



# Does Turkey have a Central Asian Project?

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**Abstract:** Central Asia's importance in Turkish foreign policy has begun to rise since the beginning of the 2010s. Turkey determines its regional policy in the conception of the Turkic world, including Azerbaijan. With this regard, Turkey pays particular attention to the institutionalization of bilateral relations with the regional states. The most successful measure in that direction is the establishment of the Turkic Council. This integration project marks significant progress for the institutionalization of Turkey's Central Asian policy. Turkey is one of the non-regional actors affecting the Central Asian balance of power. However, it has limited influence on regional security and military affairs, which Russia dominates. Turkey is only a secondary non-regional actor in Central Asia. Therefore, it primarily structures its Central Asian policy using common historical and cultural elements. In this study, we investigate whether Turkey has a long-term project in Central Asia. For this purpose, we explore the restrictions of Turkish policy in Central Asia. After that, we compare Turkey's importance for the foreign policies of Central Asian states. Additionally, we evaluate Turkey's interest in non-Western organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to transform Turkish foreign policy priorities in recent years. Finally, we show that Turkey has a policy toward Central Asia but not a fully-fledged project for the region.

**Keywords:** China, Central Asia, Eurasian Economic Union, Russia, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Turkey

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, modern Central Asia has become a significant region that affects regional and international politics. As a result, central Asia is a center at the intersection of regional and global projects.

The region has rich energy resources. Their transportation to other countries raises the importance of Central Asia in energy politics. On the other hand, security threats such as fundamentalism and drug trafficking, which come from Afghanistan, desta-

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bilize the region and strengthen local regimes at the same time. In this framework, non-regional states devise various policies and create integration projects in political, military, economic, ideological, and cultural spheres. Undoubtedly, their purpose here is to increase their influence on regional development and use regional energy resources. Thus, it turns Central Asia into a region of power struggle (Nadtochey and Safranchuk 2019).

Currently, the main non-regional actors in Central Asia are China, Russia, and the USA. Secondary actors in the region are Turkey, Iran, some Arab and European countries, Japan, South Korea, and India. The influence of the countries listed in the second group on the balance of power in political and military-security fields in Central Asia remains limited. That group of states mainly strives to develop bilateral economic relations, focusing on building cultural and educational ties. In this way, they seek to contribute to the regional states' national identity-building processes.

Turkey is one of the secondary actors in the balance of power in Central Asia. It has cultural, religious, and linguistic ties with Central Asian people. Therefore, Central Asia is one of the areas where Turkey's regional power ambitions can rise. However, it is questionable whether Turkey can realize its regional policy.

Following this puzzle, we formulate our research question in the following way: which factors shape Turkey's role in Central Asia?

At this point, we propose two possible perspectives that help us to answer the research question. The first is to determine the position of Turkey in Central Asia. The second perspective is the evaluation of what Turkey's Central Asian policy means for Central Asian states. Besides, it is necessary to analyze Turkey's integration policy, the Turkic Council initiative, Turkey's interest in Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in changing Turkey's foreign policy priorities in recent years.

The theoretical paradigm guiding our argument is neorealism. We study Turkish foreign policy as a behavior of a rational actor that seeks to guarantee its survival and secure its interests (Mearsheimer 1994). In this paradigm, institutions are mainly viewed as instruments of states that seek to increase their capabilities and influence other actors (Mearsheimer 1994). We also acknowledge that the behavior of states in world politics is guided by changes in the structure of international relations, including the actions of other states and entities (Waltz 1979). We will show that current Turkish foreign policy uses a pragmatic approach accompanied by the exploitation of institutions as agents of its influence.

We use case study as the primary methodological tool to answer the research question. This method implies a qualitative approach to studying holistic phenomena with observational evidence (Gerring 2007). Our study relies on an in-depth description and interpretation of the available evidence to understand current transformation trends and limitations of Turkish foreign policy. Additionally, we use comparative analysis to evaluate Turkey's position in the region compared to other important regional actors. It would help us to study how Turkey presents itself in the regional balance of power.

