

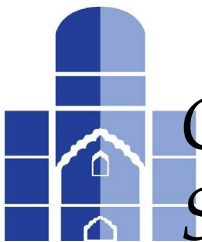
# Türkiye's Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus

Svante E. Cornell

Editor

SILK ROAD PAPER

June 2024



*Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*  
*Silk Road Studies Program*



# **Türkiye's Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus**

**Svante E. Cornell, ed.**

© **Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program –**  
A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center  
American Foreign Policy Council, 509 C St NE, Washington D.C.  
Institute for Security and Development Policy, V. Finnbodavägen 2, Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden  
[www.silkroadstudies.org](http://www.silkroadstudies.org)

*“Türkiye’s Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus”* is a *Silk Road Paper* published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center. The Silk Road Papers Series is the Occasional Paper series of the Joint Center, which addresses topical and timely subjects. The Joint Center is a transatlantic independent and non-profit research and policy center. It has offices in Washington and Stockholm and is affiliated with the American Foreign Policy Council and the Institute for Security and Development Policy. It is the first institution of its kind in Europe and North America, and is firmly established as a leading research and policy center, serving a large and diverse community of analysts, scholars, policy-watchers, business leaders, and journalists. The Joint Center is at the forefront of research on issues of conflict, security, and development in the region. Through its applied research, publications, research cooperation, public lectures, and seminars, it functions as a focal point for academic, policy, and public discussion regarding the region.

© Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2024

ISBN: 978-91-88551-54-2

Printed in Lithuania

Distributed in North America by:  
Central Asia-Caucasus Institute  
American Foreign Policy Council  
509 C St NE, Washington DC 20002  
E-mail: [info@silkroadstudies.org](mailto:info@silkroadstudies.org)

Distributed in Europe by:  
The Silk Road Studies Program  
Institute for Security and Development Policy  
Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm-Nacka  
E-mail: [info@silkroadstudies.org](mailto:info@silkroadstudies.org)

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to the European offices of the Joint Center (preferably by e-mail.)

# Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Svante E. Cornell</i>	
Türkiye's Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus: Domestic Determinants	7
<i>Svante E. Cornell</i>	
Security and Military Cooperation among the Turkic States in the 2020s	15
<i>Richard Outzen</i>	
Türkiye's Energy Engagement in Central Asia and the Caucasus	30
<i>Brenda Shaffer</i>	
Türkiye and the Organization of Turkic States: A Quest for Pan-Turkism?	40
<i>Halil Karaveli</i>	
Türkiye-Azerbaijan Relations: the Building of an Alliance	49
<i>Ali Hajizade</i>	
Türkiye-Kazakhstan Relations: A Strong Partnership in the Turkic World	60
<i>Bayram Balcı</i>	
Friends at Last: The Rapid Rise of Türkiye-Uzbekistan Relations	72
<i>Svante E. Cornell</i>	
Implications for the Region and Western Policy	84
<i>Svante E. Cornell</i>	

# Introduction

*Svante E. Cornell*

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, a sense of euphoria swept over a Türkiye that had just seen its application to join the European Community rejected. The emergence of five Turkic-majority states in the Caucasus and Central Asia provided an alternative possibility to European integration: Türkiye could look east and seek to build a new confederation of Turkic states.

The idea was vigorously embraced but soon appeared stillborn for a number of reasons. For one, the Turkic nations of the former USSR had just gotten rid of one overlord and were not in the market for another. The sometimes haughty tone of Turkish officials toward them did not help either. Besides, Türkiye was beset by internal problems – a rising PKK insurgency in the southeast, a troubled economy with runaway inflation, and a surge of Islamist politics that frightened the secular leaders of Central Asia and Azerbaijan.

For two decades thereafter, Central Asia and the Caucasus did not figure prominently in Turkish foreign policy. Economic realities forced Türkiye to look again toward the EU in the 2000s. After consolidating power, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP government turned south – jumping headfirst into the frayed politics of the Middle East, a region that would keep Türkiye preoccupied for over a decade. But a combination of internal and external shocks in the 2010s led to a domestic realignment in a nationalist direction, which also led to a renewed interest in the Turkic states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

As this volume will detail, Türkiye has been actively pursuing its influence in the region bilaterally but also multilaterally, through the upgrading of Turkic cooperation with the creation of the Organization of Turkic States.

It is worth pausing for a minute on the ethnolinguistic aspect of Türkiye's approach to the region. While Türkiye continues to maintain bilateral relations with non-Turkic states like Georgia and Tajikistan, there is a clear emphasis on ethnic and linguistic ties in Türkiye's approach. In this sense, Türkiye differs markedly from Russian and Chinese approaches in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Because neither Russia nor China can appeal to common identity markers, these powers have focused mainly on economic and security issues as they have devised their regional mechanisms, such as the Eurasian Economic Union or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Whatever the faults of these instruments – and there are many – they are at least inclusive, in that they do not differentiate between regional states on the basis of identity. Türkiye's approach, by contrast, stresses common identity markers and makes them central to its bid for influence in the region. Indeed, increasingly the language used both during OTS meetings and in bilateral meetings of Turkish and regional leaders stressed "brotherhood" of fellow Turkic peoples. This is in one sense an asset that other regional powers cannot compete with. On the other hand, emphasizing the ethnolinguistic commonality between Türkiye and Turkic peoples risks alienating the non-Turkic peoples of the region and feeding the existing sentiments in Georgia and Tajikistan – not even to speak of Armenia – countries whose own nationalist narratives have been motivated in part by enmity against Turks, past or present.

That being said, Türkiye's renewed involvement with Central Asia and the Caucasus is one of the most significant developments in the region in the past several years. It complements the rise in regional cooperation in Central Asia, as well as between Central Asia and Azerbaijan. And importantly, at a time when relations between the West and Russia are at an all-time low

and Western relations with China are deteriorating, Türkiye's growing influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus provides much-needed opportunities for regional leaders to expand their international relations. In the foreign policy strategy adopted by regional leaders, balance is key. Their continued sovereignty and independence depends on establishing relations with other powers that help counterbalance their relations with Russia and China. Since the U.S. and EU have thus far been unwilling to provide enough of a regional presence to generate such a balancing force, Türkiye's involvement is a welcome opportunity for regional states to build ties with outside powers that are not shy to get involved in security and military affairs.

.



## **Türkiye's Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus: Domestic Determinants**

*Svante E. Cornell*

Türkiye, as noted in the introduction, had a burst of activism in Central Asia in the 1990s. For two decades thereafter, its main areas of focus then lay elsewhere. By the late 2010s, Ankara was once again making this region a priority. What can we make of these shifts in orientation? To understand Türkiye's changing foreign policy priorities, a look at the country's domestic politics is warranted.

Türkiye, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington famously declared, was a "Torn Country" – culturally and socially divided between groups in society that agreed on very little in terms of what their country should look like, what threats it faces, where its allegiances lies, and the direction of its foreign policy.

During the cold war, a left-right dimension dominated Turkish politics. The "left," which remained in a minority position in a generally center-right country, questioned the prevailing capitalist order and was skeptical of relations with the West. The country's "right" was large and relatively amorphous, ranging from center-right liberal and democratic forces to ethnic nationalists and Islamic conservatives. These forces shared the belief that the Soviet Union and communism were the biggest threats to Türkiye. This led them to promote the alliance with the United States. While it may seem counterintuitive today that Islamic conservatives would support the United States, this made sense in the Cold War context.

With the end of the Cold War, the left-right split ceased to dominate Turkish society. Instead, the chief dividing lines came to be related to identity. A

prominent divide in the country was between the portion of the population that was urban, modern, and European in outlook and lifestyle; and that which was more traditional, conservative, and Islamic. Superimposed on this was the divide between the majority Turks and a large portion of the Kurdish minority which maintained an emphasis on a separate Kurdish identity.

With the common enemy of communism being gone, divergences emerged between centrists, Islamists, and nationalists. While all were accommodated in the Democratic Party of the 1950s and 60s, they had split up into rivaling political parties. All found room, to some degree and in competition with each other, in the ruling coalitions led by Turgut Özal in the late 1980s and then again under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership in the 2000s.

Up until the 2000s, the dominant force in the Turkish "right" was the center-right, personified by figures like Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel. They emphasized the importance of Türkiye's ties to the West, the primacy of NATO, and the objective of integration with the European Union. They came increasingly to approve of Turkish involvement in the Middle East, but did so either because of national security concerns, involving primarily threats emerging from Syria, Iraq and Iran; or to support Turkish business ties with markets in the Middle East. There was no romanticism about the Middle East among Turkish centrists, who generally tended to have unfavorable views of Arabs.

Türkiye's nationalists have historically been more averse to integration with the West than the centrists and stand out by their emphasis on ties with the Turkic states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, a heavy antipathy toward Iran, and an aversion for the Arab Middle East. They have also been driven to a considerable degree by animosity toward traditional Turkish foes like Russia and Greece. The nationalist worldview sees many adversaries but few friends: as the Turkish nationalists saying goes, "a Turk's only friend is

another Turk." Over time, nationalists developed a greater aversion for the United States as well, primarily as a result of America's support for Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria, and its hosting of exiled preacher Fethullah Gülen, who is held responsible for the failed 2016 coup attempt.

The Islamist and Islamic conservatives, which were the driving force in organizing the AKP, had been at the forefront of anti-Communism during the Cold War, often in alliance with nationalists. But they became increasingly anti-Western as the relationship between the West and the Muslim world soured from the 1990s onward. Islamists urged Türkiye to drop its ties with the West and seek, instead, to once again be the leader of the Muslim world. Islamists and Islamic conservatives promote an orientation toward the core Arab Middle East, which is the center of Islamic civilization. They are, in other words, the most dedicated supporters of a foreign policy that focuses on the Middle East.

Thus, Türkiye's approach to Central Asia and the Caucasus, and its foreign policy in general has differed greatly depending on the contours of the ruling coalition at the helm of the Turkish state. That includes both the formal government coalitions, the informal groupings within major parties like the AKP, and the balance between the elected political power and the unelected guardians of the military and intelligence services of the country.

### **Domestic Shifts in the AKP Era**

Erdoğan's AKP has changed shape repeatedly over the past twenty years. Initially, the AKP rebranded itself as a post-Islamist party in order to expand its electoral appeal. Its core of Islamists was complemented by alliances with Kurdish conservative forces as well as Turkish liberals – who shared a common desire to counter the Kemalist establishment that had been guiding the country from behind the scenes, a system often termed the --system of "military tutelage." From 2007 onward, however, the ruling coalition began to shift in an Islamist direction. Erdoğan, in cooperation with Gülenist allies

in the state, successfully asserted control of the state from the Kemalist elites, many of whom ended up in prison on trumped-up charges. As it grew more authoritarian and its Islamist agenda became clearer, the AKP began to lose liberal support. The events in Syria from 2011 onward also led to a considerable loss of Kurdish support.

Meanwhile, the growing dissent within the Islamist camp – the power rivalry between Erdoğan and the followers of Fethullah Gülen – led to yet another change in the informal ruling coalition from 2013 to 2016. The fallout between Erdoğan and Gülen forced the former to seek support from erstwhile foes belonging to the right-wing nationalist camp to stave off the Gülenists' attempts to undermine Erdoğan's rule. This led to a gradual toning down of the emphasis on Islamist agendas both at home and abroad and instead a turn toward nationalism.

The grand bargain between Erdoğan and right-wing nationalists was facilitated by a common social base of conservative Turks that have a strong nationalist as well as religious identity. Different people may emphasize ethnic or religious aspects of the identity to varying degrees, but since the military began to promote the idea of a "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" in the 1980s as an antidote to communism, being Muslim and Turkish has come to be largely synonymous for much of the social base of both the AKP and the nationalist MHP.

Further, regional developments – chiefly in Syria – brought rising Turkish nationalism. The nationalist right had opposed Erdoğan's outreach to the Kurds and the negotiations with the PKK. Following the rise of the PKK-aligned statelet in northern Syria, the military and intelligence establishment prevailed upon Erdoğan to drop this outreach to Kurds and return to a traditional, hard-core security approach to the Kurdish issue, animated by Turkish nationalism.

## **Foreign Policy Implications**

These domestic shifts were mirrored in Turkish foreign policy. The first years of Erdoğan's tenure were focused greatly on Ankara's efforts to start accession talks with the European Union. Of course, in retrospect Erdoğan's effort to negotiate with the EU was a result of two key rationales: to attract Western investors to Türkiye's economy; and to gain leverage from the West to consolidate power and displace the Kemalist establishment. While the Islamist foreign policy goals would come out in the open later, early signs were visible, for example, in Türkiye's embrace of Hamas and Erdoğan's close relations with Sudanese ruler Omar al-Bashir. But the Islamist agenda came to the forefront when the Arab upheavals hit in early 2011. This led Türkiye to emerge as a strong backer of the forces motivated by political Islam that challenged the *status quo* across the Middle East and North Africa, chiefly groups connected to the Muslim Brotherhood.

But Türkiye's Middle Eastern adventures led it to become more regionally isolated from 2013 onward. A realization that this policy was failing developed in parallel with the nationalist shift in the ruling coalition. This led the Turkish leadership to begin paying closer attention to Central Asia and the Caucasus. These shifting priorities came to full view in the second half of the 2010s. Türkiye became a much more active participant in the Council of Turkic-Speaking states – a body that had largely been driven by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan during the period of Türkiye's focus on the Middle East.

Türkiye's engagement with the region was also aided considerably by the uptick in relations with Uzbekistan following the passing of that country's long-time leader, Islam Karimov. Meanwhile, Central Asian leaders began to take note of Türkiye's possible role as a counterbalancing force to Russian influence. Turkish-Russian relations had been on a rollercoaster as the two powers clashed, initially in Syria. Türkiye found itself in proxy conflict with

Russia not only in Syria but in Libya as well. Then came the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan had heated up throughout the 2010s, as Armenia's approach grew increasingly uncompromising – Armenian leaders began referring to occupied territories in Azerbaijan as “liberated” territories, sponsored the settlement of ethnic Armenians from the Middle East in these territories, and the defense minister even spoke of “new wars for new territories.” Armenia also provoked Türkiye's ire by staging large commemorations of the hundredth anniversary of the defunct 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which would have created an Armenian state on large parts of present-day Türkiye's territory. Armenia's President mentioned that the Treaty, while never implemented, remains “in force” – thus effectively laying territorial claims on Türkiye,<sup>1</sup> something former Armenian National Security Adviser Gerard Libaridian defined as a “declaration of at least diplomatic war” on Türkiye.<sup>2</sup>

This appears the point at which the Turkish leadership decided to back Azerbaijan's aim to restore its authority over the areas of Azerbaijan that had been occupied by Armenia since 1994. Turkish weapons sales to Baku shot through the roof over summer 2020, and the two countries organized large-scale military exercises in early August. Crucially, Türkiye left several F-16 fighter jets in Azerbaijan following these exercises, a clear deterrent against any external power – be it Russia or Iran – that would have considered intervening to stop Azerbaijan's military operation.

---

<sup>1</sup> “President Armen Sarkissian: “The Treaty of Sèvres even today remains an essential document for the right of the Armenian people to achieve a fair resolution of the Armenian issue”, President.am, August 10, 2020.

(<https://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2020/08/10/President-Armen-Sarkissians-interview/>)

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Libaridian, “A Step, This Time a Big Step, Backwards,” Aravot, September 1, 2020. (<https://en.aravot.am/2020/09/01/263436/>)

That operation, which led to the 44-day war in October-November 2020, featured the use of advanced Turkish and Israeli military technology that Armenian forces, in the absence of a Russian intervention, were unable to answer. A Russian-negotiated cease-fire deal was announced on November 9, ushering in a new reality in the South Caucasus. For the first time since independence, the region featured a non-Russian power as an important security guarantor. This reality – with Türkiye emerging as a power in the post-Soviet space – was codified in June 2021 through the Shusha Declaration, a mutual defense treaty between Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Central Asian countries took note of this development and eagerly embarked on a process of intensifying relations with Türkiye – a much-needed opportunity as these countries found themselves increasingly isolated following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## **Future Outlook**

Given the multiple shifts in Turkish domestic politics and in foreign policy orientation, a relevant question is whether the current nationalist orientation is a lasting one. There is reason to think it could be. First of all, polling in Türkiye shows that nationalism has become hegemonic not just in society at large but among Turkish youth as well. The “moment” of political Islam in Türkiye has clearly passed, with polling showing the younger generation being more secular than their parents – and this being true particularly for the children of the Islamic conservative class.

Similarly in the halls of power, the civil war within the Islamist movement – between supporters of Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen – was detrimental to the Islamist movement. In its place, nationalist cadres have become influential and look to remain so.

As long as nationalism remains a dominant force in Turkish society as well as in the Turkish state, it is reasonable to expect that Türkiye will continue

to pay close attention to its relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus. And unlike in the Middle East, this is a region where Türkiye's presence is largely welcome.



# Security and Military Cooperation Among the Turkic States in the 2020s

*Richard Outzen*

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkish diplomacy has sought to transform relationships with the Turkic states of Central Asia and the Caucasus into a serious geopolitical enterprise. In the years immediately following the independence of these states (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan), Ankara engaged in ambitious talk with meager results regarding pan-Turkic cooperation. None of the new states seemed keen to follow Ankara's lead in regional diplomacy, the Turkish military and security services possessed little power projection capability or defense technology appropriate to their needs, and exiting the Russian sphere of economic and cultural influence proceeded slowly. Commentators in Türkiye, the Turkic states, and the West noted the yawning gap between aspiration and achievement.

