TURKEYSCOPE
INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

Editors: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Dr. Joel D. Parker

Vol. 5, No. 5, September - October 2021

The Central Asian Perspective on Turkey:

Does Family Come First?

Oğul Tuna

Thirty years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. During these last three decades, Turkic Central Asian states have reconfigured their foreign policies. For years, the states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Persian-speaking Tajikistan, remained with closed regimes and corrupt autocracies. Since the 1990s, Turkey was the first country to recognize the independence of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Turkey tried to expand its influence in many fields varying from education to military affairs. However, Ankara's efforts failed at the beginning due to a series of problems on the national, regional, and international levels.

In spite of the fluctuating nature of the Turkey-Central Asian states' relations, they could have met on a common ground of history, language, identity, and culture. Central Asia has opened to the external world and has been trying to find new partners to create an equilibrium in the region since the late 2010s, as Turkey's approach towards these countries changed from a patronage-like attitude to a strategic partnership. While they reject Turkish interference in their internal affairs, Central Asian states are eager to

deepen their relations with Turkey.

Transformation of paradigms and tools of Turkish intervention in Central Asia

The tools and the paradigms of Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis Central Asia transformed during the Erdoğan era, which began in 2003. These changes have kept up with Turkey's reorientation from the West towards Eurasia and have also been linked to Turkey's internal political struggles.

There has been a cumulative change in Turkey's foreign policy direction since the 1990s. After the collapse of the USSR, Ankara adopted a secular, nationalist, and yet protective, discourse regarding the newly formed Turkic states. While Turkey was identified with the role of big brother, it embraced Panturkist ideas and politics inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Turkey assumed the role of guide for ethnically and culturally related peoples and newborn states in *the Turkish fatherland*, where the Turkish people originated from. However, the excitement during the first half of the 1990s turned into disappointment as Turkey's interests in the European Union and NATO remained a priority. Furthermore, the corrupt elites of the region turned down an expansion of Turkish influence.

Following the debut of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the father of the Turkish *Strategic Depth* doctrine, as the new Turkish foreign minister in 2009, Turkey returned to the Central Asian region under the Neo-Ottomanist ideals, which espoused the long-standing Panturkism and Panislamism. Even after Davutoğlu's fall from favor in 2016, the direction and the official discourse of the foreign policy remained intact. In between Neo-Ottomanism and Panturkism, Turkey joined a competition for influence between the Arab Gulf states, Iran, Russia, and China. This rivalry and Turkey's recent rise in the region reified into the *Asia Anew* policy in 2019. This New Asia Initiative aims to improve interstate relations, the trade capacity of the private sector, academic cooperation, and interaction between the peoples.[1]

Turkey's Central Asian policy since the 1990s has enjoyed effective and potent tools, such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Turkey's government-backed housing agency (TOKİ), and other private contractors, as well as institutions, such as the Turkic Council or International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY). Moreover, Central Asia is the second destination to receive Turkey's bilateral official development assistance in 2020 (166.12 million USD, together with neighboring countries), which is more than the total Turkish aid to Africa (102.64) and less than that to Europe (233.31).[2] Ankara's aid comprises cultural, educational, academic, infrastructural, and sanitary assistance.

Nevertheless, there has been one issue that created serious problems on the interstate level: the rise and the fate of the Gülen Movement or the "Fethullah Terrorist Organization" (FETÖ) according to Turkish official discourse. Started as an Islamist fraternal movement, since the 1980s, the organization managed to infiltrate into the vast majority of the government's institutions through its disciples. On the other hand, the disciples of Fethullah Gülen established many schools in Central Asia, as well as other neighboring regions. These schools were perceived principally as the formation centers of new elites who were tagged as the "Golden Generation" by Fethullah Gülen himself.[3] Many in Azerbaijan and Central Asia had perceived these schools and other Turkish institutions as an alternative to the Russian schools.[4] However, the primary goal of the Gülenists was the Reislamization of these countries. Hence, some of these former Soviet republics on the brink of civil war banned Gülen schools, even before Turkey took this step. Education was one of the points of divergence between Uzbekistan and Erdoğan's Turkey even before the 2016 coup d'état attempt, while the late president Islam Karimov's regime closed all the Turkish high schools linked to the Gülenists.[5]

Following the 2016 attempted coup, diplomatic tools were transformed in two separate ways. Firstly, through its "Foundation of Education" (Maarif Vakfı) Ankara seized the resources of the Gülenists in Central Asia. Finally, the above-mentioned Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, TİKA, and other intergovernmental institutions have become more important since then.