The main research narrative on Turkey's foreign policy in Central Asia has changed quite drastically since the republics' independence. Some of the early works in the field viewed the collapse of the USSR as the possibility for Turkey to use its cultural and ethnic ties with the Central Asian republic to gain additional influence in the region (Mozaffari 1997; Sayari 2000). Although up to the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, Turkey did not prioritize the region. At that time, scholars portrayed Turkey's foreign policy in Central Asia as contingent on developing its relationship with the EU and NATO (Aydin 1996, 2004; Mozaffari 1997; Weitz 2006).

The re-emergence of Russia and the rise of China limited Turkey's opportunities to promote its interests in Central Asia. The soft power that Turkey actively used during the first years of the independence of Central Asian republics seemed to be outbalanced by the significant military and economic capabilities of other actors in the region. This trend was also captured in the literature. Some scholars highlighted the failure of the strategy of pan-Turkism and the re-orientation of Turkish foreign policy towards more practical goals. To some extent, this pragmatism implied that Turkey became a neutral player in the region and prioritized economic relations (Duarte 2013; Zeeshan 2013; Ivanova 2019). This new approach to foreign policy was attributed to Ahmet Davutoglu. He was the minister of foreign affairs during the early 2010s and his policy of "zero problems" with neighboring countries (Safonkina 2014). Under this new approach, Turkey used soft power to build new multilateral institutions and harness cooperation in such spheres as science, education, and business (Safonkina 2014).

In some studies, scholars suggest that Turkey should look beyond common identity issues and interact with other significant regional powers more actively (Efe Çaman, Akyurt 2011; Hakan 2010). This view appears to be more realistic as it proposes concentrating on the structure of the regional power balance.

It is also important to mention that Turkey has not abandoned its grand cultural projects altogether. On the contrary, some authors highlight that the ideology of Neo-Ottomanism could be re-emerging as a significant factor that guides its interaction with neighbors (Mehdiev 2016).

Our work follows current trends in the literature that study the changing role of Turkey in the region. We review Turkey's foreign policy in the region as mainly dictated by its interests and find evidence of this in the available sources. Additionally, as in some studies discussed above, we also highlight some additional possibilities for Turkey if it tries to participate in Eurasian multilateral institutions such as SCO or EEU.

### **Limits of Turkey's Central Asian Policy**

By the end of the Cold War, political instabilities and security risks in the near abroad of Turkey determine not only the Turkish foreign policy priorities but also its relations with the great powers. Accordingly, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East are among unstable regions in Turkey's neighborhood.

In this context, the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003, the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, the so-called 'the Arab Spring' in the Middle East (its evolution into a civil war in Syria), and finally, tensions between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have shaped Turkish foreign policy in the last 20 years. These dynamics bear some limitations on the continuity of Turkish policy in Central Asia. Turkey spends most of its foreign policy resources to regulate crises in those unstable regions. Notwithstanding these issues, Turkey has still managed to increase its importance in Central Asia from the 2010s.

Turkey defines its Central Asian policy with the 'Turkic World' approach. Thus, Turkey focuses primarily on cultural, linguistic, and economic relations, on the harmony of expected benefits with Turkic-speaking countries. In this context, it is necessary to put forward Turkey's Central Asian policy limits by evaluating them in the context of political, economic, military, and cultural-educational fields.

### Political Relations

According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey's foreign policy priorities in Central Asia are<sup>1</sup>:

- *Promoting stability and democratic values in the region by developing bilateral and multilateral relations,*
- *Increasing the functioning of multilateral organizations such as the Turkish Council, TURKSOY, TIKA,*
- *Increasing cooperation with countries in the region through such mechanisms as economic commissions and high-level strategic cooperation councils,*
- *Maintaining economic support for the development of the countries of the region,*
- *Increasing economic investments in the region by improving economy and trade relations.*

Turkey's relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan determine Turkey's presence in Central Asia. The Kazakh-Turkish relations develop stably as compared to Turkey's relations with other countries.