The past decade has seen a renewed and far more successful, though still partial, effort to develop robust defense ties among the Turkic states. Five regional security dynamics motivated the participants in this process to take it more seriously. First, economic and industrial development turned Türkiye into a G20 economy with a first-class defense industrial establishment, with widely-exported unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or "drones") as the brand-defining product.<sup>3</sup> Second, military reforms led to a

---

<sup>3</sup> Can Kasapoglu, "Transforming From Arms Importer to Trendsetter: Assessing the Growth of Turkey's Defense Industries," *Defense Journal of the Atlantic Council in Turkey*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey->

more professional,<sup>4</sup> lethal,<sup>5</sup> and outwardly-oriented Turkish military establishment that could provide training, education, doctrine, and equipment to partner militaries struggling to replace Russia's role in these areas. Third, Russia became more aggressive in re-asserting influence in post-Soviet Republics,<sup>6</sup> launching wars against Georgia and Ukraine, supporting Armenian occupation of a fifth of Azerbaijan's territory, and hinting at possible interventions elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Fourth, generational change in all six countries reduced elite and public perceptions that Russian leadership in the former Soviet space was natural or inevitable.<sup>8</sup> Fifth, failure of the U.S.-led NATO effort to stabilize Afghanistan, coupled with the failure of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to resolve conflicts among its members, made it clear that no external coalition or

---

[defense-journal/transforming-from-arms-importer-to-trendsetter-assessing-the-growth-of-turkeys-defense-industries/](https://www.defensejournal.com/transforming-from-arms-importer-to-trendsetter-assessing-the-growth-of-turkeys-defense-industries/).

<sup>4</sup> Rich Outzen, "Turkey's Global Military Footprint in 2022," *Defense Journal of the Atlantic Council in Turkey*, December 22, 2022 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/turkeys-global-military-footprint-in-2022/>.

<sup>5</sup> Noah Ringler, "Turkey's New Joint Operational Concepts Foreshadow the Future of Armed Conflict," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, March 16, 2021 <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2021/03/16/turkeys-new-joint-operational-concepts-foreshadow-the-future-of-armed-conflict/>.

<sup>6</sup> Nathan Hodge, "Restoration of Empire is the Endgame for Russia's Vladimir Putin," *cnn.com*, June 11, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/10/europe/russia-putin-empire-restoration-endgame-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrius Sytas, "Russian Military in Belarus Threatens Baltics and Poland, Says Lithuanian President," *reuters.com*, February 17, 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-military-belarus-threatens-baltics-poland-says-lithuanian-president-2022-02-17/>.

<sup>8</sup> Banyan (pseudonymic columnist) "Central Asian Countries Are Subtly Distancing Themselves From Russia," *The Economist*, October 22, 2022 <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/10/20/central-asian-countries-are-subtly-distancing-themselves-from-russia>.

hegemon would be a security provider - and that the Turkic states would have to carry some of the load themselves.<sup>9</sup>

This paper will examine the nodes and linkages in this thickening network to assess just how much military and security convergence has been achieved. Drone sales are far from the only form of cooperation: other strands include the training of OTS-member state personnel in Turkish military institutions, joint exercises, specialized training and advisory missions, and political-military consultations. The first and most mature case is Türkiye -Azerbaijan, a relationship which has been referred to as "one nation, two states, one army."<sup>10</sup> Kyrgyzstan provides another interesting case in that it has used Turkish military equipment in active combat against neighboring Tajikistan, unlike OTS states which have so far deployed and trained on such equipment for in peacetime only.<sup>11</sup> The other countries of the OTS have cooperative programs at a far more preliminary stage of development, but progress has been evident and will be reviewed.<sup>12</sup>

After a fuller discussion of the regional dynamics that provided the context for defense convergence, the paper will examine each bilateral case. It will then lay out problematics and challenges related to the phenomenon, and likely implications for regional and international geopolitical balances and stability.

---

<sup>9</sup> Kanat Altynbayev, "Russia-led CSTO is Facing its End Amid Various Conflicts," Caravanserai, September 30, 2022 [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2022/09/30/feature-02](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/09/30/feature-02).

<sup>10</sup> Ihsan Sefa, "Bir Millet, İki Devlet, Bir Ordu," *Aydinlik* (newspaper), 6 July 2021, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/haber/bir-millet-iki-devlet-bir-ordu-249886>.

<sup>11</sup> Fehim Tastekin, "Are Turkish Drones Complicating Disputes in Central Asia?" *al-Monitor*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/are-turkish-drones-complicating-disputes-central-asia>.

<sup>12</sup> Blue Domes, "Turkey and Central Asian military cooperation: more than just drones,"

May 25, 2022, <https://bluedomes.net/2022/05/25/turkey-and-central-asian-military-cooperation-more-than-just-drones/>.

### **Critical Context: Regional Dynamics Changing in Central Asia**

Somewhat counterintuitively, steps toward greater security cooperation have occurred in parallel to, but separately from, the political and cultural convergence achieved via the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The main reason for this is the membership – for now – of various OTS members in countervailing alliances (NATO and CSTO). Türkiye is a primary military contributor to NATO. While Turkmenistan has refrained from joining alliances and Uzbekistan has withdrawn from CSTO, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remain within the CSTO.

A multilateral military or security alliance at this stage would likely discomfit NATO, CSTO, Russia, or China, and perhaps all at once, without yet providing a guarantee of greater security.<sup>13</sup> For that reason, military-to-military relationship building has been bilateral and outside of the framework of the OTS, which has focused instead on cultural, economic, and political convergence rather than security.<sup>14</sup> The growth of the non-military OTS and the deepening of a network of separate bilateral military ties among the Turkic states both reflect the tension between Russia's intent to maintain influence over the Central Asian states by keeping them weak

---

<sup>13</sup> Nurettin Akcay, "Does the Organization of Turkic States Worry China and Russia?" *The Diplomat*, November 23, 2022 <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/does-the-organization-of-turkic-states-worry-china-and-russia/>.

<sup>14</sup> Marriam Javed, "Organization of Turkic States, 10<sup>th</sup> Summit Fact Sheet," *The Diplomatic Insight*, November 10, 2023 <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/factsheet-on-the-organization-of-turkic-states-and-the-10th-summit-in-astana/>.

and isolated<sup>15</sup> and the reality that Moscow's grip is weakening in practical terms.<sup>16</sup>

Ankara's reconnaissance and strike drones represented a breakthrough because they were the first military system that could be offered to Turkic states at a better quality/price point than competitors, were at or near the frontier of current warfighting technology, and could be integrated without requiring a complete overhaul of operational and logistical systems. The performance of Turkish drones in Libya, Syria, Nagorno-Karabagh, and Ukraine was enough to convince potential customers to invest in them.<sup>17</sup> Turkish firms and officials adroitly turned sales into training, maintenance, and advisory presence - military diplomacy in the broad sense.<sup>18</sup> Not only the sales but demonstrated Turkish commitment to stand by defense partners stoutly when they faced crises and conflicts catalyzed strategic convergence, which has caused concern in Moscow and Beijing.<sup>19</sup> The changing nature of Turkish military forces from conscript-heavy and domestically-focused to more professionalized and expeditionary has made it easier to send detachments for training and exercises to the Turkic states, where their presence may cause less concern than Russian or other advisors

---

<sup>15</sup> Sinan Tavsan, "Turkic World Sees Risks and Opportunities as Russia Stumbles," *Nikkei*, November 30, 2022 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkic-world-sees-risks-and-opportunities-as-Russia-stumbles>

<sup>16</sup> Maximilian Hess, "Russia is Down, but not Out, in Central Asia," *Central Asia Papers*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 17, 2023 <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/02/russia-is-down-but-not-out-in-central-asia/>

<sup>17</sup> Lucas Morvan, "Turkey Continues Exporting Drones to Central Asia," *novastan.org*, April 21, 2023 <https://novastan.org/en/kyrgyzstan/turkey-continues-exporting-drones-to-central-asia/>

<sup>18</sup> Can Kasapoglu, "Türk dünyası askeri jeopolitiğinde 'SİHA' faktörü," *Anadolu Agency*, November 30, 2021 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/turk-dunyasi-askeri-jeopolitiginde-siha-faktoru/2434467>

<sup>19</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/does-the-organization-of-turkic-states-worry-china-and-russia/>

would. Turkish Minister of Defense Yaşar Güler recently testified to the Turkish parliament that the balance between professional and conscript forces within the Turkish military has now reached parity (50/50).<sup>20</sup>

Russia's re-assertion in former Soviet Republics has changed the calculus of national leaders in the Turkic states too. For Azerbaijan the issue dates to the early post-Soviet period: Russian troops aided and supported Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territory in Nagorno-Karabagh and the seven surrounding districts. Russia launching wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014 and 2022) has greatly deepened concerns that Russian leaders would not hesitate to launch new operations into the Turkic states on various pretexts. Even the CSTO mission dispatched – with rapidity – to help suppress protests against Kazakhstan's President in January 2022 seems to have raised alarm bells over vulnerabilities to the big neighbor, rather than gratitude for the speedy response.<sup>21</sup> The Turkic republics appear to have concluded that they need a "third neighbor" besides Russia and China, and one with cultural ties and military prowess fits the bill nicely.

Another factor creating openness to Turkic military cooperation has been the failure of U.S. will and capability to function as a regional security provider. The abrupt collapse of the 20-year U.S.-led stabilization effort in

---

<sup>20</sup> Veli Toprak, "Milli Savunma Bakanı Yaşar Güler: 40 tane Eurofighter uçağı alacağız," *Sozcu* (Turkish daily), November 16, 2023. [https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2023/gundem/milli-savunma-bakani-yasar-guler-40-tane-eurofighter-ucagi-alacagiz-7864118/?utm\\_source=dahafazla\\_haber&utm\\_medium=free&utm\\_campaign=dahafazlahaber](https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2023/gundem/milli-savunma-bakani-yasar-guler-40-tane-eurofighter-ucagi-alacagiz-7864118/?utm_source=dahafazla_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=dahafazlahaber)

<sup>21</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Learning from Kazakhstan's January Crisis," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 18, 2022. (<https://cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13715>)

Afghanistan was a seminal moment in this process.<sup>22</sup> Yet the relative low priority for the region for Washington and the consequent growth of Chinese influence both predate the disaster in Kabul.<sup>23</sup> It has been hard to discern a clear vision or statement of American interest, reducing the prospects for regional governments to seek security cooperation or geopolitical cooperation.<sup>24</sup> In fact, several of the governments have labored, or still do labor, under a variety of U.S. sanctions. Most recently, the U.S. paused its relationship with Azerbaijan after it reasserted control over Nagorno-Karabagh and may allow sanctions imposed in 1992 at the behest of the Armenian lobby, waived yearly since 2002, to resume.

It may be sound policy for the U.S. not to prioritize Central Asia, given its various interests in many other regions of the globe. Yet it is entirely feasible, at prudent cost for the U.S., to encourage these countries seek local security solutions, bringing in a NATO member to help the process. As S. Frederick Starr put it, "a discussion with the countries that honestly includes security, sovereignty, self-government and self-determination is what's been missing."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, taboos that applied for Türkiye and for the post-Soviet Turkic states have greatly eroded over the past two decades. Under the AKP government of President Erdoğan, Turkish foreign policy has become less risk-averse and more open to bilateral hard power interventions. For the younger

---

<sup>22</sup> Iskander Akylbayev, and Nurtas Janibekov "What Does the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan Mean for Central Asia?" *The Diplomat*, May 25, 2021 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/what-does-the-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-mean-for-central-asia/>.

<sup>23</sup> Navbahor Imamova, "China's Influence Spreads as U.S. Lags," *Voice of America* (VOA), website, April 22, 2023 <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-influence-in-central-asia-spreads-as-us-lags/7061325.html>

<sup>24</sup> Alex Little, "What is U.S. Central Asia Policy?" *National Interest*, November 2, 2023 <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-us-central-asia-policy-207131>.

<sup>25</sup> Navbahor Imamova, "Experts Urge U.S. to Update its Central Asia Strategy," *Voice of America* (VOA), February 2, 2022 <https://www.voanews.com/a/6424466.html>

generation of Central Asians, the idea of security dependence on Russia – or China, for that matter – seems less and less attractive. There may be a catalyst effect involved here too, through the cultural and economic convergence of the OTS. Once non-security collective and multilateral cooperation has begun to seem “normal” for the current generation of national leaders and publics in the region, the evolutionary path to greater military and security cooperation becomes normalized as well.

None of these factors incline the six states to pursue collective security in the full sense, but they do create fertile ground for growing bilateral cooperation in military, intelligence, and related fields. We are thus witnessing the emergence of a series of incremental, discrete security relationships below the threshold of collective security. There may not be a “Turan Army” in the works, but the series of thickening Turkish bilateral defense and security relationships with its cousins to the East has great geopolitical import and the potential to grow in time to something more formal.<sup>26</sup>

### **Country by Country**

Azerbaijan is *sui generis* for the degree of not just cooperation, but integration with the Turkish military and security services. After its early post-independence military proved unable to defend national territory against Armenian forces in the early 1990s, Baku essentially shifted from the Soviet model of training and operations to the Turkish model. Turkish trainers and equipment came to Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani officers studied in Turkish military schools, and the two sides paid close attention to joint

---

<sup>26</sup> David Biro, “The Turan Army: Opportunities for a New Military Cooperation Led by Turkey,” *Nuova Antologia Militare*, Vol. 8 No. 2 (2021), pp. 333-359,

<https://hal.science/hal-03389110/document>.



doctrine and interoperability.<sup>27</sup> These two states are more ethnically similar than either is with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Uzbekistan, with both rooted in the Oğuz ethnolinguistic group – this has led to popularization of the term “one nation, two states.” By 2020, the degree of military integration – and battlefield success – prompted some observers to modify this to “one nation, two states, one army.”<sup>28</sup> Drones, ground vehicles, command and control systems, advisors, and logistical support all supplemented longstanding training and educational ties as Baku moved towards ejecting Armenian forces from Azerbaijani territory in 2020 and 2022.<sup>29</sup>

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev appears to have appreciated, shortly after assuming power from predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev, the need to diversify his support base away from Nazarbayev loyalists domestically<sup>30</sup> and the CSTO regionally.<sup>31</sup> His moment of epiphany with Russia came during the uprising or failed coup attempt that he survived with Russian assistance, but which Moscow did not seem distressed to see

---

<sup>27</sup> Josephine Freund, “Strong Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations Reinforced Through Guler’s Visit to Azerbaijan,” Caspian Policy Center Research, August 29, 2023 <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/strong-azerbaijani-turkish-relations-reinforced-through-gulers-visit-to-azerbaijan>.

<sup>28</sup> Can Kasapoglu, “Can Turkish Drones Bolster NATO’s Eastern Flank Against Russia?” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 18, No. 100, June 23, 2021 <https://jamestown.org/program/can-turkish-drones-bolster-natos-eastern-flank-against-russia/>.

<sup>29</sup> Haldun Yalcinkaya, “Turkey’s Overlooked role in the Second Nagorno-Karabagh War,” *Insights on Turkey*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 21, 2021 <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-overlooked-role-second-nagorno-karabakh-war>.

<sup>30</sup> Shaun Walker, “Where is Kazakhstan’s former longtime leader Nursultan Nazarbayev?” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/16/where-is-kazakhstans-former-longtime-leader-nursultan-nazarbayev>

<sup>31</sup> Benno Zogg, “Observer Now, Beneficiary Later: China and the Unrest in Kazakhstan,” *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2022 <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/observer-now-beneficiary-later-china-and-the-unrest-in-kazakhstan/>

unfold.<sup>32</sup> Tokayev has been forced to balance continued dependence, especially for trade, on Russia with growing popular disaffection for Putin and his war in Ukraine,<sup>33</sup> and has taken small steps toward strategic de-alignment from Russia.<sup>34</sup> The first real growth in military ties with Türkiye came with a 2020 agreement for joint defense industrial projects.<sup>35</sup> A protocol for intelligence cooperation was signed in 2022.<sup>36</sup> Despite speculation in the West that the Russian “rescue” in 2022 might lead to deepened dependence and marginalize Turkish aspirations for a bigger role,<sup>37</sup> Ankara’s patient and consistent approach led to a range of new

---

<sup>32</sup> Reuters News, “President of Kazakhstan Says He Has Weathered Attempted Coup d’Etat,” *nbcnews.com*, January 10, 2022

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/president-kazakhstan-says-weathered-attempted-coup-detat-rcna11567>. See also Dubnov, Arkady “Kazakhstan: a Coup, a Counter-coup, and a Russian Victory,” *Al Jazeera*, January 16, 2022 <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/1/16/a-coup-a-counter-coup-and-a-russian-victory-in-kazakhstan>.

<sup>33</sup> Bhavna Dave, “Ukraine Conflict: Kazakhstan’s Difficult Balancing Act Between Need for Russian Support and Popular Opposition to the War,” *The Conversation* (UK), April 11, 2022 <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-conflict-kazakhstans-difficult-balancing-act-between-need-for-russian-support-and-popular-opposition-to-the-war-180210>.

<sup>34</sup> Isabel van Brugen, “Another Neighbor Turns its Back on Russia,” *Newsweek*, September 29, 2023 <https://www.newsweek.com/kazakhstan-russia-neighbor-sanctions-ukraine-1830862>.

<sup>35</sup> “Turkey, Kazakhstan Agree on Military Cooperation that Covers Intelligence Sharing, Defense Industry,” *nordicmonitor.com*, May 16, 2020 <https://nordicmonitor.com/2020/05/turkey-kazakhstan-agree-on-military-cooperation-that-covers-military-intelligence-defence-industry-and-joint-projects/>.

<sup>36</sup> Aybulat Musaev, “Kazakhstan Approves Military Intelligence Protocol with Türkiye,” *Caspian News*, August 11, 2022 <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakhstan-approves-military-intelligence-protocol-with-turkiye-2022-8-11-21/>.