Limits of the bilateral relations

The Central Asian perception of Turkey has also evolved in parallel with the changes in Turkish foreign policy and the balance of power in the country. Ankara has adopted a more aggressive and interventionist policy in multiple arenas since 2015. From Libya to Ukraine, the Turkish defense industry has attracted many clients in neighboring regions. However, some of the Turkic-language states have grown uncomfortable with the growth of Turkish influence over the Turkic world, and Turkey's intervention in the internal affairs of these countries.

Although Central Asian governments have not publicly expressed concern regarding the growing military activity of Turkey outside its borders, these countries remained impartial and indifferent during the Second Karabakh War (September-November 2020). While Ankara explicitly supported Baku in its battle against Armenia, other Turkic-language states called on many occasions for a peaceful and diplomatic settlement of the conflict within the framework of the Moscow-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).[6] Despite President Erdoğan's calls for public support, the members of the Turkic Council did not stand with Azerbaijan during the conflict.[7] Turkmenistan, in particular, is wary of Turkey's growing influence over the Turkic world following the victory of Karabakh.[8]

Along with FETÖ, Turkish educational institutions are seen as problematic for Central Asian governments, despite the local popularity of Turkish education. Following Uzbekistan, several countries avoided the infiltration of Gülenists or any other Turkish influence, to protect against the threats of Islamization, radicalization, and chauvinism. Tashkent is still reluctant to loosen its grip on its educational sphere. In recent months, the Uzbek authorities have recalled hundreds of students studying in at least three madrasas and other religious schools in Turkey.[9] Another unexpected blow came from Azerbaijan this year. After the victory of Karabakh, the far-right Turkish group *Grey Wolves,* or *Idealist Hearths* formally submitted their plan to inaugurate a school in the region. The Azerbaijani government first refused the initiative, then accepted it

providing that the school was placed under Baku's control.[10] Azerbaijan's rejection of Turkish nationalist and religious radicalism within its borders signifies that even among Turkey's closest ally in the region, there may be points of divergence.

After the 2016 coup attempt, Turkish intelligence operations in Central Asia revealed the strong links of the FETÖ in the region. Notwithstanding Kazakhstan's outstanding support for Turkey, Ankara had difficulty explaining the present and potential threats of the Gülenists to other states. Kyrgyzstan has been a special case. Its former president, Almazbek Atambayev had close ties to the organization and was one of the few world leaders who publicly denied Gülen's involvement in the coup attempt.[11] Despite this, in July 2021 the Turkish Intelligence Agency MIT conducted a kidnapping mission in Bishkek and brought Orhan İnandı - a senior member of the Gulenist movement in Kyrgyzstan - to Turkey.[12] Other members of the organization and Kyrgyz civilians protested against Turkey for weeks, while Kyrgyz authorities protested the incident as a violation of its sovereignty.

From undesirable 'Big Brother' to a strategic partner

In the second half of the 2010s, Central Asian countries felt compelled to transform their foreign policy, primarily, due to the geopolitical changes in Asia that took place with China's ascending role in the region. Moreover, the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan has created a power vacuum and increased the risk of instability in Central Asia. In a multi-polar world, these countries have found themselves at the center of a new Great Game. As Beijing has maintained its economical, military, and political domination in the region, Central Asian states try to establish close relations with middle powers, such as Israel, Pakistan, or Turkey to create a balance of power in the region. Turkey is increasing its economic and military weight in Central Asia. Turkey's competition with Russia in South Caucasus, Syria, and Ukraine boosts its image as an alternative partner for these countries. Furthermore, the increase in nationalism in Central Asia also contributes to this new situation. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have already referred to Turkey as their "strategic partner."