Turkey is also eager to institutionalize its relations with the countries of the region. For this purpose, during Nazarbayev's visit to Turkey in 2009, the parties signed the Strategic Partnership Treaty and established the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2012. Moreover, under the Council, the Joint Strategic Planning Group and the Joint Economic Commission meetings proceed within bilateral relations.

Relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan deteriorated because Turkey sheltered representatives of Uzbek opposition in the 1990s. Furthermore, Turkey has taken a stand against Uzbekistan at the United Nations regarding the events in the Uzbek city

<sup>1</sup> Orta Asya Ülkeleri ile İlişkiler. *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dış İşleri Bakanlığı*. URL: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-orta-asya-ulkeleri-iliskileri.tr.mfa> (accessed 10.06.2021)

of Andijan in 2005. The normalization process began when the minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, visited Uzbekistan in 2014. Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev was president in 2016, a new era in bilateral relations has begun. The two countries have established the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council. In addition, Turkey and Uzbekistan hold meetings within the Council of the Joint Economic Commission and Joint Strategic Planning Group.

Turkey's relations with Kyrgyzstan, on the one hand, are generally stable. They established The High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council as a mechanism of bilateral relations in 2011. Moreover, political consultations proceed with the Joint Strategic Planning Group meetings between ministers of foreign affairs. On the other hand, between Turkmenistan and Turkey, bilateral relations primarily developed in the economic field. From the 1990s to the current days, Turkey has become a significant trade partner in the economy of Turkmenistan. Two states hold regular high-level meetings. Besides, other meetings of different ministers regularly play an essential role in the development of bilateral relations.

Finally, because of the civil war in Tajikistan during the 1990s, Turkey and Tajikistan's bilateral relations began to develop in the 2000s. The visit of prime minister Erdogan to this country in 2003 marks the beginning of a new era. In 2012, The Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Tajikistan signed The Joint Statement to establish a Cooperation Council.

Turkey maintains positive relations with all states of the region, using bilateral institutions to reinforce them.

## Economic Relations

Given its geographical proximity to major energy routes, Turkey strives to play a decisive role in energy transportation projects to Europe. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan (a South Caucasus country) are the leading regional partners in Turkey's energy policy. There is no borderland between Turkey and Central Asia. Therefore, the South Caucasus region is a trade route from Central Asia to Europe. From the 1990s to the present day, different energy pipeline projects emerged, such as the Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan oil pipeline (2006), the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) in 2018, and the Baku – Tbilisi – Kars railway (2017).

In parallel with the Turkish economy's steady growth from the 2000s (with an average annual growth performance of 5.37% until 2020<sup>2</sup>), Central Asia has become a significant region in Turkish economic policy. Turkey's bilateral trade with the countries of Central Asia has increased steadily. Between 2014 and 2018, Turkey exported 38.94 billion dollars to the countries of the region<sup>3</sup>. In 2018, Turkey's trade volume

<sup>2</sup> Real GDP Forecast. *OECD*. URL: <https://data.oecd.org/gdp/real-gdp-forecast.htm>. (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>3</sup> Türk Cumhuriyetlerine 5 Yılda 24.5 Milyar Dolarlık İhracat. *Anadolu Ajansı*. October 10, 2019. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/turk-cumhuriyetlerine-5-yilda-24-5-milyar-dolarlik-ihracat/1614208> (accessed 10.06.2021)

with Central Asian states was 6 billion dollars; it accounts for 15% of Turkey's total foreign trade. In 2019, Turkey's total trade volume with the region was about \$ 7 billion (see Table 1). As can be seen from the table, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are Turkey's two largest trading partners in the region.

Nevertheless, the trade volume with these two countries alone in 2019 is as low as about \$ 4.7 billion. On the other hand, Turkish companies' investments in Central Asia have approached 15 billion dollars<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, many Turkish firms operate in the region. While these companies' contracting assets have reached 86 billion dollars to date, more than 4000 Turkish companies are working in Central Asia<sup>5</sup>.

