage of foreign revenue causes depreciation of the local currency, which Turkmen government is trying to control by not allowing people to withdraw cash from ATMs and/or putting them in prison for standing at the ATM.<sup>55</sup> Regular citizens travel to the neighboring Uzbekistan to withdraw cash from their accounts<sup>56</sup> or pay fees for bank personnel to withdraw any amount of cash from their cards, rather than the 200 manat allowance (about USD57).<sup>57</sup> Payments of pensions and salaries have also

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<sup>53</sup> Olzhas Auyezov and Ece Toksabay, "Foreign Companies Struggle in Cash-Strapped Turkmenistan", *Reuters*, 3 June 2018, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN11Z0Q4> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>54</sup> "Foreign companies queue up to sue cash-strapped Turkmenistan", *Reuters*, 17 April 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkmenistan-economy/foreign-companies-queue-up-to-sue-cash-strapped-turkmenistan-idUSL8N21U3Q6> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>55</sup> "Cash-Flow Problem: People In Turkmenistan Detained Just For Standing At ATMs", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 27 August 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/cash-flow-problem-people-in-turkmenistan-detained-for-standing-at-atms/30131248.html> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>56</sup> Farangis Najibullah, "Desperate Times: Turkmen Turn To Uzbekistan To Stem Major Cash Shortage", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-turn-to-uzbekistan-to-stem-major-cash-shortage/30278900.html> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>57</sup> "Cash-Flow Problem: People in Turkmenistan Detained Just for Standing at ATMs", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 27 August 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/cash-flow->



been delayed.<sup>58</sup> As a result, more Turkmen citizens are looking for job opportunities in Turkey. Turkish migration agency have reported doubling number of official work permits for Turkmen citizens last year.

While the official economic cooperation between the two states may suffer in the short term as a result of Turkmenistan's own financial worries, with more Turkmen citizens will look for jobs in Turkey the bilateral relations are set to continue relatively unchanged.

### *Tajikistan*

Turkish-Tajik bilateral relations have been undermined by the internal and international dynamics in the region. Tajik language does not belong to the Turkic family, which poses a problem for Tajik labor migrants who prefer to travel to neighboring Russia and Kazakhstan for seasonal work. In addition, strong internal divisions in Tajikistan prompt the regime to seek support from Turkey in dealing with its exiled opposition members who sought refuge in Turkey.<sup>59</sup> International dynamics, such as the Afghan conflict have also undermined the



economic stability and security of Tajikistan as drug trafficking, terrorist insurgencies continue to challenge internal security. Although Russia is involved in protecting Afghan-Tajik border, its porosity remains a threat. Political cooperation mainly supports the economic links between two states

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problem-people-in-turkmenistan-detained-for-standing-at-atms/30131248.html (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>58</sup> "Pensions and Benefits Delayed as Cash Shortage Bites in Turkmenistan", *Turkmen News*, 19 July 2019, <https://en.turkmen.news/news/pensions-and-benefits-delayed-as-cash-shortage-bites-in-turkmenistan/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>59</sup> After the Tajik Civil War that ended in 1997, the country retained a strong opposition. However, in 2015 Tajik authorities banned the main opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) after it was designated as a terrorist organization by the country's Supreme Court, and purged most of its members, many of whom fled to Turkey. Tajik government has worked closely with the Turkish authorities to extradite major figures from the IRP including Namunjon Sharipov who was eventually sent back to Tajikistan in 2018.

and is based on more than 60 agreements that were signed since the country's independence in 1991. Two countries institutionalized this cooperation in the form of the Tajik-Turkish Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation, which met 10 times since its inauguration with the last meeting being held in Ankara in 2018.<sup>60</sup> Two countries also share relatively high trade volumes with Turkey being the fourth largest partner of Tajikistan. Tajikistan mainly exports cotton and aluminum to Turkey importing textiles and other consumer goods.<sup>61</sup> Tajikistan is also looking into attracting large Turkish construction companies into the domestic market, both in infrastructure, as well as in the consumer market.<sup>62</sup> But both countries noted the need to update their bilateral Agreement on the Mutual Encouragement and Protection of Investments<sup>63</sup>.

Turkey is also active in the social development of the country. Turkey attributes strong value to its own political system and officially aims to assist Tajikistan in the areas of development and democratization.<sup>64</sup> The Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA) in Tajikistan has sponsored over 300 projects mainly in the healthcare and education.<sup>65</sup> Another area of cooperation in social sphere is guided by the Turkish Small and Medium Industry Development Organization (KOSGEB), which is looking into projects to provide technical assistance, aid and support to Tajik counterparts.

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<sup>60</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, "Relations of Tajikistan with Turkey", 1 March 2013, <https://www.mfa.tj/en/main/view/25/relations-of-tajikistan-with-turkey> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Mehmet Kara, "Turkey Ranks 4th among Tajikistan's Trade Partners", *Anadolu Agency*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-ranks-4th-among-tajikistans-trade-partners/1156606> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>62</sup> "Doubling Trade Volume Primary Target between Ankara, Dushanbe," *Daily Sabah*, 7 August 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/2019/08/07/doubling-trade-volume-primary-target-between-ankara-dushanbe> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Gülay Kılıç, "Turkey-Tajikistan Relations: Limited to Bilateral Visits – Analysis", *Eurasia Review*, 16 September 2011, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16092011-turkey-tajikistan-relations-limited-to-bilateral-visits-analysis/> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

<sup>65</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, "First Lady Erdoğan: 'It is our shared duty to help people with disabilities unleash their hidden potential'", 15 June 2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/105682/first-lady-erdogan-it-is-our-shared-duty-to-help-people-with-disabilities-unleash-their-hidden-potential-> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

Both governments are further looking to expand their bilateral cooperation into the areas of security, particularly against drug trafficking, arms trade and terrorism. They are also interested in moving economic cooperation into high value-added industries.

## AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

A brief glance at Turkey-Central Asian relations suggest that it will continue to expand at the high-level both in the bilateral and multilateral for a. Economic cooperation with countries in the region, however, will depend on the overall domestic macroeconomic stability and the international setting, shaped most notably by external actors such as Russia and China. Social and cultural cooperation will grow as more Central Asians travel or move to Turkey seeking education, work or business expansion. Similarly, Turkish small and medium size businesses will penetrate deeper into the region, forging ties by bringing goods and providing services. While Turkey has to compete with the influence of Russia and China, it does have the required institutional capacity to implement important regional initiatives. So its multilateral presence will grow as it navigates through the complex socio-political terrain of Central Asia.

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