<sup>37</sup> Cengiz Candar, “Kazakhstan Crisis Challenges Turkey’s Leadership of Turkic Union,” *Al-Monitor*, January 12, 2022 <https://www.al->

projects and deals.<sup>38</sup> By 2022, the two sides agreed on an enhanced strategic partnership,<sup>39</sup> and Turkish drones are now being produced in Kazakhstan under license.<sup>40</sup>

The trajectory of Kyrgyz-Turkish defense ties bears some resemblance to the early stages of the Azerbaijan case, in that Bishkek was faced with a threat to sovereign territory by a Russian-backed force that initially held the upper hand, in the shape of Tajikistan. During several rounds of border fighting in 2021 and 2022, Kyrgyz forces struggled to stop incursions by more heavily armed Tajik units.<sup>41</sup> Bishkek has been preparing for future potential clashes by expanding purchases of TB2 Bayraktar, Aksungur, and Anka drones from Ankara.<sup>42</sup> The Kyrgyz also purchased Russian drones and are presumably benefiting from the “whole package” approach (trainers, advisors, logistical and technical support) that Ankara uses elsewhere.<sup>43</sup>

---

[monitor.com/originals/2022/01/kazakhstan-crisis-challenges-turkeys-leadership-turkic-union](https://www.monitor.com/originals/2022/01/kazakhstan-crisis-challenges-turkeys-leadership-turkic-union) .

<sup>38</sup> “Kazakhstan Eyes Wide Range of military Cooperation With Türkiye,” *dailysabah.com*, March 1, 2023

<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/kazakhstan-eyes-wide-range-of-military-cooperation-with-turkiye>.

<sup>39</sup> “Turkey, Kazakhstan Agree on Enhanced Strategic Partnership,” *dailysabah.com* , May 11, 2022 <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-kazakhstan-agree-on-enhanced-strategic-partnership>.

<sup>40</sup> Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan Seals Deal to Produce Turkish Drones Under License,” *Eurasianet*, May 13, 2022 <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license>.

<sup>41</sup> Aijan Sharshenova, “More Than a Border Skirmish Between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” *The Diplomat*, September 19, 2022 <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/more-than-a-border-skirmish-between-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan/>.

<sup>42</sup> Svenja Petersen, “Perspectives: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Building Up For Another Potential Round of Fighting,” *Eurasianet*, August 28, 2023 <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-building-up-for-another-potential-round-of-fighting>.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Iddon, “Why Kyrgyzstan is Procuring Turkish and Russian Drones For Its Tiny Air Force,” *forbes.com* , November 1, 2021

With Russia devoting its military resources overwhelmingly to the war in Ukraine, Iran has stepped in as a patron of Dushanbe in this adversarial pairing, rendering Kyrgyz-Tajik tensions something of a proxy for broader Türkiye -Iran competition in Central Asia.<sup>44</sup>

Turkmenistan has preferred an entirely non-aligned and unencumbered strategic orientation since independence, and its relationship with Türkiye has remained mostly economic and cultural.<sup>45</sup> There have been fewer Turkmen cadets and other trainees at Turkish military institutions, as it has a relatively small military establishment and has thus far refrained from serious outreach or partnerships in the defense and security space.<sup>46</sup> Yet there are signs this might be shifting to a more cooperative stance. After 2020 deals, the Turkmen government expanded purchases of Turkish drones to its growing inventory of unmanned vehicles, which may lead to future deals and closer collaboration in training, logistics, and related fields.<sup>47</sup>

Uzbekistan alone among the Turkic states has yet to purchase Turkish drones.<sup>48</sup> Tashkent did, however, sign a 2022 defense cooperation agreement

---

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2021/11/01/why-kyrgyzstan-is-procuring-turkish-and-russian-drones-for-its-tiny-air-force/?sh=4a5d51b328c4>

<sup>44</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Iran's Stakes in the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Standoff," *Gulf International Forum*, October 8, 2022 <https://gulffif.org/irans-stakes-in-the-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-standoff/>.

<sup>45</sup> "Turkey, Turkmenistan Sign Deals, Strengthen Ties in Erdogan's Visit," *Daily Sabah*, November 27, 2021 <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkey-turkmenistan-sign-deals-strengthen-ties-in-erdogans-visit>

<sup>46</sup> Blue Domes, *op.cit.* <https://bluedomes.net/2022/05/25/turkey-and-central-asian-military-cooperation-more-than-just-drones/>.

<sup>47</sup> Stijn Mitzer, and Joost Oliemans "Turkmenistan's Path to Drone Power," *Oryx*, October 17, 2022 <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/turkmenistans-path-to-drone-power.html>

<sup>48</sup> Devon Sealander, "Kazakhstan's Drone Deal With Turkey Showcases Regional Security Focus," *Caspian Policy Center Research*, June 8, 2022

with Ankara that includes intelligence sharing, joint training, and logistics projects.<sup>49</sup> A further protocol was announced in November 2022, adding military education and defense industrial cooperation to the agenda.<sup>50</sup> Uzbekistan, while much more populous and militarily capable than Turkmenistan, is at a similar – very initial, but growing – stage of mil-to-mil ties with Türkiye.

Türkiye has more or less come to dominate the developing Central Asian drone market, but that is likely not the limit of ambition for Ankara, nor for its partners.<sup>51</sup> The fuller potential for cooperation lies in the growth of military education exchanges, training and exercises, a broader range of equipment and defense technologies, and perhaps most importantly, development of common doctrine and operational approaches. Türkiye and Azerbaijan are already there; the other four will develop ties at variable speeds and may never reach the same degree of integration. But they are clearly involved in the same sort of process at differing scales. It seems likely that the defense/security integration of these states will permanently lag behind their cultural and economic integration efforts within the OTS. Yet even as the loosest tie that binds these countries, and one outside the OTS

---

<https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/kazakhstans-drone-deal-with-turkey-showcases-regional-security-focus>.

<sup>49</sup> "Turkey, Uzbekistan Set For Intelligence Sharing, Joint Military Drills, Defense Cooperation," *nordicmonitor.com*, July 4, 2022

<https://nordicmonitor.com/2022/07/turkey-uzbekistan-set-for-intelligence-sharing-joint-military-drills-defense-cooperation/>.

<sup>50</sup> "Uzbekistan, Turkey Sign Agreement on Military Cooperation," *Tashkent Times*, November 25, 2022 <http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/10064-uzbekistan-turkey-sign-agreement-on-military-cooperation>.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Iddon, "Turkey Likely to Get Upper Hand in Central Asia's Drone Market," *forbes.com*, December 22, 2022

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/12/22/turkey-could-dominate-central-asias-nascent-drone-market/?sh=247285491d1a>

framework for the foreseeable future, the building out of this network is a strategic development worth watching.

### **Implications for the West**

There are three main implications of these developments for Western strategists and policymakers. First, deepening Turkic cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus is a hedge against domination of the Eurasian “Heartland” by Russia, China, or Iran – a strategic tenet for Washington and the West for over one hundred years.<sup>52</sup> Were these countries – together or severally – to develop significant security capabilities under the tutelage of Beijing or Moscow, there would be strategic risk for the U.S.; having them do it with a NATO partner presents more opportunity than risk. The opportunity comes as a bargain for Washington which has little desire for direct engagement – but can be a distant friend and supporter. This grouping of six states share more than ethnolinguistic heritage - they share a geopolitical alignment against Iranian hegemony, religiously-motivated terrorism, Russian meddling, and domination by China – an alignment that accords with U.S. interests. Deepening trade, cultural ties, and policy coordination among these states – buttressed by gradually growing security coordination – relieves the U.S. and its allies of a potential concern.<sup>53</sup>

Second, the growth of security capabilities and coordination among these states has significant potential to bolster their internal stability. Bilateral and multilateral training and exchanges will produce more capable and

---

<sup>52</sup> Torbjorn Knutsen, “Halford J. Mackinder, Geopolitics, and the Heartland Thesis,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 36 (2014), No. 5, pp. 835-857  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07075332.2014.941904>.

<sup>53</sup> Ali Mammadov, “The United States can’t offset its rivals in Central Asia alone. Turkey can help,” *TurkeySource*, Atlantic Council, August 14, 2023  
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/the-united-states-cant-offset-its-rivals-in-central-asia-alone-turkey-can-help/>.

professional military and security forces, better intelligence sharing will help identify and address emergent threats, and response assistance for internal unrest or natural disasters will potentially come from these mid-sized regional partners rather than Russia.

Third, and importantly for Washington and European capitals, anti-U.S. powers (China, Russia, and Iran) are not blind to these developments. The likelihood that they will seek to undermine, co-opt, or gain privileged / partnered access with the OTS – and with the emerging network of bilateral military partnerships – is high. As China and Russia invest money and soft power on trying to pull Türkiye away from the West, their potential success means pulling this entire network of Turkic states further away too. The West can and should encourage the growth of the OTS states as internally networked partners in trade, culture, regional diplomacy – and security. It should complement that by partnering itself with these countries through regional exercises, exchanges, disaster relief, and when appropriate, defense industrial cooperation. The rise of a Turkic security architecture, as well as a Turkic political and cultural bloc, in Central Asia and the Caucasus might be a net strategic gain for the West in an era of Great Power Competition, if appreciated rather than ignored and engaged rather than sidelined.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Sinan Tavsan, "Turkic World Wants a Voice in the New Global Order," *Nikkei Asia*, November 13, 2021 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkic-world-wants-a-voice-in-the-new-global-order>.

# **Türkiye's Energy Engagement in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

*Brenda Shaffer*

Over the last three decades, Türkiye has played a key role in the establishment of the East-West energy corridor from Azerbaijan to Europe. As a landlocked state, Azerbaijan had to establish its major energy export corridor via neighboring states, and not directly from ports to international markets. Accordingly, it chose to build its main energy export through states – Türkiye and Georgia – which would be unlikely to disrupt the energy export for political goals. The founding of the East-West energy and transportation corridor during the early 2000s and 2010s helped to cement Azerbaijan's alliances with Türkiye and Georgia and the ties of Azerbaijan and Georgia with the West.

The main components of the East-West Corridor from Azerbaijan to Türkiye and onward to Europe and global markets are the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, completed in 2006; the South Caucasus Pipeline for natural gas export, also inaugurated in 2006; and the Southern Gas Corridor which became fully operational in 2020. The TANAP segment of the Southern Gas Corridor is the largest gas pipeline in Türkiye, currently delivering over 16 BCM of gas annually. TANAP delivers over 6 BCM of its current export volumes to Türkiye and the lion share to Europe. In 2023, Azerbaijan's overall natural gas exports to Türkiye and those transited to Europe



increased significantly, with 9.5 BCM to delivered to Türkiye, and 11.8 BCM of gas was exported to Europe.<sup>55</sup>

These projects broke the hold of Russia on energy export from the Caspian Sea. The establishment of this East-West energy corridor enabled the development of transportation projects that linked the Caspian region to Türkiye and the West, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the road network from Azerbaijan through Georgia and Türkiye. Through possession of a trade and transportation outlet that was not dependent on Russia, these infrastructure projects enabled Azerbaijan and Georgia to conduct independent foreign policies and deepen cooperation with the West.

Türkiye's state-owned energy companies—TPAO and Botaş—are investors in Azerbaijan's energy sector. In the upstream field, TPAO – the Turkish state oil company – owns a 5.73 percent share in Azerbaijan's Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli project and a 19 percent share in the Shah Deniz gas field.

In the export infrastructure, TPAO owns a 19 percent stake of the South Caucasus Pipeline, a 6.53 percent stake in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, and has 19 percent in the South Caucasus Pipeline Expansion (SCPX). Botaş holds 30 percent of TANAP's shares.

As part of efforts to double gas exports to Europe, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan are discussing the enlargement of TANAP and are likely to set the parameters of the expansion during 2024.

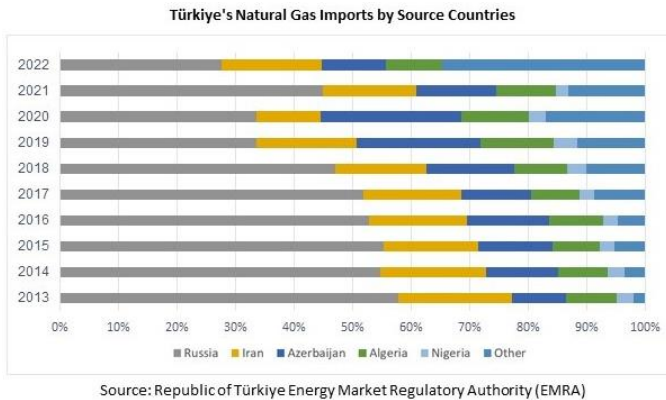
Azerbaijan's SOCAR is invested heavily in Türkiye's energy sector and has become Türkiye's largest foreign investor. SOCAR made its largest foreign investments in Türkiye, currently totaling 19.5 billion. Among SOCAR's investments is the Star Refinery outside Izmir on the Aegean coast. It

---

<sup>55</sup> "Azerbaijan's gas export increased by 5.3% in 2023, says Energy Minister," Azertag, January 11, 2024.

([https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbajjans\\_gas\\_export\\_increased\\_by\\_53\\_in\\_2023\\_says\\_energy\\_minister-2880061](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbajjans_gas_export_increased_by_53_in_2023_says_energy_minister-2880061))

processes a quarter of Türkiye's oil products. SOCAR has also established the Petkim Petrochemicals company outside Izmir.



Azerbaijan and Türkiye also decided in 2020 to establish a gas pipeline linking Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan's exclave, to the Turkish gas network, via the city of Iğdır.<sup>56</sup> President Ilham Aliyev and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan led a groundbreaking ceremony for the project in September 2023. SOCAR and Botaş are carrying out the project and plan to complete it by the end of 2024. While it is a small pipeline (97.5 kilometers) requiring minimal investment, this pipeline has strategic implications, since it will end Nakhichevan's dependence on transit through Iran.

## 2024: A Pivotal Year for Turkish Decisions on Natural Gas Supplies

During 2024, Ankara will make several major decisions that will affect the composition of its gas suppliers, including from the Caspian region. This year is especially important since Türkiye's major contracts with Gazprom

<sup>56</sup> "Erdoğan, Aliyev attend foundation-laying for Nakhchivan Gas Pipeline", Daily Sabah, September 25, 2023.

(<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/erdogan-aliyev-attend-foundation-laying-for-nakhchivan-gas-pipeline>)

will expire at the end of 2024, and in 2026 its contract with Iran will conclude. Accordingly, Ankara will decide this year whether to renew these contracts and at what volumes and price formulation. Over the last decade, Ankara has decreased the relative proportion of gas from Russia and Iran, offset with increased imports from Azerbaijan and of LNG. The volume of gas available from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan will affect Türkiye's decisions on renewal of long-term contracts with Russia and Iran and the extent of gas volumes. Türkiye's gas buyers will also examine concluding long-term contracts for LNG import this year.

During 2024, Ankara and Baku are likely to decide the number of gas volumes to be exported to Türkiye as part of the next wave of Azerbaijan's gas exports beginning in 2028. In addition, Ankara aims this year to contract new gas volumes from Turkmenistan, most likely also to export or transit to markets in Europe. In support of this goal, on March 1, 2024, on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, Türkiye's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Bayraktar and Turkmenistan's Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, the chairman of Turkmenistan's People's Council, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for natural gas export to Türkiye.<sup>57</sup> If the MOU develops into a concrete gas supply contract, Turkmenistan will be able to diversify its gas exports and lower its dependence on exports to China.

Currently, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Azerbaijan conduct periodic gas swaps that enable small amounts of Turkmen gas to be exported (virtually) to Azerbaijan and Türkiye, freeing up additional volumes for export to Europe. The current U.S. administration has stated that it does not view these swaps as a violation of U.S. sanctions on Iran,<sup>58</sup> but that could change under a different U.S. administration.

---

<sup>57</sup> "Turkmenistan signs gas deal with Turkey, eyeing European sales," Nikkei, March 2, 2024. (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Energy/Turkmenistan-signs-gas-deal-with-Turkey-eyeing-European-sales>)

<sup>58</sup> "Swap supplies of Turkmen gas to Azerbaijan via Iran do not violate sanctions - U.S. ambassador", Interfax, January 12, 2024. (<https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/98367/>)

Ankara is also evaluating launching a gas hub. If this is established, Türkiye would likely seek additional gas imports, including from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

During 2024, Türkiye's Black Sea gas field Sakarya will ramp up production. The field is likely to peak at 15 BCM a year and average 11 BCM annually during production. Accordingly, these volumes will not reduce needs for imports but will offset some of the anticipated growth in Türkiye's gas demand.

### **Emergence of the Turkic Alliance: Implications for Energy**

In recent years, cooperation between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and the states of Central Asia has increased immensely. For the first time since independence, the states of Central Asia have concluded significant military cooperation agreements with a state other than Russia. The states have transformed the Turkic Council, which engaged mostly in cultural activity, into the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), significantly expanding their cooperation. The military cooperation, however, is taking place in the form of bilateral treaties and agreements, such as Türkiye's defense treaty with Azerbaijan, and bilateral cooperation agreements of Ankara each with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and Baku's with each of those two states.

The Organization of Turkic States has formally established cooperation in the sphere of energy among the member states.<sup>59</sup> As part of this cooperation, the members established the OTS Program on Energy Cooperation and its Action Plan. In addition, the energy ministers of the member states meet annually. The 2024 meeting of the OTS member energy ministers will be held in Kyrgyzstan.

---

<sup>59</sup> Organization of Turkic States, "Areas of Cooperation," <https://www.turkicstates.org/en/isbirligi-alanlari#11-energy-cooperation>

### *Lowering Dependence on Russia: Kazakhstan Seeks to Diversify Oil Export Routes*

The emerging strategic cooperation has increased the confidence of the states to lower their dependence on Russia. The bulk of Kazakhstan's oil is exported via Russia's Black Sea ports. Since the 2021 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has disrupted Kazakhstan's oil exports several times. Accordingly, Astana seeks to increase its export volumes through alternative routes, including across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan's major oil export infrastructure. The volumes of Kazakhstani exports along this route have increased significantly, and the numbers are anticipated to continue to climb. Turkish companies are also interested in investments in Kazakhstan's ship building capacity.