**Table 1: Turkey's trade volume with Central Asian countries (million dollars) in 2019**

	Import	Export	Trade Volume
Kazakhstan	1,404	900	2,304
Kyrgyzstan	372	442	814
Tajikistan	198	157	355
Turkmenistan	345	745	1,090
Uzbekistan	1,140	1,232	2,372

### Military Cooperation

Turkey is a secondary actor in the security and military fields of Central Asia. Since the 1990s, Turkey has not found a foothold in the region to promote its military agenda. For instance, in 1994, Turkey was mainly occupied with implementing NATO's Partnership for Peace Program in Central Asia. However, as a secondary actor, Turkey provides limited financial assistance to countries in the region through military cooperation agreements. For example, Turkey provided Uzbekistan with a 1.2 million grant in March 2002 and signed an agreement on counterterrorism in 2003 (Aydin 2013). Turkish military aid to Kyrgyzstan is totaling \$13 million by 2013. Since 2010, Kazakh military students have started to study in Turkey. Besides, in 2005, Turkey provided military grants for military students from Kazakhstan (Aydin 2013).

Furthermore, Turkish and Kazakh defense industry companies ASELSAN and Kazakhstan Engineering signed a \$ 44 million worth agreement in 2012<sup>6</sup>. Turkey also gives limited military grants to Kyrgyz military students. In addition, from time to time, the Turkish army organizes training programs for Kyrgyz soldiers.

In general, Russia ensures the security needs of Central Asia. Russia has a military presence in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It protects the security of the region

<sup>4</sup> Orta Asya Ülkeleri ile İlişkiler. *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dış İşleri Bakanlığı*. URL: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-orta-asya-ul-keleri-iliskileri.tr.mfa> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>5</sup> Orta Asya Ülkeleri ile İlişkiler. *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dış İşleri Bakanlığı*. URL: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-orta-asya-ul-keleri-iliskileri.tr.mfa> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>6</sup> Ryskeldi Satke, Casey Michel, and Sertaç Korkmaz, Turkey in Central Asia: Turkic Togetherness? *The Diplomat*. November 28, 2014. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/turkey-in-central-asia-turkic-togetherness> (accessed 10.06.2021)



and restricts the activities of an external actor in this area (Safranchuk 2019). In recent years, China's military effectiveness in Central Asia also has increased. Although not yet officially confirmed, there are claims that China has a military base in Tajikistan<sup>7</sup>.

### Turkey's Soft Power

Turkey's soft power in Central Asia has been historically based on religious, linguistic, and cultural elements. Turkey uses them to establish governmental organizations and educational institutions, promote the Turkish press, and broadcast media in Central Asia. With this regard, Turkey's cultural influence in Central Asia remains strong, and this is mainly due to the state policy of those Central Asian ruling elites who want to distance themselves from Russia (Malysheva 2017).

Turkey's soft power policies in Central Asia have developed in several areas. For this purpose, during the 1990s, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) were established. TIKA has 57 branches all over the world. Five of them operate in the capitals of all Central Asian states<sup>8</sup>. TURKSOY is a multilateral cultural organization consisting of 6 members of the Central Asian republics, Azerbaijan and Turkey<sup>9</sup>. In 2007, Yunus Emre Institute was also founded as a governmental organization for contributing to Turkey's soft power politics. The mission of the Yunus Emre Institute is to introduce the Turkish language, culture, and art to the world. It has branches in 58 countries around the world. In Central Asia, there is only one branch in the Nursultan, the capital of Kazakhstan<sup>10</sup>. Another institution operating in this field is the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), established in 2010<sup>11</sup>. Under The 'Great Student Project,' from 1992 to 2012, the Presidency allocated some 22.000 quotas to the Central Asian republics, and 15.248 of them reached their recipients (Aydin 2013). Unfortunately, this project was not successful, and it was renamed in 2012 under the umbrella of YTB as 'the Turkey scholarship.' From 2013 to 2019 (see Table 2), the number of students studying in Turkey increased from 10,023 to 23,423. Besides, the Turkish universities and educational institutions continue their activities in Central Asia. These universities are Ahmet Yesevi University in Kazakhstan (1991), Süleyman Demirel University (1996), the Kyrgyz Manas University of Turkey in Kyrgyzstan (1995). The TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara has also opened a branch in Tashkent for Uzbek students who will study in it during the 2020 – 2021 academic year.