Uzbekistan's new president Shavkat Mirziyoyev's "New Uzbekistan – Third Renaissance" initiative is a striking example.[13] Once a hostile regime to Turkey, the country now considers relations with Turkey to be very important. As Uzbekistan became the fifth member state of the Turkic Council in 2019, Uzbek authorities have affirmed that they are following Ankara as a model.[14]

Increasing Russophobia and Sinophobia in Central Asia likewise force the states to take measures in cultural fields to defend their shared Turkic heritage.[15] As the Russian language loses its status in the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan prepare for an alphabet switch in the 2020s.[16] China's economic grip and the human rights violations in Xinjiang have increased anti-China sentiments in the region.[17] Consequently, close relations with Turkey or even Panturkism is a convenient alternative to the Russian and Soviet heritage and a possible Chinese domination.[18]

Under these circumstances, strategic partnership with Ankara becomes crucial. Enjoying its positive image on the public level, in the wake of its conflict with neighboring Tajikistan Turkey provides military and humanitarian assistance to Kyrgyzstan.[19] Uzbekistan has engaged in joint military operations with Turkey in the wake of the Taliban conquest of Afghanistan.[20] Even Turkmenistan's regime could not remain indifferent to the success of the Turkish defense industry: A Turkish-made *Bayraktar TB2* UAV was presented to the Turkmen public during the 30th-anniversary ceremony of the independence.[21] Turkmenistan is also getting ready to finally join the Turkic Council.[22]

Despite all these developments, having a close diplomatic relationship with Turkey has not yet become a foreign policy priority for most Central Asian countries.[23] However, both sides currently enjoy the pragmatic and realistic level of the relations as they stand. While Central Asian states are deepening their defense relationships with Turkey to equilibrate the geopolitical situation in the region, Ankara is trying to expand its influence in ways that were not possible in the 1990s.

Oğul Tuna is a Ph.D. student in the History Department at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of the book Resistance Everywhere: Politics of Turkey's Left-Wing Diaspora in France (1971-1988). His research interests include transnational movements within the territories of the former Soviet Union.

Notes

[1] Şeyma Nazlı Gürbüz, "Asia Anew: Initiative to shape future of Turkish diplomacy", *Daily Sabah*, August 11, 2019, https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/08/10/asia-anew-initiative-to-shape-future-of-turkish-diplomacy.

[2] Turkish Development Asisstance Report 2019, TİKA, Ankara, 2020, p. 30-31, https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/sayfa/publication/2019/TurkiyeKalkinma2019WebENG.pdf.

[3] Bayram Balcı, "Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam", *Religion, State and Society*, 31:2, p. 160.

[4] Danara Kurmanova, "Real'naya rol' Turtsii v Tsentral'noy Azii – otsenki ekspertov", *Sputnik Uzbekistan*, April 4, 2021, https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20210604/realnaya-rol-turtsii-v-tsentralnoy-azii--otsenki-ekspertov-19092023.html.

[5] "Turtsiya nadeetsya «otkryt' novuyu stranitsu» v otnosheniyakh c Uzbekistanom", *Radio Ozodlik*, November 17, 2016, https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/28122525.html.

[6] *Internet-portal of CIS*, "O reaktsii v SNG na sobytiya v regione Nagornogo Karabakha", September 28, 2020, https://e-cis.info/news/564/88599/.

[7] Arsen Usenov, "Turtsiya v Tsentrolnoy Azii: vliyanie i limity", *Central Asian Analytical Network*, July 13, 2021, https://www.caa-network.org/archives/21989/turcziya-v-czentralnoj-azii-vliyanie-i-limity.

[8] *Platon Asia*, "Moskva «vzylas'» za Turkmenistan", November 14, 2020,

https://platon.asia/analitika/moskva-vzyalas-za-turkmenistan.

[9] Bruce Pannier, "Uzbekistan prinuditel'no vozvrashchaet domoy studentov-teologov, obuchayushchikhsya v Turtsii i Egipte", *Radio Azattyk*, June 18, 2021, https://rus.azattyq.org/a/uzbekistan-prinuditelno-vozvraschaet-domoy-studentov-teologov-obuchayuschihsya-v-turtsii-i-egipte/31314664.html.

[10] *TRT Haber*, "Bahçeli: Azerbaycan yönetimi okul projemizi uygun görmedi", May 29, 2021, https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/bahceli-azerbaycan-yonetimi-okul-projemizi-uygun-gormedi-584573.html.