The risk that Russia may disrupt Turkish-led energy ventures in the Caspian Sea and Central Asia is certainly present. Türkiye, however, has proven able to operate in many areas where there is significant Russian presence, without eliciting direct major Russian retribution or opposition, such as in Syria and Libya.

### *Trans-Caspian gas: closer than ever*

Changing geopolitics in Eurasia, including Türkiye's role, is increasing the prospects of initiating gas exports from Turkmenistan westward across the Caspian.<sup>60</sup> From the early 1990s, the United States and Europe attempted to establish exports to the west of Turkmenistan's massive natural gas volumes. However, success was never achieved, primarily due to Ashgabat's fear (well-founded) that Moscow would take action to disrupt any serious attempts at Trans-Caspian gas export. However, recently several changes in the geopolitics of the Caspian region have shaken up the

---

<sup>60</sup> Svante E. Cornell and Brenda Shaffer, "A New Spring for Caspian Transit and Trade," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 17, 2023. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13770-a-new-spring-for-caspian-transit-and-trade.html>)

calculations and have increased the chances of the initiation of westward gas export.

First, the Southern Gas Corridor is operational, delivering gas to Türkiye and Europe. While the idea was only theoretical, Ashgabat was not willing to take risks to commit its gas volumes. However, with the infrastructure up and running and with concrete demand from gas buyers in Türkiye and Europe, the export option is more attractive to Turkmenistan. Second, Moscow is likely to refrain from blocking Turkmenistan's gas exports westward and in fact, might even be in favor. The geopolitics of gas in Eurasia have changed fundamentally with Russia losing market dominance in Europe and consequently aiming to divert its gas exports toward China. Under these conditions, Turkmen gas exported to Europe would not compete with Russian supplies, while a potential reduction of volumes exported to China, or at least the absence of growth thereof, would improve the price environment for Russian exports to China. Accordingly, Moscow may no longer be intent on impeding Ashgabat's gas exports westward. Turkmenistan also fears that Chinese demand for its gas could decrease with the availability of significant exports from Russia and thus, seeks to diversify its exports with gas to Türkiye and Europe. Third, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have forged deeper political relations with Turkmenistan over the last two years, and this may give Ashgabat confidence to commence gas export west.

### *Electricity Trade*

Türkiye is interconnected in electricity with Georgia and Azerbaijan, and the sides regularly trade electricity. Georgia exports electricity to Türkiye.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Electricity Market Operator, "Electricity Balance of Georgia, 2023", [https://esco.ge/files/data/Balance/energobalans\\_2023\\_eng.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2G49fxeRh2bIX\\_hFohP3fxO4Imcih45ELxc4MHjvKTFvNWA5h7iuC-luY](https://esco.ge/files/data/Balance/energobalans_2023_eng.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2G49fxeRh2bIX_hFohP3fxO4Imcih45ELxc4MHjvKTFvNWA5h7iuC-luY)

Georgia also transits Azerbaijan's electricity exports to Türkiye. Nakhchevan also receives electricity supplies from Türkiye. Türkiye and Azerbaijan intend to expand their electricity trade and electricity infrastructure interconnection.<sup>62</sup> Turkmenistan has discussed the prospects of Turkmen electricity export via Azerbaijan and Türkiye with Ankara and Baku.

### **Turkish Companies Going Out**

Türkiye's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Dr. Alparslan Bayraktar, is encouraging Turkish public and private energy companies to undertake commercial activity abroad. Central Asia is a likely object of their activity. Türkiye's state-owned companies Botaş and TPAO are investors in upstream activity in Azerbaijan and segments of the Southern Gas Corridor export infrastructure. Turkish companies, potentially in joint activity with Azerbaijan's SOCAR and other international companies, are likely to undertake investments in the energy sector in Central Asia in 2024 and onward. Despite having significant untapped gas resources, Central Asia is encountering gas shortages. In late 2023, Uzbekistan consequently initiated new gas imports from Russia's Gazprom.<sup>63</sup> The states desire to develop their own resources instead of this increased dependence on Russia. Thus, they seek exploration activity and investments in their energy sectors generally, but specifically from companies in Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

---

<sup>62</sup> Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, "Türkiye to ink deal with Azerbaijan for electricity trade," September 29, 2023. (<https://enerji.gov.tr/news-detail?id=21185>)

<sup>63</sup> Stuart Elliott and Nick Coleman, "Gazprom signs strategic cooperation pact with Uzbekistan, eyes more gas routes," S&P Global, November 1, 2023.

(<https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/natural-gas/110123-gazprom-signs-strategic-cooperation-pact-with-uzbekistan-eyes-more-gas-routes>);

"Russia starts gas supplies to Uzbekistan via Kazakhstan," Reuters, October 7, 2023.

(<https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/russia-starts-gas-supplies-uzbekistan-via-kazakhstan-2023-10-07/>)

## **Where is the United States?**

It would seem natural for the United States to seek to promote efforts of the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus and Türkiye to increase their cooperation, including in the sphere of energy, thus lowering the hold of Russia and China over these countries. Washington played a major role in the 1990s and early 2000s in the establishment of the major oil and natural gas projects from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan westward. These projects not only enabled the Caspian states to jumpstart their economies but helped them to establish independent foreign policies (especially those projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that does not transit the territory of Russia) and to forge cooperation with the United States. Washington's championing of these projects linking the Caspian region westward was essential to their success.

However, beginning in October 2021, the Biden administration ordered all U.S. embassies and government agencies to halt any engagement in the sphere of fossil fuels, including policy discussions.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, in contrast to the past, the U.S. is not playing a meaningful role in the increasing energy cooperation across the greater Caspian region, despite the clear geopolitical benefits to the United States.

For example, the 2023 initiation of new gas imports from Russia to Uzbekistan through Kazakhstan is something that should concern Washington as it creates a new lever of Moscow's influence over the region. Yet, since it relates to natural gas, a fossil fuel, Washington has not supported activity to develop alternative gas supplies. Kazakhstan is holding out and still has not signed up for new gas deliveries to its market

---

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Interim International Energy Engagement Guidance," December 15, 2021. Available at <https://energyworkforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Interim-International-Energy-Engagement-Guidance-2021-12-10.pdf>



from Gazprom.<sup>65</sup> American interest in increasing the gas supplies to Central Asia could add confidence to the states of the region to seek alternatives to Russian gas supplies.

### **Türkiye Looking Ahead**

During 2024, Ankara will make major decisions in the energy sphere. Heading into 2024, Türkiye's involvement in the energy sphere is likely to expand across the Caspian Sea into Central Asia. Its growing security cooperation with the states of Central Asia will raise the likelihood of expanded energy cooperation, as the states of the region will gain confidence to diversify away from Russia. Transit of additional gas volumes across Türkiye increases its role as an important energy transit state and furthers its aims to establish a gas hub.

During 2024, the prospects are high that a peace agreement or series of normalization agreements will be signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia. If Baku and Yerevan make significant process toward normalization, Türkiye is likely to open up direct trade and increase transportation connections with Armenia. This could increase Türkiye's access to Azerbaijan and Central Asia, especially if the Zangezur Corridor is established. Opening of trade and infrastructure connections can facilitate energy trade with Armenia, if Yerevan desires. These new trade routes will also facilitate greater Turkish involvement in Central Asia, including in the energy sector.

---

<sup>65</sup> "Kazakhstan opts out of Russian gas imports this winter," Upstream Online, November 7, 2023.

(<https://www.upstreamonline.com/production/kazakhstan-opts-out-of-russian-gas-imports-this-winter/2-1-1549685>)

# Türkiye and the Organization of Turkic States: A Quest for Pan-Turkism?

*Halil Karaveli*

Addressing the 8<sup>th</sup> summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States – or the Turkic Council in short – November 12, 2021 in Istanbul, Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan solemnly announced the historic renaming of the Council: “We are changing the name of our Council, which has developed its institutional structure and boosted its prestige in its region and beyond, to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).” The Turkic Council was formed in 2009, upon the suggestion of President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan in 2006. Halil Akıncı, a Turkish diplomat who was appointed the first Secretary General of the Council, proudly called it “the first voluntary alliance of Turkic states in history.” Baghdad Amreyev, who held the same position when the Turkic Council was renamed the Organization of Turkic States in 2021, boldly predicted that “It may well end up as the United States of the Turkic World.”<sup>66</sup>

At a press conference during the inaugural summit of the OTS, Erdoğan held forth an even more grandiose vision, saying that “the region of Turkestan, the cradle of civilization, will once again become a center of attraction and enlightenment for all humanity.”<sup>67</sup> The reference to the historic term of Turkestan, in lieu of Central Asia, was striking. It seemed to bespeak pan-Turkic ambitions behind Türkiye’s investment in the OTS. On one hand, it made sense to speak of Turkestan since the OTS brings together the Turkic states from Türkiye to Central Asia, excluding the non-Turkic

---

<sup>66</sup> “The United States of the Turkic World,” *Middle East Monitor*, November 15, 2021,

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Tajikistan. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye are its founding members, with Uzbekistan joining what was then still the Turkic Council in 2019. Turkmenistan has held an observer status since 2021, as does, somewhat peculiarly, Hungary (since 2018) and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (since 2022).

Yet on the other hand Erdoğan's resurrection of the term of Turkestan was also notable as the term has been out of official use in Türkiye as well as internationally for a century, since the founding of the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding, the historical process that concluded with the Soviet eradication of Turkestan as a geographical and political entity and with a systematic – and as it seemed, successful – effort by the Soviet Communist Party to bury the notion of a unified Turkic nation across Eurasia, attests to the historical roots and reality of a Turkic identity that is now resurfacing. Imagined as they may be – as is arguably any other national-cultural community – the notions of Turkestan and Turkic unity are nonetheless not fictitious concepts. The reference to Turkestan is a reminder that the OTS has not materialized in a historical-cultural vacuum. Neither is the OTS the first attempt in history to unite peoples across Eurasia that identify as Turkic or simply as Turks. As has been the case before in history, the deepening of Turkic cooperation today answers to the material interests of the elites of the participating states.

Ultimately, the OTS represents an institutionalized restoration of a pre-Soviet pattern of Turkic cooperation. In 1919, the Third Conference of the Muslim Organizations of Russia, held in Tashkent, declared Turkestan as the unified republic of the Turks of Central Asia and Caucasus.<sup>68</sup> The attempt was short-lived. Faced with the challenge of an independent Turkic Communist Party (in power in Tashkent) with pan-Turkic ambitions, for which there was apparently fertile soil from the banks of Volga to the Kirghiz steppe, Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks banned the word

---

<sup>68</sup> Helène Carrère d'Encausse, *L'Empire d'Eurasie*, Fayard, 2005, p. 300

Turkestan, renaming the region Middle Asia (*srednaya Aziya*), an anodyne term devoid of dangerous political-historical connotations. The Soviet Communist Party also abolished its *Turkburo*, and the republic of Turkestan disappeared as a constitutionally recognized sovereign republic of the Soviet Union.

The pan-Turkic revival to which Lenin put an end originated among the Kazan Tatars in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century<sup>69</sup> and was ultimately prompted by material, economic interests. A similar dynamic is at work today, with business once again propelling political unity. The Kazan bourgeoisie had historically controlled the trade between Russia and Turkestan but lost its monopoly in the wake of the Russian conquest of Turkestan. In order to preserve an economically advantageous position, the Kazan bourgeoisie promoted cultural and political Turkic unity under its leadership.<sup>70</sup> Not coincidentally, Yusuf Akçura, the prominent Kazan Tatar intellectual and an ideologue of pan-Turkism, was the son of an industrialist.<sup>71</sup> However, even though the economically driven pan-Turkic ambitions of the Kazan Tatars inspired nationalism among the Turkic peoples across the Russian Empire (as well as in the Ottoman Empire), these were not prepared to defer to the leadership aspirations of the Kazan Tatars. Kazan was economically and industrially incomparably far ahead of Turkestan, but Tatar political influence was resisted notably by Kazakh intellectuals and politicians who worked to unite the tribes of the Kirghiz steppe (today Kazakhstan) in an autonomous Kazakh state.<sup>72</sup> Türkiye, which enjoys a similar economic-industrial pre-eminence in the Turkic world today – with Istanbul, in a sense, playing a role similar to what

---

<sup>69</sup> The pan-Turkism of the Kazan Tatar intellectuals inspired the birth of Turkish nationalism in the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>70</sup> Doğan Avcıoğlu, *Türklerin Tarihi* (Birinci kitap), İstanbul 1978, p.49, 62.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>72</sup> Héléne Carrère d'Encausse, *L'Empire d'Eurasie*, Fayard, 2005, p. 216.

Kazan did in the nineteenth century as an economic and cultural powerhouse – made the same discovery in the 1990s when Türkiye somewhat naively assumed that the newly independent Turkic states in Central Asia would defer to it.

Turkish experts argue that “unlike in the 1990s, Türkiye no longer seeks an active leadership role in the post-Soviet space.” The main decision-making body of the OTS is the Council of Heads of States, which is chaired by member states on a rotational basis and decisions are made by consensus. They also argue that Türkiye’s relationship to the OTS is “guided by pragmatism, rather than ideological considerations.”<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, there are other Turkish experts who argue that Türkiye by virtue of its historical heritage as heir to an empire, long state tradition, deep ties to the West and NATO membership, while simultaneously enjoying a “balanced relationship” with Russia exercises a “catalyzing function” in the OTS.<sup>74</sup> This argument is made by Mehmet Yüce, an analyst at the Turkish pro-government SETA Foundation who also argues that Türkiye’s level of economic development makes it a “guide” for the other members of the OTS as well as a gateway to the West.

Indeed, President Erdoğan’s speech at the 8<sup>th</sup> summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in which he announced the renaming of the Council as the Organization of Turkic States expressed the down-to-earth economic motives that are the main drivers propelling Turkic cooperation as well as Türkiye’s business-oriented view of the OTS. Calling on the member states to transcend rhetoric, Erdoğan notably underlined economic priorities: “we should rapidly increase our trade and mutual

---

<sup>73</sup> Gulnor Djumaeva, “Will Organization of Turkic States become the leading platform in Central Asia?” CABAR, Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, February 9, 2023. (<https://cabar.asia/en/will-organization-of-turkic-states-become-the-leading-platform-in-central-asia>)

<sup>74</sup> Mehmet Yüce, “Türk Devletleri Teşkilatına üye ülkeler arasında ikili ilişkilere bakış”, *Kriter*, November 2022

investments. We must lift all the non-tariff barriers to trade among our countries. In this sense, I attach special importance to the signing of the Trade Facilitation Strategy Document.” Türkiye has substantially increased its exports to Central Asia as well as its imports from the region, becoming one of the region’s leading trade partners. By 2022, more Turkish companies were active in Uzbekistan than Chinese companies.<sup>75</sup> And emphasizing the need to transcend the geographical barriers to cooperation, Erdoğan noted that “we cannot achieve the results we desire unless we connect to each other through land, air and sea routes.”

While Türkiye desires to diversify its energy sources and has an ambition to become an energy hub, the countries of Central Asia seek access to the European market. With an area of 4.5 million square kilometers, a population of more than 160 million and with a combined gross domestic product of over US\$ 1.5 trillion,<sup>76</sup> the Turkic world offers obvious opportunities for mutually profitable economic cooperation and development. Yet the emphasis on trade and investments notwithstanding, it is equally clear that the institutionalization of Turkic cooperation is replete with geopolitical implications.

Officially, the OTS does not challenge Chinese and Russian aspirations to hegemony in Central Asia. Nonetheless, Burhanettin Duran, general coordinator of the SETA foundation and a member of the Turkish Presidency’s Security and Foreign Policy Council, argues that Türkiye can and should try to check China: “Given China’s proximity and growing economic interest in the region, Türkiye could serve a balancing role to ensure that Beijing does not engage with the Turkic world as it has with

---

<sup>75</sup> Djumaeva, “Will Organization of Turkic States become the leading platform in Central Asia?”

<sup>76</sup> Metin Gürcan, “Erdoğan envisions alliance of Turkic-speaking states,” *Al-Monitor*, November 18, 2021

Africa.”<sup>77</sup> Metin Gürcan, a Turkish military and foreign policy analyst who is in opposition to Erdoğan (and who was charged with espionage and was imprisoned in June 2023), speculated that “Erdoğan’s government could see the process of institutionalizing the Turkic Council as a trump card in its efforts for a transactional relationship with the Biden administration, promising the prospect of counterbalancing Russia and China in the region.”<sup>78</sup>

In contrast, Numan Kurtulmuş, Speaker of the Turkish Parliament, instead offered a vision of Turkic equidistance to the East and West. Arguing that “the time is now opportune for the Turkic world to seriously wield its power without expecting handouts or relying on anyone,” Kurtulmuş opined that the members of the OTS have now reached a point where they can “have a say and an impact” along a corridor that stretches from Central Asia to Europe, “so long as they build their own center line rather than being condemned to the west and east axis.”<sup>79</sup> The Speaker ventured that “if Turkic states establish their own axis, a new power, decision-maker, as well as a new political idea and economic power center will emerge.”<sup>80</sup> Kurtulmuş stressed that this is particularly vital in a global environment of escalating conflicts.

A Turkish bureaucrat who spoke anonymously to the internet publication *Al Monitor* similarly pointed out that global dynamics impel the Turkic states to further institutionalize their partnership: “The upcoming period could be overcome only by joining forces between nations that have achieved cultural, economic and, to some extent, political cohesion. Thus, the changes and transformation trends in the shadow of global rivalries

---

<sup>77</sup> Nurettin Akçay, “Does the Organization of Turkic States Worry China and Russia?” *The Diplomat*, November 23, 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Gürcan, “Erdoğan envisions alliance of Turkic-speaking states.”