<sup>7</sup> Tajikistan: Secret Chinese base becomes slightly less secret. *EurasiaNet*. September 23, 2020. URL: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-secret-chinese-base-becomes-slightly-less-secret> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>8</sup> *TIKA Official Website*. URL: <https://www.tika.gov.tr/en> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>9</sup> *TURKSOY, Official Website*. URL: <https://www.turksoy.org/ru> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>10</sup> Yunus Emre Enstitüsü. *Nursultan*. URL: <https://nur-sultan.yee.org.tr> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>11</sup> T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı. *Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*. The Official Website. URL: <https://www.ytb.gov.tr/kurumsal/baskanligimiz-2> (accessed 10.06.2021)

In addition to these governmental institutions, after the Central Asian states gained their independence, some religious foundations from Turkey began educational and cultural activities in Central Asia. These groups have started to establish Turkish high schools and language education centers. The most well-known of these religious groups are 'cemaat' under Fethullah Gulen's leadership (living in the USA and responsible for the military coup attempt on July 15, 2015, in Turkey). After the coup attempt, Turkey identified that group as the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation (FETO). Therefore, Turkey wants to eliminate all the Turkish schools and educational centers founded by this group. Transferring these schools to Turkey's administration has resulted in a problem with Central Asian states. These schools were already closed in Uzbekistan before the year 2000. Turkmenistan, too, closed them in 2011. Besides, Tajikistan closed these educational institutions in 2016 after the military coup attempt. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, some issues are still present. Negotiations with these countries are ongoing. Therefore, the impact of Turkey's educational policy in the region is questionable.

On the other hand, Turkey continues to broadcast television in Central Asia. For this purpose, it founded the TRTAvaз channel in 2009. This channel also produces content in Central Asian languages during the day by aiming to be a bridge in the geography where Turkic languages are spoken. During this period, the Turkish series have become popular in Central Asia, as in many parts of the world. Turkey is the second most exported country of TV series in the world after the United States. It has exported more than 150 Turkish series to 146 countries as of 2019. Those series bring approximately 500 million dollars of revenue with an audience of 700 million viewers<sup>12</sup>. The majority of these series have no ideological content. In this way, Turkish daily life and the Turkish language have become more prevalent in Central Asia.

**Table 2: Number of Central Asian students studying in Turkey by year**

	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	1306	1799	1986	2015	2065	2191
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	1410	1819	1994	2032	1926	1937
<b>Tajikistan</b>	469	624	701	692	656	649
<b>Turkmeni- stan</b>	6941	9092	9903	10418	12247	17571
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	371	556	652	736	840	1075
<b>Totally</b>	10,028	13,890	15,236	15,893	17734	23,423

### Turkic Council as a New Integration Project

Turkic Council is a unique example of Turkey's integration policy with Central Asian states since the demise of the Soviet Union. The four Central Asian states, except

<sup>12</sup> ABD'den Sonra En Fazla Dizi İhrac Eden Ülke Türkiye. *Anadolu Ajansı*. November 11, 2019. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur-sanat/abdden-sonra-en-fazla-dizi-ihrac-eden-ulke-turkiye/1641524> (accessed 10.06.2021)



for Turkmenistan, are members of the Council. The Council is also a leading organization in Central Asia which does not include Russia. This organization originated from the Summits of Turkic Speaking States in the 1990s. During the 1990s, they did not result in a multilateral mechanism. However, as a positive result, at the first summit in 1992, it was decided to establish TURKSOY. The members of the organization held meetings regularly until 2009. In that year, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey signed the council agreement to establish the Turkic Council as a roof organization in Nakhchivan. In this context, the Turkic Council's related organizations are TURKSOY, TURKPA (Parliamentary Assembly of Turkish-speaking countries), Turkish Business Council, Turkish Academy, and Turkish Culture and Heritage Foundation. The first summit of the Turkic Council convened in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in 2011. Uzbekistan became a member of the Council in 2019. At the 2019 summit, Nursultan Nazarbayev was elected as a lifetime president of the Council. The summits of the Turkic Council were held seven times until 2020. The Council of Foreign Ministers is the main body of political cooperation, and it meets regularly within the framework of the Summit of the Turkic Council. Besides, member states propose cooperating in transportation, education, youth and sports, transport, economy, culture, information and communication technologies, diaspora, media.

We shall question the purpose of existence of this organization in two ways: whether the Council can act as a Central Asian project for Turkey and to what extent the Turkic Council is an alternative for Central Asia states.

The Turkic Council cannot act as a full-fledged Central Asian project, but it marks a definite beginning for later periods. The foundation of such an organization, independent from Russia and China, constitutes a soft alternative for Central Asia's Turkic-speaking states. Consequently, Russia and China have sorted the region's needs as the more traditional security, military, and economic needs are provided. Turkic Council could embrace more non-traditional areas such as education and culture, which would expand its scope.

Secondly, could the Council be an alternative to other forms of cooperation in the region? The Turkic Council has the potential to be an alternative form of determining the foreign policies of regional states. The Council gives Central Asian republics a chance to expand their multipolarity even further.

Russia is the leader of the most multilateral organization in which Central Asian republics are members. This situation in the relations of the regional states is considerable detail to keep in mind when considering integration projects. When we look at the countries of the region, all of them also have weak civil societies. It restricts the soft power capabilities of external actors. Besides, clan and family structures dominate their political systems. It is one of the biggest obstacles to building a national identity within regional countries.

The Turkic Council is an effective instrument for the development of Turkey's relations with Central Asian republics. However, Turkey's resources are not sufficient to finance the needs of Central Asian states. Moreover, as a regional power in Central

Asia, Turkey does not have the adequate material capacity to implement an effective foreign policy.

Nevertheless, recent Turkey's relations with the EU and the United States also affect Turkey's interactions with Central Asian states. Therefore, the Eurasian vector in Turkish foreign policy will open new areas in Central Asia to Turkey. The EAEU and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are the two integration projects of which Central Asian countries are also members and stand in Turkey as two new alternatives. Turkey's approach to these two organizations also offers a new choice to the continuity of Turkey's politics in Central Asia for an extended period.

### **Turkey's Policy Towards EAEU and SCO**

Turkish foreign policy priorities have undergone several changes since the mid-2010s. Based on integration with Western institutions, the traditional Turkish foreign policy priorities began to change during this period. However, the EU and the United States' relations are still the main determinants of Turkish foreign policy. One of the main factors of deterioration of relations with Western partners is the so-called Arab Spring, which resulted in a civil war in Syria. The approaches of Turkey and the Western states to the resolution of the Syrian crisis differ pretty significantly.

As a NATO member, Turkey has purchased S-400 air defense systems from Russia instead of F35. However, the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, resulted in a new breaking point in Turkey's relations with Western countries.

As a result, some negative trends are emerging. EU suspended Turkey's accession process. The relations with NATO remain troubled. These issues require Turkey to pursue a more independent foreign policy. Therefore, the Eurasian vector is becoming an alternative for Turkey.

Turkey has developed policies to improve its relations with Eurasian countries such as Russia and China. In contrast, organizations involving these two countries have emerged as an alternative for Turkish integration policy. These projects affect Turkey's policy in Central Asia. They can present Turkey with new economic and political opportunities, but they also may impose some constraints. For instance, if Turkey becomes a member of those organizations, it would have to implement its policy in Central Asia in line with Russia and China's preferences.