<sup>79</sup> “Time to exert power of Turkic world: Türkiye’s Kurtulmuş,” *Daily Sabah*, September 7, 2023.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*

require a synergetic interaction on various levels between the Turkic states.”<sup>81</sup>

Azerbaijan’s President İlham Aliyev held out an even more expansive vision in his speech at the 9<sup>th</sup> Summit of the OTS, stating that “the Turkic world does not consist only of independent Turkic states. Its geographical boundaries are wider.”<sup>82</sup> Some suggest, indeed worry, that “the OTS may stoke the emergence of nationalist ambitions among Turks.”<sup>83</sup> Yet Binali Yıldırım, Chairman of the Council of Elders, reassured that the OTS is not an expression of pan-Turkish nationalism: “some believe the Turks are dreaming about their old ambitions. However, our aim is to develop regional cooperation, enhance the well-being of people and make security permanent.” In a similar vein, Türkiye’s ambassador to China, Abdülkadir Emin Önen, assured that the “OTS does not follow ethnicity-based policy among its members or in third countries.”<sup>84</sup>

Nonetheless, ethnicity-based policies contribute to furthering a sense of unity among the member states of the OTS. President Aliyev underlined that the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 was “a real test for this cooperation.”<sup>85</sup> The OTS was the second power after Türkiye to endorse Azerbaijan’s cause in the war. Noting that the OTS “reacted immediately” from day one and gave “strong support” to his country, Aliyev argued that such support has “strengthened the Turkic world.”<sup>86</sup> Turkish analyst Mehmet Yüce similarly argues that Türkiye’s military-industrial achievements represent a security guarantee for all of the Turkish states.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Gürçan, “Erdogan envisions alliance of Turkic-speaking states.

<sup>82</sup> Akçay, “Does the Organization of Turkic States Worry China and Russia?”.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*

<sup>85</sup> “The United States of the Turkic World,” *Middle East Monitor*, November 15, 2021.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*

<sup>87</sup> “Türk Devletleri Teşkilatına üye ülkeler arasında ikili ilişkilere bakış”, Mehmet Yüce, *Kriter*, November 2022.



Ultimately, military cooperation between the member states of the OTS may prove far more consequential than cultural endeavors like the establishment in 2022 of a Common Alphabet Commission to further the transition to a standard Turkic alphabet.

Even though the OTS has not materialized in a historical-cultural vacuum and instead represents a resurrection of the attempts a century ago to forge Turkic unity across Eurasia, ethnicity – or more precisely a common linguistic as well as more dubious notion of a cultural heritage that is supposed to unite the lands between Istanbul and Samarkand – ultimately matters less than material interests. Turkic unity is valued and promoted only as far as it aligns with the economic-political state interests of the individual members of the OTS and is discarded when it contravenes those interests. While the OTS has embraced the cause of Azerbaijan, it has pointedly not embraced that of the Turkish Cypriots, despite Türkiye's repeated efforts to make use of the OTS as a platform for a further international recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).

These efforts appeared to have borne fruit when the TRNC was accorded observer status at the 9<sup>th</sup> summit of the OTS in Samarkand. This development was enthusiastically welcomed, with one Turkish academic touting it as “the real expression and example of the vision of solidarity in the Turkish world.”<sup>88</sup> Yet to Türkiye's dismay, Kazakhstan, the host of the 10<sup>th</sup> summit of the OTS held in Astana in November 2023, refused to extend any invitation to the TRNC, effectively voiding the observer status that the Turkish Cypriot breakaway state was granted a year before. Presumably, Kazakhstan, a country eager to develop and nurture its ties with the United States and the European Union (as are the other Central Asian members of the OTS) did not want to convey the impression that it challenges the rules

---

<sup>88</sup>Suleyman Kızıltoprak, “Türk dünyasında bütünleşmeye doğru: Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı, *Anadolu Ajansı*, November 11, 2022 .

of the international order by hosting an entity that is internationally unrecognized, however Turkic it may be. In the words of Metin Gürcan, “the lack of support for the Turkish Cypriots shows that the Turkic Council (and now the OTS) rests largely on an economy-focused pragmatism rather than ethnic idealism.”<sup>89</sup>

The Turkic states’ reluctance to recognize and include the TRNC not only underlines the ultimately non-ethnic character of the cooperation that the OTS embodies, it is also indicative of Türkiye’s limited ability to exercise an uncontested leadership role among the group of Turkic states.

---

<sup>89</sup> Gürcan, “Erdogan envisions alliance of Turkic-speaking states.

# Türkiye-Azerbaijan Relations: The Building of an Alliance

*Ali Hajizade*

To keen observers of the South Caucasus, it is no secret that Turkish and Azerbaijani leaders, as well as much of their population, define their relations as being "one nation, two states." It would probably not be an overstatement to say that the cooperation level that exists between the two states is a rare occurrence in the world.

Statements of the heads of the two states help us better understand the essence and depth of these relations. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has stated that: "Türkiye is not only our friend and partner but also a brotherly country for us. Without any hesitation whatsoever, we support Türkiye and will support it under any circumstances".<sup>90</sup> As for Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, he noted that "we continue our efforts to strengthen our relations and cooperation in all areas within the framework of the motto 'one nation, two states.'"<sup>91</sup>

What do these words mean in practice? Since 1992, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have consistently developed deep and multifaceted ties in a variety of areas, but upon closer examination, it is possible to identify two main priority areas: military cooperation and energy, along with a common stance on many international and regional issues. Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan,

---

<sup>90</sup> "Azerbaijan Supports Turkey 'without Any Hesitation,'" September 3, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/azerbaijan-supports-turkey-without-any-hesitation>.

<sup>91</sup> Diyar Guldogan, "Azerbaijan's Recent Victory in Karabakh 'Matter of Pride': Turkish President Erdogan," September 25, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/azerbaijans-recent-victory-in-karabakh-matter-of-pride-turkish-president-erdogan/3000640>.

unlike other alliances in various corners of the world, was rarely of a declarative nature and often manifested itself in practical measures. For example, after Armenia occupied the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan in early 1993, as a sign of solidarity and support for Azerbaijan, Türkiye closed its border with Armenia.<sup>92</sup> Since then, the border between the two countries has remained closed.

This is not to say that there have never been any disagreements between the two countries. Negotiations on energy matters have frequently proven feisty. But nothing compares to the so-called “Zurich Protocols,”<sup>93</sup> which were signed between Türkiye and Armenia in 2009. The protocols provided for the normalization of relations between Türkiye and Armenia, including the opening of the border and establishment of diplomatic relations. However, Azerbaijani leaders believed that these protocols did not take into consideration the interests of Azerbaijan. The negotiations and subsequent signature of the protocols caused discontent in Baku and brought Turkish-Azerbaijani relations to a historic low. As a result, Ankara linked the implementation of the protocols with the liberation of the territories of Azerbaijan that were under Armenian occupation at that time.<sup>94</sup> Since this situation, Ankara has generally coordinated with Baku its stance on and contacts with Armenia. Paradoxically, this crisis ultimately served to strengthen political ties and intensify dialogue at the highest level.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> “Relations between Türkiye and Armenia,” n.d., <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkiye-and-armenia.en.mfa>.

<sup>93</sup> “Zurich Protocols,” n.d., [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/site\\_media/html/zurih-protokolleri-en.pdf](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/site_media/html/zurih-protokolleri-en.pdf).

<sup>94</sup> Vladimir Socor, “US Conflict Resolution Policy Backfires in Yerevan,” April 27, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/us-conflict-resolution-policy-backfires-in-yerevan/>.

<sup>95</sup> “Turkey to Coordinate Armenia Rapprochement with Azerbaijan,” September 27, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-to-coordinate-armenia-rapprochement-with-azerbaijan>.

## **Military Cooperation: The Building of an Alliance**

In the field of military cooperation, Ankara and Baku signed an agreement on cooperation on military education in August 1992, at the height of the First Karabakh War.<sup>96</sup> Thus, Azerbaijan became one of the first post-Soviet states to establish cooperation on military education with a NATO member state. On June 10, 1996, the parties signed another agreement on “military education, as well as technical and scientific cooperation in the military field.” Presently, thousands of officers who graduated from Turkish military academies serve in the Azerbaijani army. According to the former chief of the general staff of the Turkish army, Hulusi Akar, in 2015 the number of Azerbaijani military personnel who received military training in Türkiye was over 7,000.<sup>97</sup> Intensive long-term military cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan has allowed Azerbaijan to bring its army close to NATO standards.

In 2010, the two countries signed a Joint Declaration on the establishment of the Council on high-level strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye.<sup>98</sup> At that time, this step was considered a transition to a new level of allied relations between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The second paragraph of the agreement on “Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance” stipulates the provision of military assistance if one of the signatories is subject to an external attack.<sup>99</sup> Eleven years later, these same provisions were reaffirmed in the Shusha Declaration, which took the relationship one step

---

<sup>96</sup> “Azərbaycan və Türkiyə Arasında Hərbi Əməkdaşlıq İnkişaf Etdirilməlidir,” March 11, 2011, <http://anl.az/down/meqale/525/2011/mart/162438.htm>.

<sup>97</sup> Rufiz Hafizoglu, “Chief of General Staff Hails Level of Co-Op between Azerbaijani, Turkish Armed Forces,” October 6, 2015, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2440789.html>.

<sup>98</sup> “Relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan,” n.d., <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkiye-and-azerbaijan.en.mfa>.

<sup>99</sup> “‘Azərbaycan Respublikası və Türkiyə Respublikası Arasında Strateji Tərəfdaşlıq və Qarşılıqlı Yardım Haqqında’ Müqavilənin Təsdiq Edilməsi Barədə Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu,” December 21, 2010, <https://e-qanun.az/framework/21158>.

further. The signing of this document on June 15, 2021 was a landmark event in relations between Baku and Ankara.<sup>100</sup> According to some experts, the declaration “cemented” the Azerbaijani-Turkish Alliance.<sup>101</sup> The declaration covers a wide range of issues, including regional security-related issues. The Shusha Declaration is the first document signed between Türkiye and Azerbaijan that uses the word “alliance,”<sup>102</sup> and it amounts to a mutual defense treaty between the two countries.<sup>103</sup> Thus, Azerbaijan became the first post-Soviet state to effectively be provided with the security umbrella of a NATO member.

The military agreements between the two countries on one hand facilitate deeper military-technical cooperation; on the other hand, they enhance Türkiye's role and influence in the South Caucasus and provide Türkiye with a basis for extending this influence further to Central Asia.

Corporations that are now essential actors in the Turkish defense industry began to show interest in Azerbaijan in the 1990s. In 1998, one of the most significant actors in the Turkish military industry, ASELSAN, opened its office in Baku.<sup>104</sup> Today, Azerbaijan is not just a buyer<sup>105</sup> of Turkish military

---

<sup>100</sup> “Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey,” June 21, 2021, <https://coe.mfa.gov.az/en/news/3509/%20shusha-declaration-on-allied-relations-between-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-and-the-republic-of-türkiye>.

<sup>101</sup> Fuad Shahbazov, “Shusha Declaration Cements Azerbaijani-Turkish Alliance,” June 23, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/shusha-declaration-cements-azerbaijani-turkish-alliance/>.

<sup>102</sup> Ruslan Rehimov, “Landmark Shusha Declaration between Türkiye, Azerbaijan Turns Year-Old,” June 15, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/landmark-shusha-declaration-between-turkiye-azerbaijan-turns-year-old/2614301>.

<sup>103</sup> “Azərbaycan Respublikası ilə Türkiyə Respublikası Arasında Müttəfiqlik Münasibətləri Haqqında Şuşa Bəyannaməsi,” June 16, 2021, <https://president.az/az/articles/view/52122>.

<sup>104</sup> “Azərbaycan və Türkiyə Arasında Hərbi Əməkdaşlıq İnkişaf Etdirilməlidir.”

<sup>105</sup> “Türkiyə'nin Azərbaycan'a Silah İhracatı Yüzde 600 Arttı,” December 3, 2020, <https://www.yenisafak.com/ekonomi/turkiyenin-azerbaycana-silah-ihracati-yuzde-600-artti-3587900>.

industry products worth hundreds of millions of dollars but also a partner of major Turkish defense industry developers and manufacturers.<sup>106</sup> It is no coincidence that after the Turkish government created the positions of "defense industry cooperation attachés" at the Turkish embassies, the first such attaché, Ilker Türköz, was appointed to Azerbaijan.<sup>107</sup> Every year, Azerbaijan and Türkiye conduct joint military exercises both in Türkiye and in Azerbaijan. During these exercises, the two militaries practice scenarios and mechanisms for joint operations.

The Azerbaijani military also frequently participates in international military exercises held in Türkiye. One of the largest joint exercises took place in Azerbaijan shortly before the second Karabakh war in July-August 2020, with the participation of Turkish F-16s and ground forces of both countries.<sup>108</sup> During the 44-day war, several Turkish F-16s remained in Azerbaijan as what President Aliyev termed a deterrent in the event of "aggression committed from outside" against Azerbaijan.<sup>109</sup> This statement likely referred to deterrence against a possible Russian or Iranian intervention to assist Armenia in the war.

Türkiye, through its various high-ranking representatives, also expressed its support for Azerbaijan during the hostilities in the Tovuz area in July 2020, preceding the 44-day war. For example, Ismail Demir, the head of the Turkish Defense Industries Presidency, following a meeting with the Azerbaijani military, stated that: "With all its technology, capacity and

---

<sup>106</sup> Tapdıq Fərhadov, "Azərbaycan və Türkiyə Birgə Pilotsuz Uçuş Aparatları İstehsal Edəcək," April 28, 2023, <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7069283.html>.

<sup>107</sup> "Türkiyə Xarici Ölkələrdə İlk Dəfə Azərbaycana Müdafiə Sənayesi Müşaviri Təyin Edib," September 6, 2023, <https://report.az/xarici-siyaset/turkiye-xarici-olkelerde-ilk-defe-azerbaycana-mudafie-senayesi-musaviri-teyin-edib/>.

<sup>108</sup> "Azərbaycan-Türkiyə Təlimləri Mediada: Ermənistan 'Göz Dağı,'" July 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/region-53574476>.

<sup>109</sup> "If There Is Aggression Against Azerbaijan, Aggressor Will Collide with F-16," October 26, 2020, [https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2020/10/free/politics\\_news/en/129152.htm](https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2020/10/free/politics_news/en/129152.htm).

experience, Türkiye's defense industry is at Azerbaijan's disposal, from armed unmanned aerial vehicles to missiles and electronic battle systems."<sup>110</sup>

After the Second Karabakh War, military and military-technical cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan continued to expand. It is noteworthy that President Erdoğan and Turkish commandos participated in the Baku victory parade on December 10, 2020.<sup>111</sup> In 2022, Baykar Makina, the manufacturer of world-famous Turkish Bayraktar drones, opened a branch in Azerbaijan.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, Azerbaijani specialists are actively involved in developing and producing Turkish weapons.

In September 2023, Türkiye expressed its full support for what Baku termed an "anti-terror operation" carried out against Armenian separatists and the Armenian Armed Forces' units in the area of temporary deployment of the Russian peacekeeping contingent.<sup>113</sup>

## **Economic Relations**

Along with the military and the military-technical component of Azerbaijani-Turkish cooperation, the economic component currently focusing on energy is also a strategically important aspect of the

---

<sup>110</sup> Gokhan Ergocun, "Turkey, Azerbaijan Discuss Defense Industry Cooperation," July 17, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-azerbaijan-discuss-defense-industry-cooperation/1913897>.

<sup>111</sup> "Azerbaijan Celebrates Nagorno-Karabakh Victory, Erdogan Attends," December 10, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/10/azerbaijan-celebrates-nagorno-karabakh-victory-erdogan-attends>.

<sup>112</sup> Shawn Johnson, "Türkiye's Baykar Makina Set up Office in Azerbaijan," December 27, 2022, <https://biz.crast.net/turkiyes-baykar-makina-set-up-office-in-azerbaijan/>.

<sup>113</sup> "Turkey Supports 'Steps Taken by Azerbaijan' in Nagorno-Karabakh," September 20, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/turkey-supports-steps-taken-by-azerbaijan-in-nagorno-karabakh-erdogan>.



relationship. Türkiye is Azerbaijan's leading trading partner, with trade between the two countries exceeding \$5 billion in 2021.<sup>114</sup>

According to 2021 data, Azerbaijani investments in Türkiye exceeded \$20 billion.<sup>115</sup> Concerning Azerbaijani investments in Türkiye, it is worth emphasizing that a significant share of investment is in the energy sector of Türkiye. For example, Azerbaijani investments in the STAR refinery made Azerbaijan the greatest single investor in modern Turkish history, with an initial value of \$6.3 billion.<sup>116</sup> Thanks to these investments, the Azerbaijani company SOCAR has become one of the major actors in the Turkish energy market. Through SOCAR, Azerbaijan also supplies natural gas to Türkiye, thereby reducing Türkiye's dependence on Russian and Iranian gas. In March 2020, Azerbaijan became the largest natural gas exporter to Türkiye, surpassing Russia and Iran for the first time in history.<sup>117</sup> In February 2023, Azerbaijan announced plans to increase gas exports to Türkiye by 19 percent and bring their volume to 10 billion cubic meters during 2023.<sup>118</sup>

In addition to being a buyer of Azerbaijan's natural resources, Türkiye is also an important transit country for Azerbaijani oil and gas to reach world markets. The main export oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, and the gas pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, pass through Türkiye. Azerbaijan also has access to the Turkish transport infrastructure through the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars

---

<sup>114</sup> "Economic Relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan," n.d.,

<https://www.mfa.gov.tr/economic-relations-between-turkey-and-azerbaijan.en.mfa>.