During the Supreme Economic Council of EAEU in Minsk in 2013, the president of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev voiced a possibility of Turkey's membership in the EAEU. This move could have also marked the desire of Kazakhstan to balance Russia in the union. Among Central Asian countries, only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the union, while Tajikistan is the candidate country. Other members have raised the issue of Uzbekistan's membership in the union since 2019. The Economic Union is a project of Russia's regional economic integration in the post-Soviet area, including Central Asia.

First of all, we should consider whether the economic interests of Turkey match with those of the EAEU member states. The EU has remained Turkey's most important trading partner. The trade volume between Turkey and the EU amounted to 162 billion dollars in 2019. Turkey ranks sixth with a 3.4% share in EU total exports, and Turkey's trade volume with the EU corresponds to 49% of Turkey's total exports with 88 billion dollars in the same year<sup>13</sup>. Turkey's trade volume with CIS countries in 2019 was 36.3 billion dollars, while Central Asia's trade volume with Turkey was only 8.5 billion dollars<sup>14</sup>. As a result, Turkey's foreign trade with the EU is larger than the sum of trade with the CIS and Central Asian countries. Therefore, the pursuit of membership in the EAEU will affect Turkey's relations with the EU countries. The fact that recently only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan of the Central Asian countries are members of the union also limits Turkey's interest in membership.

The possibility of membership in SCO has been one of the alternatives of the Turkish foreign policy agendas since the 2010s. For the first time, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated it in 2012 while he was returning from Russia<sup>15</sup>. Among Central Asian countries, only Turkmenistan is not a member of the organization. As of 2013, it has officially become a dialogue partner. In this respect, Turkey is the only country with this status as a NATO member state. Furthermore, although Turkey is not an SCO member, it was elected as the SCO Energy Club's rotating president in 2017. In 2016, President Erdogan stated that the EU was not the only alternative for Turkey when he returned from Uzbekistan. He asked why Turkey will not be in the Shanghai-Five<sup>16</sup>. A week later, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman<sup>17</sup> reminded that Turkey has the status of a dialogue partner in the SCO and added that they are happy with the close cooperation with Turkey. However, no further development has happened since then. Turkey's accession to the SCO could signal that it is considering other partnerships instead of the EU. Therefore, if Turkey sees the SCO as a real alternative and applies for membership, how will it affect the Central Asian policy of Turkey?

In the current situation, there are three ways for Turkey to develop its Central Asian policy for the near future:

1. Turkey will normalize its relations with Western countries. Through this, Turkey can offer new alternatives to the Central Asian states as in the 1990s. Recent developments demonstrate that Turkey is moving away from that.

<sup>13</sup> Yani Başımızdaki Dev Pazar Avrupa Birliği. *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Ticaret Bakanlığı*. URL: <https://ticaret.gov.tr/dis-iliskiler/avrupa-birligi/yani-basimizdaki-dev-pazar-avrupa-birligi> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>14</sup> *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dış Ticaret İstatistikleri*. URL: <https://ticaret.gov.tr/istatistikler/dis-ticaret-istatistikleri/dis-ticaret-istatistikleri-2019-2020-ocak-mayis-donemi-genel-ticaret-sistemi%20Ülke%20Gruplarına%20Göre%20Dış%20Ticaret> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>15</sup> Bizi de Şangay Beşlisine Alın. *Milliyet*. July 26, 2012. URL: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/bizi-de-sangay-beslisi-ne-alin-1571936> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>16</sup> Şangay Beşlisi Nedir? *Habertürk*. 21.11.2016. URL: <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1326726-sangay-5lisi-nedir> (accessed 10.06.2021)

<sup>17</sup> Çin: Türkiye, Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü'ne üyelik başvurusu yaparsa değerlendiririz. *BBC News Türkçe*. 21.11.2016. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-38051010> (accessed 10.06.2021)

2. If the Eurasian vector in Turkey's foreign policy becomes more institutionalized, membership in SCO will elevate its importance even further. It will open new possibilities to Turkey in Central Asia.

3. The relations with China and Russia will expand and deepen in the field of security and military partnerships. Therefore, Turkey can be a part of military-security politics in Central Asia.

As a result, Turkey's effectiveness in regional security issues may increase. However, Turkey's membership in NATO raises additional issues in this regard. Whether Turkey will be able to implement its foreign policy independently of other regional powers remains. There is no doubt that Turkey will have to follow policies parallel with Russian and Chinese political interests. It will mean that Turkey will preserve its secondary power status in Central Asia. In a possible security issue, will Turkey pursue common interests in the region with Russia and China, or will the interests differ? It will be directly proportional to the institutionalization of Turkey's relations with Russia and China.

\* \* \*

Turkey is a secondary actor in Central Asian politics. The most significant reason for this is the inadequacy of its material resources to meet the political, military, security, and economic needs of Central Asian countries. On the whole, Russia and China still determine the security, economic, and political agendas of the Central Asian region. Furthermore, the Russian military presence in Central Asia closes the region for other actors' military activities. Turkish foreign policymakers prefer to concentrate on developing bilateral relations in trade, culture, and education.

While the importance of the Central Asian direction of Turkish foreign policy continues to rise, it is still unclear whether Turkey has developed a long-term project for the region. Currently, Turkish regional policy is shaped by more realist imperatives. As a secondary actor in the region, Turkey aims to develop bilateral economic relations with Central Asian countries. For this purpose, it increases its investments in the region. Besides, Turkey aims to activate soft power potential in cultural and educational fields. The Turkish Council is an essential organization for the realization of these policies. In these ways, Turkey has become an effective alternative for Central Asian countries.

The Turkish government supports the foundation of Turkish universities and educational institutions in the region. Graduates from Turkish educational institutions will be bridges between Turkey and Central Asian countries in the future. Nevertheless, Turkey is not alone in this area. Russia, China, the Western states, and other non-regional actors are also implementing their regional policies.

The agenda of membership in the EAEU and the SCO can have increased importance given Turkey's changing foreign policy priorities. Turkey's interest in these areas will undoubtedly increase, but it will also affect Turkey's relations with NATO and the EU. Membership in EAEU or the SCO could open a new political space for Turkey in

Central Asia. However, Russia and China will undoubtedly force Turkey to follow their policies.

As a result, Turkey has a policy in Central Asia, but there is no long-term Central Asian Project. As seen, Russia and China dominate the fields of political and military cooperation in the region. This guarantees a secondary role for Turkey in the region. Therefore, Turkey should balance its foreign policy between Western states and the other power centers such as Russia and China.

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## Есть ли у Турции Центральноазиатский проект?

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С 2000-х гг. Центральная Азия стала приоритетным регионом во внешней политике Турции. Она определяет свою региональную политику в концепции тюркского мира, включая Азербайджан. В этой связи Турция уделяет особое внимание институционализации двусторонних отношений с государствами региона. Наиболее успешной политикой в этом направлении является создание Тюркского совета. Такой интеграционный проект стал значительным прогрессом турецкой политики в Центральной Азии.

Турция является одной из внешних стран, влияющих на баланс сил в Центральной Азии. Однако роль Турции ограничивается определением региональных повесток дня в области безопасности и военно-политического сотрудничества. В этих условиях Турция рассматривается как второстепенная внешняя страна в Центральной Азии. Поэтому она в первую очередь формирует свою политику, приближаясь к общим историко-культурным элементам. В исследовании авторы ставят вопрос о том, есть ли у Турции проект в Центральной Азии на долгосрочную перспективу. С этой целью изучаются ограничения турецкой политики в ЦА. После этого также сопоставлено значение Турции для внешней политики центральноазиатских государств. Кроме того, интерес Турции к западным организациям, таким как Евразийский экономический союз и Шанхайская организация сотрудничества, оценивается при переходе турецких внешнеполитических приоритетов в последние годы. К концу исследования станет очевидно, что Турция имеет политику в отношении Центральной Азии, но не имеет проекта в Центральной Азии на долгосрочную перспективу.

**Ключевые слова:** Турция, Центральная Азия, Россия, Китай, Евразийский экономический союз, Шанхайская организация сотрудничества.

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