<sup>115</sup> "Economic Relations," n.d., <https://ankara.mfa.gov.az/en/content/99/economic-relations#:~:text=Approximately%20%2C000%20companies%20with%20Azerbaijani,-oil%20and%20gas%20sector>.

<sup>116</sup> Turan Gafarli, "Turkey's Stance on the Recent Escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan," September 2020, <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Turkey-Azerbaijan-Armenia.pdf>.

<sup>117</sup> Gafarli.

<sup>118</sup> "Azerbaijan to Boost Gas Exports to Turkey by 19% to 10 Bcm in 2023," February 3, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/azerbaijan-boost-gas-exports-turkey-by-19-10-bcm-2023-2023-02-03/>.

railway. Gas from Azerbaijan is delivered to consumers in Europe through the TAP and TANAP gas pipelines, in the development of which Türkiye played an important role. Against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijani gas and Türkiye as a transit country have acquired a particular role in ensuring the EU's energy security.

For quite some time, Azerbaijan has been taking steps to realize its potential as a producer and exporter of green energy generated by renewable sources. Azerbaijan intends to export this energy to Europe through Georgia via a cable to be laid under the Black Sea.<sup>119</sup>

In June 2023, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Energy signed a memorandum of understanding with Nobel Energy Management on the construction of a 400MW solar power plant in Nakhchivan and the subsequent export of electricity to Türkiye.<sup>120</sup> In 2023, a memorandum on the transit of electricity generated from renewable sources was signed between the ministries of energy of the two countries.<sup>121</sup> Also, Türkiye and Azerbaijan, along with Georgia, are considered the gateway to Central Asia. Delivering energy from Central Asia to the West via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye could play a crucial role in ensuring the EU's energy security and in parallel, reduce Russia's influence in Central Asia. The model of cooperation

---

<sup>119</sup> Mateusz Kubiak, "Azerbaijan Set to Become a Green Energy Supplier to the EU," January 5, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-set-to-become-a-green-energy-supplier-to-the-eu/>.

<sup>120</sup> "The Use of Renewable Energy Resources in Azerbaijan," June 14, 2023, <https://minenergy.gov.az/en/alternativ-ve-berpa-olunan-enerji/azerbaycanda-berpa-olunan-enerji-menbelerinden-istifade#:~:text=On%202017%20December%202022%2C%20the,the%20approval%20of%20the%20agreement.>

<sup>121</sup> "Azərbaycan və Türkiyə Bərpa Olunan Enerjinin Ötürülməsi Sahəsində Sənəd İmzalayıb," August 25, 2023, <https://renewables.az/public/news/azerbaycan-ve-turkiye-berpa-olunan-enerjinin-oturulmesi-sahesinde-sened-imzalayib-2023-09-25-200209>.

between Türkiye and Azerbaijan is also an important example for the Turkic states of Central Asia. Türkiye is trying to play a more active role in this region both within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States and on a bilateral basis.<sup>122</sup>

Against the backdrop of active military and economic cooperation, the solidarity of Türkiye and Azerbaijan on foreign policy issues is increasingly noticeable. One of the notable examples, which was actually difficult to foresee even a year ago, is the visit of the president of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Ersin Tatar, to Azerbaijan. Mr. Tatar had a busy schedule in Baku, but the culmination of this schedule was Tatar's meeting with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.<sup>123</sup> This can be considered a significant milestone in the solidarity between Baku and Ankara; it is worth recalling that presently the TRNC is recognized only by Türkiye.

Although the main fields of cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan are defense and energy, the two states also actively support each other on humanitarian issues like during natural disasters. When severe forest fires in the summer of 2021 engulfed forest areas in various regions of Türkiye, Azerbaijan was among the first to respond and sent its firefighters and equipment to help extinguish fires. Despite modest capabilities and forest fire threats in Azerbaijan itself, Azerbaijani firefighters and rescuers became the largest group among those who arrived in Türkiye to help put out the fires.<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Ali Hajizade, "Turkey in Central Asia, It Is Not Just About Schools and Construction," April 20, 2021, <https://thegeopolitics.com/turkey-in-central-asia-it-is-not-just-about-schools-and-construction/>.

<sup>123</sup> "Ilham Aliyev Received President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Ersin Tatar," October 14, 2023, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/61573>.

<sup>124</sup> "Muğla'da Orman Yangını Söndürme Çalışmalarına Destek Veren Azerbaycanlı İtfaiyeciler, Trabzon'da Coşkuyla Karşılandı," August 21, 2021,

In February 2023, after a powerful earthquake hit eastern Türkiye and caused massive casualties and destruction, Azerbaijani rescuers became one of the first foreign rescuers to arrive in Türkiye. But Azerbaijan did not limit itself to sending rescuers and humanitarian aid. Azerbaijan decided to actively join the reconstruction efforts as well. At the initiative of the Azerbaijani government, a residential complex with 1,000 apartments is being built in the Turkish city of Kahramanmaraş, which will include a school, a mosque, and other necessary infrastructure elements.<sup>125</sup> The presidents of both countries connected via video call for the groundbreaking ceremony for the complex from Baku, where they attended Teknofest.

While Azerbaijani construction companies work in the earthquake zone in Türkiye, large Turkish companies are actively involved in restoration works in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan in Karabakh. Turkish companies are involved in the construction and restoration of road infrastructure,<sup>126</sup> and in order to facilitate and speed up reconstruction works, Azerbaijani authorities use the Turkish tender system,<sup>127</sup> which also contributed to the increase in the number of Turkish construction companies operating in Karabakh.

---

<https://www.trtavaz.com.tr/haber/tur/avrasyadan/muglada-orman-yangini-sondurme-calismalarina-destek-veren-azerbaycanli-itfaiyec/611bcb2901a30a075ca49f49>.

<sup>125</sup> "Azerbaycan'ın Yapacağı 1000 Konutun Temeli Atıldı," n.d.,

<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/azerbaycanin-yapacagi-1000-konutun-temeli-atildi-42259075>.

<sup>126</sup> "Azerbaycan Karabağ'da Yol Projesini Türk Şirket Yapacak," n.d.,

<https://insaatelemanı.com/azerbaycan-karabagda-yol-projesini-turk-sirket-yapacak>.

<sup>127</sup> "Karabağ'ın İnşasında Türkiye Modeli," January 21, 2021,

<https://www.trthaber.com/haber/azerbaycan/karabagin-insasinda-turkiye-modeli-548259.html>.

## **Conclusions**

September 2023 turned out to be particularly momentous in Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations. During the meeting of the two Presidents in Nakhchivan, the foundation of the Iğdir-Nakhchivan gas pipeline was laid, and a protocol of intent for the construction of the Kars-Nakhchivan railway was signed.<sup>128</sup> These steps were essentially intended to reduce the dependence of Nakhchivan and, ultimately, of Azerbaijan in general on Iranian gas supplies and transit facilities. Since the restoration of its independence, Azerbaijan has not had direct and continuous land communication with Nakhchivan; land communication was carried out through the territory of Iran. Also, Nakhchivan's autonomy was fully dependent on gas supplies from Iran. This was certainly used by Iran as leverage in relations with Azerbaijan. Supplying Nakhchivan with Azerbaijani gas via Türkiye and connecting Nakhchivan to the Turkish railway network and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway will, on the one hand, lead to a decrease in the importance of Iran and on the other hand, to an increase in the cooperation and interdependence between Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

Considering the turbulent situation in the world, it is reasonable to expect the two countries getting even closer in the military and economic spheres and actively pursuing coordinated policies in the regional geopolitical arena.

---

<sup>128</sup> "Azərbaycan-Türkiyə Sənədləri İmzalanıb," September 25, 2023, [https://azertag.az/xeber/azerbaycan\\_turkiye\\_senedleri\\_imzalanib\\_yenilenib\\_video-2761876](https://azertag.az/xeber/azerbaycan_turkiye_senedleri_imzalanib_yenilenib_video-2761876).

# **Türkiye-Kazakhstan Relations: A Strong Partnership in the Turkic World**

*Bayram Balcı*

In 1991, when the USSR imploded, Türkiye's interest in the Central Asian republics exploded. It was during this relatively recent period that Turkish diplomacy towards Kazakhstan began to take shape. The two states shared many points of kinship but were largely ignorant of each other, since the sealed Iron Curtain had prevented any contact until then. Official links between Türkiye and the Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia were only established with the demise of the Soviet Union. Even before the Soviet era, at the time of the Ottoman Empire, political links between Anatolia and Russian Turkestan were limited. It was only towards the end of the empire that the sultans, notably Abdülhamid, tried to forge closer links with the Muslims of the Russian and Chinese empires without any notable success. Even less fruitful were the attempts of the Young Turks to unite the Turks of Türkiye and those of Central Asia, even though one of the most illustrious of their number, Enver Pasha, died for this ideal while fighting the Bolsheviks in the mountains of what is now Tajikistan.

Bilateral relations between Türkiye and Kazakhstan are dynamic in almost all areas: political, economic, cultural and military. They are largely based on personal commitment and understanding between the leaders of the two countries and strengthening institutional ties. As a result, Türkiye's foreign policy towards the Turkic world has become a central pillar of state policy, above and beyond personal and partisan ties.

## **Political Relations, from Personal Links to Strategic Agreements**

As the first country to recognize Kazakhstan's independence, Türkiye and its leaders attached the greatest importance to political relations with this country and with the rest of the Turkic world. In thirty years of relations, Turkish heads of state, starting with Turgut Özal and on to Süleyman Demirel and now Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have made frequent visits to Kazakhstan. Similarly, the official authorities of Kazakhstan, including Nursultan Nazarbayev in the past and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev today, are regular visitors to Türkiye. As a result, strong political relations have led to the establishment of wide-ranging cooperation programs.

For Türkiye, Kazakhstan is crucial to the success of its general policy of building a Turkic world that stretches, in the words of Süleyman Demirel, "from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China." Indeed, of all the Turkic-speaking states of the former USSR, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are the most favourable to the idea of creating a political union bringing together the Turkic states.

For the Kazakh elites, Türkiye is an essential country in political strategy aimed at freeing the country from the Russian orbit and diversifying its foreign partners as part of the multi-vector policy launched by President Nursultan Nazarbayev and pursued by his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Certain Eurasianist elites, both Turks and Kazakhs, also share the sentiment that their two countries form a bridge between Europe and Asia.

The good relations between the two countries have led to the signing of a number of political agreements, including the 2009 "strategic partnership" agreement. In 2012, during then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit, a bilateral agreement was signed to implement "synergy in the economic development of the two countries." In the same year, during Nazarbayev's visit, a "high-level strategic partnership" agreement was also signed. Finally, in May 2022, President Tokayev paid another visit to Türkiye, during which he signed several cooperation agreements in various fields, strengthening the ties

between the two countries.<sup>129</sup> These good political relations are complemented by economic partnerships that have made steady progress since the country gained independence.

### **Economic Relations Set to Strengthen**

Kazakhstan is a country rich in natural resources and offers Türkiye many opportunities for cooperation. Alongside various minerals and metals, hydrocarbons are the main Kazakh exports to Türkiye. In return, Türkiye exports textiles, foodstuffs, and various industrial products to Kazakhstan.<sup>130</sup> But the construction and building sector deserves a special mention. Kazakhstan has embarked on far-reaching construction policies since its independence and has relied heavily on Turkish companies to build new cities in the country, notably the capital Astana. Finally, another feature of the Turkish economic presence in Kazakhstan is that Turkish companies are among the most numerous foreign companies established in the country. Some of the giants and flagships of Turkish industry are present, such as the Yıldırım Group, Tiryaki Holding, and TAV, which bought Astana airport in 2020.<sup>131</sup> But above all, by 2022, no fewer than 4,000 Turkish companies, albeit small, were working in Kazakhstan and criss-crossing the country.

---

<sup>129</sup> Asel Satubaldina, "Kazakhstan and Turkey Determined to Advance Strategic Partnership Through Investment and Business Cooperation", *The Astana Times*, May 11, 2022, <https://astanatimes.com/2022/05/kazakhstan-and-turkey-determined-to-advance-strategic-partnership-through-investment-and-business-cooperation>

<sup>130</sup> Özgür Nur Ögütçü, "The current state of relations between Kazakhstan and Turkey", *Avrasya İncelemeleri Merkezi/Center for Eurasian Studies*, September 2027, <https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/the-current-state-of-relations-between-kazakhstan-turkey>

<sup>131</sup> Tuba Sahin, "Turkey's TAV takes over operations at Almaty Airport", *Anadolu Ajansi*, Mai 31, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkeys-tav-takes-over-operations-at-almaty-airport/2225673>



In the field of fossil fuels, Kazakhstan has rapidly built cooperation with China, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to develop a pipeline network linking Central Asia to the Caucasus and Western Europe, in order to open up Central Asian oil and gas, to free itself from the Russian network, and to increase the volume of trade between several countries on the Eurasian continent. This policy will enable Astana to reduce its dependence on Russia.

However, despite the good political and economic relations with Türkiye, the volume of trade seems to be stagnating at a level that is not particularly high. In 2023, it barely reached \$ 5 billion, but the leaders of the two countries express hope that it will reach \$ 10 billion in 2030.

### **Soft Power, Türkiye's Greatest Asset in Kazakhstan**

What gives bilateral relations the prospect of strengthening is the strength of Turkish soft power. Türkiye's cultural influence in Kazakhstan is deep and growing, giving the country and its products and services a good reputation.

Numerous initiatives and actions undertaken by the Turkish state and various non-state actors have contributed to Türkiye's influence in Central Asia in general and in Kazakhstan in particular. While the Turkish government has been criticised for having an over-ambitious, unrealistic policy that was out of touch with the realities of the Central Asian countries it was targeting, in reality, Turkish initiatives have been crowned with success in the field of ideas and the humanities.<sup>132</sup>

In the field of education, Türkiye has implemented a major student exchange policy between Türkiye and the Turkic world, which has benefited

---

<sup>132</sup> Hayriye Kahveci, Işık Kuşçu Bonnenfant, "Turkish Foreign Policy Towards Central Asia: An Unfolding of Regionalism and Soft Power", *All Azimuth*, 2023, <https://www.allazimuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/3-Turkish-Foreign-Policy-Towards-Central-Asia.pdf>

Turkish-Kazakh relations. Thousands of Kazakh students have received grants to study in Türkiye. In 2022, there were approximately 2,300 Kazakh students throughout Türkiye. Similarly, universities in Türkiye and Central Asia have been linked by a policy of diploma equivalence, which has encouraged the development of significant university cooperation and the mixing of students from Türkiye and the rest of the world. The crowning achievement of this cooperation between Türkiye and Kazakhstan was the creation of the Ahmet Yesevi Turkish-Kazakh University in the southern city of Turkestan.<sup>133</sup> The reference to Ahmet Yesevi and the location of the university just a few hundred metres from his mausoleum are no coincidence. In the history of the Turkic world, Ahmet Yesevi is considered to be a common point of reference, a founding spiritual father and federator between the various Turkic peoples of the steppe, with a notable influence on the mystical Turkish Islam of Anatolia. Today, thirty years after it was founded, the university is one of the largest in Kazakhstan and one of two state universities established by Türkiye in the Turkic world, the second being Manas University in Kyrgyzstan.

Cooperation in the field of religion is also an important aspect of Türkiye's policy of forging closer ties with Kazakhstan in the field of ideas. Lacking religious elites after the Soviet era, where Islam was confined to the private sphere, Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states called on several foreign countries to train new elites and rehabilitate religious sites. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries responded, but not to the same extent as Türkiye. The Turkish state played an active part in the revival of Islam by helping the authorities to introduce a new religious policy. The

---

<sup>133</sup> Meiramgul Kussainova, "Türkiye ile Kazakistan'ın kurduğu Ahmet Yesevi Üniversitesi daha fazla öğrenci kabul etmeye hazırlanıyor", *Anadolu Ajansı*, August 15, 2008, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/egitim/turkiye-ile-kazakistanin-kurdugu-ahmet-yesevi-universitesi-daha-fazla-ogrenci-kabul-etmeye-hazirlaniyor/2967900>

Diyanet, the official body for managing Islam in Türkiye, sent dozens of imams to Kazakhstan.<sup>134</sup> Above all, it has set up a theology faculty in the city of Shymkent, where hundreds, if not thousands, of managers working in the religious sphere and other spheres have been trained. In the same spirit, Kazakh students have been trained in Türkiye at various theology faculties. Finally, the Diyanet has also participated in the construction or renovation of mosques and has distributed a large amount of Islamic literature in Russian and Kazakh.

Lastly, another initiative by the Turkish state, despite its weak initial response in Kazakhstan, deserves to be mentioned. This was Ankara's effort to get all the Turkic states to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet in favour of the Latin alphabet to improve communication within the Turkic world. To achieve this, Turkish linguists worked on developing a Latin alphabet suitable for all Turkish languages and tried to get each country to adopt it. While Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, with Türkiye's support, have switched to a Latin alphabet that is very close to the one advocated by Türkiye, Kazakhstan has not yet done so, but Türkiye continues to offer strong incentives to adopt this reform.<sup>135</sup> A presidential decree stipulates that the Kazakh language will be written in the Latin alphabet by 2031.<sup>136</sup> True, the switch to the Latin alphabet is not intended solely to satisfy Türkiye, but rather to distance Kazakhstan from Russia and to write its language in more universal characters. Still, these language reforms in

---

<sup>134</sup> Bayram Balci, "Turkey's religious outreach in the Turkic World", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 11, 2014, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/turkey-s-religious-outreach-and-the-turkic-world>,

<sup>135</sup> Andrew Linn, "Kazakhstan is changing its alphabet – here's why", *The Independent*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/linguistics/kazakhstan-is-changing-its-alphabet-here-s-why-a8068851.html>

<sup>136</sup> Asel Satubaldina, "Kazakhstan Presents New Latin Alphabet, Plans Gradual Transition Through 2031", *Astana Times*, February 1, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/02/kazakhstan-presents-new-latin-alphabet-plans-gradual-transition-through-2031/>

Kazakhstan and the rest of the Turkic world promote Türkiye's policy of influence in the post-Soviet space.

But cooperation in the field of ideas is not the prerogative of the Turkish state alone. Reflecting the dynamism of Turkish associative life and the non-state sector since the 1980s, Turkish non-governmental organizations have made a major contribution to the development of a Turkish sphere of influence throughout the former socialist area since the end of the Cold War. Since the reforms initiated by Turgut Özal begun in January 1980, private companies, foundations, and religious groups have played a major political role not only in bilateral relations but also in Turkish foreign policy. In the case of Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia, private investment in Türkiye's policy of influence has been embodied mainly by religious groups of essentially *Nakshibendi* obedience. The community of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, the Süleymanci, as well as the followers of Osman Nur Topbas, another religious figure also related to *Nakshbandiyya*, have opened modest madrasas in several towns in Kazakhstan to promote their vision of Sunni Islam.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, various small groups stemming from the *Nurcu* movement, founded by Said Nursi, have been active in establishing religious links between Türkiye and Kazakhstan. In this respect, the community of Fethullah Gülen, which sometimes claims to be part of the *Nurcu* movement, deserves particular attention because of the considerable role it has played in Turkish influence in Kazakhstan.

Since 1991, the *Fethullahci*, followers of Fethullah Gülen, have been present throughout the post-communist area, and not just in Kazakhstan but also in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Many of them came to work there, claiming to follow the ideas of Fethullah Gülen's movement. In

---

<sup>137</sup> Bayram Balci, "Islamic revival in Central Asia", Rico Issacs, Erica Marat (Eds), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia*, 2021, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429057977-35/islamic-renewal-central-asia-bayram-balci?context=ubx&refId=f89289e6-2f66-49fc-b710-865bcbb709d6>

Türkiye, this movement, ambiguous in its relationship with politics, secularism, and the state, saw itself as a community of faith seeking to help Muslims improve themselves through education. Thousands of members of this community, which has its origins in Hanafi Sunni Islam but is strongly influenced by Turkish nationalism and guided by the teachings of its master Gülen, set up educational and religious foundations, media, and businesses throughout Türkiye. Since 1991, other representatives of this same community have travelled throughout Central Asia to set up schools, newspapers, and businesses – in other words, an armada of networks of influence. In Kazakhstan, this community helped to establish around thirty secondary schools, a university named after Süleyman Demirel, and numerous other commercial enterprises.

Between 1991 and 2016, relations between Turkish embassies and Fethullah Gülen's establishments in Central Asia were generally very good. Occasionally, some ambassadors, who were attached to Atatürk's secular ideals, did not hide their irritation with this movement, which was seen as a threat to Atatürk's legacy. But because their actions served the country's interests, criticism was muted. With the arrival of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to power, relations between the government and the various Gülenist institutions expanded both in Türkiye and abroad. In Central Asia, and more particularly in Kazakhstan, a good symbiosis was observed between the players in Turkish politics and the institutions linked to Fethullah Gülen. But this understanding between the two strongmen in Türkiye, Erdoğan and Gülen, deteriorated for a variety of reasons – above all a question of power and rivalry in domestic and even foreign politics. With the failed coup of July 2016, attributed by the Turkish authorities to Gülenist forces infiltrating the structures of the state – particularly the army, police, and judiciary – the rupture between the two men became brutal, total, and with vindictive consequences. The total war of eradication launched by the state against the Gülen movement was not limited to Türkiye. Indeed, from the day after the putsch, in Kazakhstan as elsewhere in the world, the ultimate

aim of Turkish diplomacy was to do everything possible to totally eliminate the Gülenist movement, now declared a terrorist organisation and severely repressed in Türkiye.

In practice, in Kazakhstan and elsewhere, Turkish diplomacy has used all diplomatic means – intimidation, threats, blackmail, bargaining – to obtain the closure of all Gülen institutions and the neutralization of its members. The Kazakh authorities reacted to this open war between Erdoğan and Gülen in two stages. Initially, considering that this confrontation only concerned Türkiye, the Kazakh authorities tried to remain neutral and refused to heed Türkiye's demands to close all Gülen schools and to transfer them to a new organisation, the Maarif Foundation, set up by the Turkish government to take over the Gülen establishments everywhere. Aware of the value of the Gülen schools in their country, but also out of a principle of sovereignty, the Kazakh authorities did not want to comply with Erdoğan's demands.<sup>138</sup> However, faced with the insistence of the Turkish authorities, Kazakhstan reached a compromise. The various Gülenist institutions were closed, but not handed over to Türkiye. Instead, they were incorporated into the Kazakh Ministry of National Education. As for the representatives of the Gülen movement, some went into exile in Western countries, while others remained but were asked not to engage in any political activity hostile to Erdoğan's government.

Over 25 years of varying activities, between 1991 and 2016, the schools and other establishments of the Gülen movement, in close cooperation with Türkiye, have trained hundreds of pupils and students who have gone on to become executives and leaders. Although decried by the authorities in Türkiye and just about everywhere else in the world, it is a fact that they

---

<sup>138</sup> Catherine Putz, "Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Reject Turkish Calls to Close Gülen Schools", *The Diplomat*, August 1, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/kazakhstan-and-kyrgyzstan-reject-turkish-calls-to-close-gulen-schools/>

have contributed to the spread of Turkish influence in Kazakhstan. Thanks to them, throughout Kazakhstan there are connoisseurs of Türkiye, speakers of Turkish, and men and women who have played an important role in establishing and developing Turkish-Kazakh relations. The break between the Turkish government and this movement has had a negative impact on Türkiye's ability to influence all the countries where the Gülenists were present. But at the same time, other movements, and the Turkish government itself, have been able to replace the Gülenists so that Türkiye can continue to exert a certain amount of soft power. In Kazakhstan, as elsewhere, Turkish influence did not cease with the split between Gülen and Erdoğan. In general terms, Türkiye's influence has even increased, acquiring a new dimension in the form of military cooperation.

### **Military Cooperation, Türkiye's New Trump Card in Central Asia**

In recent years, Türkiye has been particularly conspicuous – and has annoyed some of its own allies – for its interventionism, including military intervention, in several conflicts in its geopolitical environment. In Syria, in the context of the civil war that followed the Arab Spring, Türkiye carried out several military operations and occupied certain parts of Syrian territory to combat “Islamic State” and Kurdish separatism. The same Turkish interventionism was seen in Libya, where its military support enabled the legitimate government to confront the forces of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. And more recently in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Türkiye's military aid to Azerbaijan was decisive in its victory over the Armenian side. Nor should we forget Türkiye's military aid to Ukraine, which has enabled Kyiv to withstand Russia's aggression. In all these feats of arms, the media have focused on the most spectacular aspect, the use of Turkish drones. However, Turkish military know-how goes beyond this technological aspect alone and makes the country an attractive and influential partner. Its experience is much broader and is based on a long-standing arms industrial policy.

However, although Turkish military cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus began as early as independence, with a military attaché posted in each embassy, it is thanks to these recent interventionist measures that Türkiye has strengthened its military presence in the former USSR. As a result, military training to NATO standards, which Türkiye exports to these countries, as well as the purchase of Turkish equipment, has developed in the region. As for Kazakhstan, after having purchased Turkish drones, as did Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, an agreement has just been signed between Astana and Ankara for the manufacture of the Anka version of the Bayraktar drones in Kazakhstan.<sup>139</sup>

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, three key points should be made:

In thirty years of cooperation, Türkiye and Kazakhstan have succeeded in establishing an excellent relationship that has seen virtually no tension, apart from Turkish pressure on Astana to put an end to the activities of the Gülen movement. These relations cover all areas: political, educational, cultural, religious, economic, and even military. It is in the interests of both countries to cooperate both bilaterally and within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), whose development is of interest to both parties. For Türkiye, a stronger OTS is synonymous with the emergence of a Turkic bloc on the international stage. For Kazakhstan, a stronger OTS would enable it to balance its relations with Russia and the political organisations it belongs to, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO).

---

<sup>139</sup> Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan seals deal to produce Turkish drones under license", *Eurasianet*, May 13, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license>



However, the good relations between Türkiye and Kazakhstan do not mean that Russia has given up its desire for regional leadership. Although Türkiye's rise to power in Kazakhstan and Central Asia is taking place at the expense of Russia, the latter largely remains the unavoidable tutelary power. Indeed, to give just one example, in January 2020, when a popular uprising almost plunged Kazakhstan into chaos, it was thanks to Russia's intervention, within the framework of the CSTO, that calm was restored.<sup>140</sup> Russia's assistance in the restoration of order was a perfect illustration of the fact that Russia is still a key guarantor of stability in Central Asia, more so than Türkiye, which has seen the limits of its influence in the region in this crisis in Kazakhstan.

Finally, the good relationship between Türkiye and Kazakhstan does not mean that other powers, apart from Russia, do not have their sights set on regional leadership. China is now the main economic partner of most Central Asian countries. South Korea, the European Union and even the United States have forged good relations with Kazakhstan. In so doing, the country can pride itself on having succeeded in building a balanced, multidirectional foreign policy, finally free of a cumbersome "big brother," whoever that may be.

---

<sup>140</sup> Ezgi Yazici, "Kazakhstan Crisis Exposes Limits of Turkey's Reach in Central Asia", *Institute for Study of War*, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep39688>

# **Friends at Last: The Rapid Rise of Türkiye-Uzbekistan Relations**

*Svante E. Cornell*

Türkiye and Uzbekistan are, by far, the largest of the six Turkic-majority states. With populations of 85 and 35 million respectively, they constitute 120 of the 165 million of the population of Turkic-majority states. Furthermore, the two also have more varied and balanced economies than resource-dependent Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and have consistently been the most powerful military powers in the Turkic world. They are also custodians of some of the centers of the most illustrious historical empires that emerged in the broader region – the Ottoman and Timurid empires.

Obviously, there are major differences between them. Türkiye is much larger and more developed than Uzbekistan, with a GDP of \$3.2 trillion and \$33,000 per capita adjusted for purchasing power parity. Uzbekistan clocks in at \$450 billion and \$11,000 per capita. Türkiye is a NATO member with a long Mediterranean coastline and an established regional power, while Uzbekistan is a landlocked state that is building its status as a middle power.

## **Humble Beginnings**

Türkiye's relations with Uzbekistan initially followed a similar trajectory to Ankara's outreach to the other Turkic-majority states of Central Asia. Türkiye was the first country to recognize Uzbekistan's independence and welcomed 10,000 students from Turkic countries into Turkish universities. A considerable proportion of these were Uzbeks. Uzbekistan President, Islam Karimov, was the first regional Head of State to visit Türkiye in

December 1991. During this visit, Karimov made statements that indicated an enthusiasm about Turkic cooperation:

Ataturk's Principles are parallel to what we want to do in Uzbekistan. I am an admirer of Ataturk and I hope that the nations of Central Asia will achieve what he achieved in Turkey. I support the idea of unity of the Turkish people. This unity must be realized... we could call it the Turkic Common Market.

In spite of these encouraging words, a clash of sorts ensued as the reality of economic and cultural exchanges diverged from expectations. The core of the problem was related to the relationship between religion and state and more broadly to differences in the degree of control over society.

Türkiye at the time was a society in the process of opening up following the military rule of the early 1980s and had a flawed but vibrant electoral democracy. This differed strongly from Karimov's Uzbekistan, where the leadership considered it a matter of national security, even survival, to establish a strong central government to guide the country during the building of an independent state.

More specific was the matter of religion. Among the Turkish businesses and social groups that sought to develop relations with Central Asia, many were connected to religious brotherhoods, primarily of the Naqshbandi or Nur communities. These were met with suspicion in Uzbekistan, which was reeling from the showdown with radical Islamists in the Ferghana valley during the transition to independence and from the civil war in neighboring Tajikistan. But in Türkiye, these communities were closely linked to ruling parties of the center-right, not least the Motherland Party of Turgut Özal, whose family was strongly connected to the Naqshbandi order. In other words, Karimov was serious when he expressed his admiration for Ataturk's secularism – but in Türkiye, that secularism was slowly being watered down as relations between state and religion shifted.

Conversely, among Turkish nationalists, there was little love for the legacy leadership of most Turkic republics, which were tainted by their continuity with the Communist regime. Indeed, leaders like Karimov and Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan were long-time leaders of the Communist party. They had nevertheless worked to maintain some autonomy for their republics within the Soviet system. This fact, however, was lost on many Turkish nationalists that felt more commonality with opposition forces in these countries.

Against this background, bilateral relations were put in a difficult position when the Uzbek authorities suppressed the opposition forces that had stood against Karimov in the presidential election of December 1991. Opposition leader Muhammed Salih, a poet who combined avant-gardism with Sufi Islamic thought, managed to escape to Türkiye. The refusal of Turkish authorities to hand Salih over to Uzbekistan triggered a first crisis in relations. In 1994, Tashkent temporarily recalled all Uzbek students in Türkiye.

Two years later, the Islamist Necmettin Erbakan came to power as the senior partner in a coalition government and made no secret about his ambition to reorient Türkiye's foreign policy toward the Muslim Middle East. This horrified the leadership in Uzbekistan, as it was exactly the kind of development they hoped to avoid. As suspicion grew that Erbakan's movement sought to recruit and infiltrate the body of Uzbek students in Türkiye, Tashkent permanently recalled the 2,000 or so students that were left in Türkiye.

Relations temporarily improved under the successor government led by Mesut Yılmaz following the February 1997 military intervention in Türkiye. But in 1999, Uzbekistan alleged that Erbakan's movement had lent financial support to the radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which Tashkent blamed for a series of terrorist attacks in Tashkent in February 1999 that

nearly took Karimov's life. Tashkent also – with less evidence – accused Salih of being part of the plot. When Türkiye again refused to extradite Salih, relations took a serious downturn. Uzbekistan then closed many Turkish businesses and schools, particularly those associated with the Turkish Islamist Fethullah Gülen movement.

The election of the Islamist AKP in 2002 put relations in the freezer for a decade and a half. Prime Minister Erdoğan did travel to Tashkent in 2003 in an effort to build relations, but the gambit does not appear to have worked out. Matters were made worse two years later, when Türkiye joined with Western powers in condemning Uzbekistan for the crackdown on an Islamist uprising in Andijan in May 2005. And in 2011 – following the Arab Upheavals and Türkiye's support for Islamist causes across the Middle East – Uzbek authorities cracked down on Turkish businesses in Uzbekistan that were blamed for having links to religious radicalism.

### **The Turning of the Tide**

In the early 2010s, thus, Turkish-Uzbek relations were arguably the worst of any pair of Turkic states. This, in turn, prevented Turkic cooperation from blossoming. Türkiye was focused on promoting the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East, and Central Asia was a secondary consideration at best. Meanwhile, Tashkent viewed Turkish foreign policy largely as a negative, destabilizing force.

Two key events helped turn the tide in the relationship. The most obvious is the death of Islam Karimov and his replacement by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who proceeded to implement a rapid shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. But the tide had already shifted before that, as domestic developments in Türkiye led to a gradual shift away from Islamism as the dominant ideology in the country's domestic and foreign policies – and the rise of nationalism as the organizing principle of Turkish foreign policy.

The rift between Erdoğan and the Fethullah Gülen movement was a key factor in this shift, a rift that had emerged in 2011 but blew open in late 2013 as Gülen-affiliated prosecutors exposed far-reaching corruption in Erdoğan's inner circle. Erdoğan responded by striking an alliance with the far-right nationalists in the Turkish state institutions that had the wherewithal to begin to roll back the Gülenists. This, incidentally, brought Ankara in line with Tashkent's view of the Gülen movement as a dangerous, subversive force. If earlier Turkish efforts to promote the Gülen movement had led Tashkent to suspect Turkish intentions; now that Ankara actively worked to pressure other countries to suppress Gülen-related organizations, Tashkent's fears and suspicions were allayed.

This development also led to a greater influence of the military and intelligence bureaucracies in Turkish foreign policy. With that came a greater attention to Central Asia – and the rise to influence of forces that had maintained positive relations with Uzbekistan throughout. Indeed, while political relations had been in the freezer for years, Uzbek security institutions maintained positive contacts with their Turkish counterparts, with whom they had developed trust and whom they saw as unaffected by Erdoğan's Islamist ideology. It should also be mentioned that Türkiye's approach was now more respectful than in the 1990s, when Turkish representatives frequently came off as condescending toward their Central Asian counterparts.

As a result, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu paid a visit to Tashkent in 2014, indicating a slow thawing of relations. Events in the summer of 2016 would precipitate a rapid improvement. First, the failed July coup against Erdoğan cemented the nationalist forces as key powerbrokers in the Turkish state and, once the dust had settled, solidified a growing focus on Turkic states in Turkish foreign policy. Second, the death of Islam Karimov in August removed a major impediment to cooperation

with Türkiye: Karimov had personally harbored the strongest suspicions of Erdoğan and his government.

Erdoğan was now transforming himself into the leader of a nationalist coalition that had little intention of exporting Islamism into Central Asia. He jumped on the opportunity to visit the new leader of Uzbekistan. He was warmly welcomed in Samarkand in November 2016, and President Mirziyoyev reciprocated by visiting Türkiye in October 2017. Visa restrictions between the two states were rapidly curtailed, and the two began to develop cooperation in the economic field as well as in security affairs.

### **Bilateral and Multilateral Relations**

The rapprochement between Türkiye and Uzbekistan progressed rapidly, with a flurry of high-level visits over the ensuing years. President Mirziyoyev's October 2017 visit to Türkiye, the first by an Uzbek President in 19 years, was a key point – a "historical visit," in the words of Uzbek foreign minister Abdulaziz Kamilov. During this visit, the relationship between the two states was raised to the level of a strategic partnership.<sup>141</sup> The next year, a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was created between the two countries.<sup>142</sup> It has been meeting on a yearly basis since 2020, chaired by the two presidents and including a number of cabinet members from both governments. In 2022, the relationship was further elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

---

<sup>141</sup> Bahtiyar Abdukerimov, "Özbekistan-Türkiye ilişkileri stratejik ortaklık düzeyine çıkarıldı," Anadolu Ajansı, October 30, 2017. (<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/ozbekistan-turkiye-iliskileri-stratejik-ortaklik-duzeyine-cikarildi/951687>)

<sup>142</sup> Dinara Taldybaeva, "Türkiye-Özbekistan İlişkilerinin Yeni Dönemi," Eurasian Research Institute, July 2020. (<https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/turkiye-ozbekistan-iliskilerinin-yeni-donemi/?lang=tr>)

This does not make Uzbekistan unique in Turkish foreign policy. In fact, such mechanisms are a trademark institution in Turkish foreign policy, having been created with 25 countries.<sup>143</sup> Still, the intensity with which Türkiye and Uzbekistan have used this mechanism to institutionalize cooperation in a vast array of areas, comprising up to 50 different interstate agreements, stands out compared to most other countries with which Türkiye has high-level cooperation councils.

This bilateral cooperation has also had a significant effect on Turkic cooperation writ large. Uzbekistan announced its intention to join the Turkic Council in 2018, and President Mirziyoyev attended the Council's September 2018 summit in Bishkek. It was accepted as a formal member at the September 2019 summit in Baku. This in turn paved the way for the decision taken at the next summit, in Istanbul in November 2021, to further institutionalize Turkic cooperation by creating the Organization of Turkic States. Uzbekistan was particularly supportive of the creation of a Turkic Investment Fund, which the Uzbek legislature rapidly ratified. Uzbekistan itself played host to the next summit of the OTS, in Samarkand in November 2022.

In fact, it is unlikely that the creation of the OTS would have been possible without the participation of Uzbekistan. Because Turkmenistan did not participate in the Turkic Council either, it was for a long time a mechanism bringing together only four states – Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As such its potential was limited with only two Central Asian states participating. The active engagement of Uzbekistan also left Turkmenistan as the only remaining Turkic state to stay out, contributing to Ashgabat's decision to seek and receive observer status in 2021.

---

<sup>143</sup> Kenan Aslanli and Birol Akgun, "Institutional Mechanisms of the Turkish Foreign Policy: The Case of Russia-Turkey High-Level Cooperation Council," *Vestnik RUDN International Relations*, December 2020.



## **Economic Relations**

Since the renaissance of Turkish-Uzbek relations in 2016, economic and trade relations have been a major focus of the relationship. Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan has put a strong emphasis on attracting foreign direct investment, and while it has found it difficult to attract large-scale Western FDI, Türkiye has appeared as a promising partner alongside other Middle Eastern and Asian powers.

In 2017, Turkish investments amounted only to \$20 million, but by 2020 the number had already reached half a billion dollars.<sup>144</sup> Nearly 1900 corporations with Turkish capital were operating in Uzbekistan in 2022, with the large majority of them having been established in the past five years.<sup>145</sup>

In the past several years, Türkiye has emerged as Uzbekistan's fourth largest trade partner, with the volume of trade tripling from \$1.2 billion in 2016 to \$3.6 billion in 2021. The countries' leaders have set the goal of expanding trade volumes first to \$5 billion in the immediate future and to \$10 billion down the road. This would make Türkiye surpass Russia as Uzbekistan's second largest trading partner after China.

Economic cooperation has included the critical field of energy, with Türkiye helping Uzbekistan develop initiatives to mitigate the country's periodic energy shortages. In 2022, the two Presidents commissioned a \$150 million, 240 MW thermal power plant built by Türkiye's Cengiz Enerji, and the same company began construction of a \$140 million 220MW power plant in Uzbekistan's Syrdarya region.<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> TalDYbaeva, "Türkiye-Özbekistan İlişkilerinin Yeni Dönemi."

<sup>145</sup> Niginakhon Saida, "To Deepen Relations With Uzbekistan, Turkey Leans on Cultural Appeal," *Diplomat*, October 21, 2022. (<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/to-deepen-relations-with-uzbekistan-turkey-leans-on-cultural-appeal/>)

<sup>146</sup> Michaël Thanchum, "New Turkey-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Accelerates Turkey's Rise as a Eurasian Agenda-Setter," *Turkey Analyst*, June 8, 2022.

(<https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/688>)

## Security

Security and military matters were included from the outset in the rejuvenated relations between Türkiye and Uzbekistan. In July 2017, Turkish Defense Minister Nurettin Çanıklı visited Uzbekistan and signed a protocol on cooperation in military education. This expanded the education of Uzbek officers in Turkish military academies. The Uzbek Defense Minister Abdusalom Azizov followed up with a visit to Türkiye in October 2017.<sup>147</sup>

Joint military exercises soon followed. In this context, it is important to note that Türkiye did not view Uzbekistan only through the Central Asian or Turkic prism, but also in connection with the Turkish presence in Afghanistan. Erdoğan's 2016 visit to Uzbekistan followed directly on his visit to Pakistan, and in 2019, trilateral joint exercises were held bringing together Turkish, Uzbek, and Pakistani forces in Uzbekistan's Jizzakh province.<sup>148</sup> Quadrilateral joint exercises involving the three states and Azerbaijan occurred earlier the same year.<sup>149</sup> In March 2021, the two countries held joint tactical exercises for special forces in southern Uzbekistan near the Afghan border.

In 2020, Türkiye and Uzbekistan signed a cooperation protocol on military education, and the same year, the first Türkiye-Uzbekistan Defense Industry Cooperation Meeting was held. By 2022, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar took part in the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council

---

<sup>147</sup> Mehmet S. Erol, "Türkiye-Özbekistan İlişkilerinde Stratejik Ortaklık Dönemi," ANKASAM, October 27, 2018. (<https://www.ankasam.org/turkiye-ozbekistan-iliskilerinde-stratejik-ortaklik-donemi/>)

<sup>148</sup> Thanchum, "New Turkey-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Accelerates Turkey's Rise as a Eurasian Agenda-Setter."

<sup>149</sup> "Turkish military to hold joint drills with Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan," *Daily Sabah*, April 23, 2019. (<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2019/04/23/turkish-military-to-hold-joint-drills-with-azerbaijan-uzbekistan-pakistan>)

meeting in Tashkent and signed a broad framework agreement on military cooperation with his Uzbek counterpart that included joint military intelligence activity concerning “countries considered to damage the mutual interests of the Parties.”<sup>150</sup>

This suggests that the development of military and intelligence cooperation between Türkiye and Uzbekistan has expanded rapidly following the Turkish involvement in the Second Karabakh war. Türkiye has also begun exporting military materiel to Uzbekistan. In 2017, Türkiye and Uzbekistan agreed to co-produce a thousand Armored Combat Vehicles developed by Nurol Makina with Uzauto, some of which would be exported from Uzbekistan.<sup>151</sup> Uzbekistan has also acquired Türkiye's trademark Bayraktar drones.<sup>152</sup>

Türkiye is thus developing its military cooperation with Uzbekistan, including assisting in the development of Uzbekistan's domestic military industry. Türkiye is also expanding its intelligence cooperation with Uzbekistan, targeting common threats – likely targeting both state actors the two consider a threat, as well as non-state actors, particularly radical Islamist groups. On this issue, Uzbekistan continues to see a danger of Uzbek citizens radicalizing in Türkiye. During the height of the war in Syria, several thousand Uzbeks, most of which had been part of the civil war in Afghanistan, moved to Syria, and many went through Türkiye, as did Uzbek guest workers in Russia that were radicalized during their stay in

---

<sup>150</sup> A leaked copy of the agreement is available at: “Turkey, Uzbekistan set for intelligence sharing, joint military drills, defense cooperation,” *Nordic Monitor*, July 4, 2022. (<https://nordicmonitor.com/2022/07/turkey-uzbekistan-set-for-intelligence-sharing-joint-military-drills-defense-cooperation/>)

<sup>151</sup> Joshua Kucera, “Uzbekistan to Relaunch Defense Industry with Turkish Joint Venture,” *Eurasianet*, October 27, 2017. (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-to-relaunch-defense-industry-with-turkish-joint-venture>)

<sup>152</sup> Gareth Jennings, “Uzbekistan fielding Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs,” *Jane's Defence News*, November 23, 2023. (<https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/uzbekistan-fielding-bayraktar-tb2-ucavs>)

Russia.<sup>153</sup> The new cooperative environment has allowed Tashkent to pressure Türkiye to close down religious schools where Uzbeks in Türkiye were being radicalized.<sup>154</sup> Further, following the signing of an extradition treaty in 2019, Uzbekistan has improved its ability to seek the return from Türkiye of radical extremists that had earlier seen Türkiye as a sanctuary of sorts. In addition, Uzbekistan has obtained larger influence over Uzbek religious students studying in Turkish religious institutions.

## Conclusions

The booming relationship between Türkiye and Uzbekistan has been a game-changer for Türkiye's relationship with Central Asia and the broader Turkic world. The decades-long rift between the two largest countries in the Turkic world prevented Turkic cooperation from reaching its full potential. The rapid rapprochement between them since 2016 has, conversely, allowed Turkic cooperation to bloom. Alongside the expanding Turkish-Uzbek relationship, Uzbekistan has similarly emphasized its ties with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, leading to a flurry of bilateral as well as multilateral initiatives among the key Turkic countries.

It is also, furthermore, likely that this trend will continue to intensify, while the risk of considerable setbacks is limited. The geopolitical situation surrounding the region provides a strong incentive for the further intensification of cooperation between Türkiye and Uzbekistan. Irritants that existed in the past have been alleviated, even though there remain differences in the approaches Ankara and Tashkent take to a variety of

---

<sup>153</sup> Thomas Sanderson, "From the Ferghana Valley to Syria and Beyond: A Brief History of Central Asian Foreign Fighters," *CTC Sentinel*, January 5, 2018. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/ferghana-valley-syria-and-beyond-brief-history-central-asian-foreign-fighters>)

<sup>154</sup> "Uzbek Religious Students Recalled From Egypt, Turkey In New Crackdown," RFERL, June 20, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-religious-students-crackdown/31317289.html>

matters, not least in the religious area. But Türkiye's stronger nationalist profile and the strengthened role of more secular-minded forces within Turkish state institutions has led to broader convergence, while Uzbekistan has taken a more moderate approach in its relationship with religious matters.

The depth of the relationship between Türkiye and Uzbekistan has yet to catch up with the extent and width of Türkiye's ties to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. But the two countries are working rapidly to make up for lost time. This has been an important boon for Uzbekistan's foreign policy, providing the country with a trustworthy partner that is willing and able to assist Tashkent's efforts to build itself into a stronger and more independent middle power in Central Asia.

# Implications for the Region and Western Policy

*Svante E. Cornell*

Türkiye's renewed engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus has progressed along with the institutionalization of Turkic cooperation through the OTS. Türkiye's engagement in the region stands out by the pace at which Ankara has intensified its relations with regional countries in recent years, but also in terms of the areas Ankara has engaged in. Crucially for regional states, Türkiye has focused its efforts on the issue areas they deem most acute: security matters as well as energy and transportation.

A remarkable aspect of regional affairs is that few outside powers aside from Russia have more than dipped their toes in security and military affairs. Western powers have trodden carefully, with NATO's Partnership for Peace making headways from the late 1990s onward. But the downturn in Russia's relations with the West made cooperation in the military field a highly sensitive area, which posed greater risks than rewards for regional states. China's engagement with the region for a long time focused on economic matters and only more recently spread to the military and security field. But regional states remain wary of an excessive Chinese influence in security affairs. Other powers have developed military and security ties with individual states – such as the example of India's air base at Ayni in Tajikistan. But overall, no outside power has made a serious dent in Russia's security influence across Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Türkiye's willingness to engage in the security and military field, including defense industry development, is therefore significant for the region. Since the Ukraine war, regional states have embarked on a necessary effort to refurbish their defense posture. With the West only willing and able to

provide limited assistance in this field, Türkiye's role is an important one and to that, one that operates within the NATO system. It also encourages rather than discourages intensified cooperation among regional states.

There are obviously limitations to the role Türkiye might have in the region. In the South Caucasus, which is directly adjacent to Türkiye, Turkish military power could well develop into a dominant force, challenging Russia's traditional position. To some extent, this has already begun to happen, but Türkiye's posture is dependent mainly on its relationship with Azerbaijan. Türkiye has deepened security ties to Georgia as well and developed a trilateral Turkish-Azerbaijani-Georgian relationship not least in defense industry. Still, Georgia's government has come under greater Russian influence, and the Turkish emphasis on ethnolinguistic matters could be alienating to certain factions in Georgia that are suspicious of Turkish intentions. Furthermore, the normalization of Turkish-Armenian ties would be crucial for Türkiye's influence to grow. This in turn depends on the conclusion of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. While positive steps have been taken in this regard, it remains far from a done deal.

In Central Asia, Türkiye's influence will likely remain more limited than in the South Caucasus. But it is entirely realistic to foresee the development of strong defense and defense industrial ties between Türkiye and the leading states of Central Asia, as well as Ankara emerging as a major provider of defense procurement for the region. This in turn would be a significant factor in shifting the regional balance of power.

Similarly in the energy field, Türkiye plays a solid role as a consumer and transit country for oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Türkiye can play an instrumental role in facilitating the flow of greater quantities of Central Asian energy across the Caspian Sea. This would be a major boon to the efforts to strengthen the sovereignty of regional states and ensuring their economic independence from Russia and China.

What, then, does this mean for U.S. and European policy toward the region? Western powers face a conundrum: on one hand, Türkiye's ties with the West have been deteriorating for years, while on the other, there is a considerable alignment of Turkish and Western interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Turkish ties with the United States and Europe have changed character over the past few decades. Türkiye has moved in a more authoritarian direction, and its leadership – particularly President Erdoğan and his governing partner Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party – have made anti-Western diatribes a staple of their rhetoric. Middle Eastern developments have also worsened the disagreements between Türkiye and the West, and there is enough blame to go around. Türkiye has supported a variety of Islamist actors, contributing to the destabilization of various countries in the region. Meanwhile, the West ignored that the Syrian Kurds it supported were effectively a branch of the PKK, an organization the U.S. and EU deem a terrorist group. And while Türkiye has lately mended fences with Arab powers and reduced support for Islamist causes, the war in Gaza brought Erdoğan's sympathies for Hamas back to the forefront, underlining differences with the United States.

Yet at the same time, there is no denying that Türkiye has emerged as a leading force counterbalancing Russia in the Black Sea region and beyond. Ankara has not feared challenging Moscow in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus, and Türkiye continues to support Ukraine while maintaining a channel of communications with Moscow and refusing to join Western sanctions. As Türkiye is reaching further and developing relations with Central Asian states, it is clear that Ankara's efforts are playing a role in counterbalancing Russian and Chinese ambitions in this region. It is obvious that this is in the interest of the U.S. and Europe, especially as Western powers have themselves not shown any intention to step in actively to



support the Central Asian states in terms of their defense and security sectors. In this sense, Western and Turkish activities in the region are complementary – engaging in different sectors but working towards the same goal of sustaining the independence and sovereignty of the Central Asian states.

This raises the question whether some dialogue and coordination is possible between Western powers and Türkiye with regards to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Perhaps, such a dialogue on an issue where interests align is exactly what the Turkish-Western relationship needs. Continued disagreements on the Middle East have led to acrimony and soured relations among officials on both sides. By contrast, a dialogue on Central Asia and the Caucasus, a region in which they share common interests, would have positive implications for Türkiye's relationship with Western powers.

For the West, however, the most important takeaway is that Türkiye is in Central Asia and the Caucasus to stay. The consolidation of nationalist sentiment at both the elite and popular level in Türkiye is a welcome shift from the Islamist emphasis of the last decade. Central Asia and the Caucasus will continue to have a special place in Turkish foreign policy for the foreseeable future.

## Contributors' Bio

**Bayram Balci** is a researcher at CERI Sciences Po, Paris. He holds degrees in political science and Islamic studies. He was Director of the French Institute for Central Asian Studies in Uzbekistan from 2006-10, and from 2007 to 2022 the director of the Institut Français d'Études Anatoliennes (IEFA) in Istanbul.

**Svante E. Cornell**, Ph.D., is Research Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, co-founder of the Institute for Security and Development Policy, as well as Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. His most recent book *The New Secularism in the Muslim World: Religion and the State in Central Asia and Azerbaijan*, published in 2023 by AFPC Press/Armin Lear.

**Ali Hajizade** is an analyst and entrepreneur, and head of the Baku-based Hacizade Group.

**Halil Karaveli** is a Senior Fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center and the Editor of the *Turkey Analyst*.

**Col. Rich Outzen** (Ret.) is a Senior Consultant with Dragoman LLC, and formerly served, among other, as U.S. Defense Attaché in Kabul, Afghanistan, and in the U.S. State Department as Senior Advisor to the Special Representative for Syrian Engagement, and as Senior U.S. Army Advisor and Member of the Policy Planning Staff.

**Brenda Shaffer** is an international energy and foreign policy specialist, focusing on the Caspian region, European energy security, ethnic politics in Iran, and Eastern Mediterranean energy. She is a faculty member at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, a Senior Advisor for Energy at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), and a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Global Energy Center. She is a co-author of *Operational Energy* (DeGruyter, 2024).