[11] "Kırgızistan Cumhurbaşkanı Atambayev: Çavuşoğlu'nun darbe iddiaları absürt", *BBC Türkçe*, August 1, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-36940327.

[12] *DW,* "MİT'in Kırgızistan'dan getirdiği Orhan İnandı tutuklandı", July 12, 2021, https://www.dw.com/tr/mitin-k%C4%B1rg%C4%B1zistandan-getirdi%C4%9Fi-orhan-inand%C4%B1-tutukland%C4%B1/a-58244597.

[13] *O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti*, "Prezident Shavkat Mirziyoyevning O'zbekiston Respublikasi mustaqilligining yigirma to'qqiz yilligiga bag'ishlangan tantanali marosimdagi nutqi", August 31, 2020, https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/3824.

[14] Mehmet Şah Yılmaz, Jeyhun Aliyev, "Özbekistan'ın Ankara Büyükelçisi Azamhocayev, ülkesinin bağımsızlığının 30. yılını AA'ya değerlendirdi", *Anadolu Agency*, September 1, 2021, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/ozbekistanin-ankara-buyukelcisi-azamhocayev-ulkesinin-bagimsizliginin-30-yilini-aaya-degerlendirdi/2352230.

[15] Paul Goble, "After Taliban Victory, Central Asian Countries Increasingly Pursuing Separate Goals", *Jamestown Foundation*, September 23, 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/after-taliban-victory-central-asian-countries-increasingly-pursuing-separate-goals/.

[16] *President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, "O perevode alfavita kazakhskogo yazyka c kirillitsy na latinskuyu grafiku", October 27, 2017, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal_acts/decrees/o-perevode-alfavita-kazahskogo-yazyka-s-kirillicy-na-latinskuyu-grafiku; *National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, "Lotin yozuviga asoslangan O'zbek alifbosiga bosqichma-bosqich to'liq o'tishni ta'minlash chora-tadbirlari to'g'risida", February 10, 2021, https://www.lex.uz/docs/5281850; Paul Goble, "Russian Language Losing Its Position in Kyrgyzstan – and Moscow May Be as Well", *Jamestown Foundation*, January 28, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/russian-language-losing-its-position-in-kyrgyzstan-and-moscow-may-be-as-well/.

[17] Serik Rymbetov, "Anti-China Sentiments Grows in Kazakhstan as Economic Cooperation Stalls", *Jamestown Foundation*, July 26, 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/anti-china-sentiments-grows-in-kazakhstan-as-economic-cooperation-stalls/.

[18] Maksim Aleksandrovich Likhachyov, "Kazakhstansko-turetskoe sotrudnichestvo v kontekste strategicheskogo partnyorstva Astany i Moskvy", *Problemy natsional'noy strategii*, No. 4 (49), 2018, p. 131, https://riss.ru/documents/725/8212ccfd43904beca03d569a3f3df987.pdf.

[19] Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic to the Republic of Turkey, "Politicheskoe cotrudnichestvo", https://mfa.gov.kg/ru/dm/posolstvo-kyrgyzskoy-respubliki-v-tureckoy-respublike/-5e9045cea4e5a; Kubanychbek Joldoshev, "Bishkek v ojidanii voennoy pomoshchi ot Ankary", *Radio Azattyk*, July 5, 2021, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31341756.html.

[20] *Caspian Policy Center*, "Join Military Drills Between Pakistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan Reflect Growing Partnership", April 30, 2019, https://www.caspianpolicy.org/joint-military-drills-between-pakistan-turkey-and-uzbekistan-reflect-growing-partnership/.

[21] "Turkmenistan: Bringing out the big guns", *Eurasianet*, September 28, 2021, https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-bringing-out-the-big-guns.

[22] *Radio Azatlyk*, "Turkmenistan stanet polnopravnym chlenom Tyurskogo soveta", September 15, 2021, https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31460971.html.

[23] President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Qazaqstan Respy'bli'kasy syrtqy saяsatynyn' 2020 – 2030 jyldarg'a arnalg'an tujyrymdamasy ty'raly", March 9, 2020, https://www.akorda.kz/kz/legal_acts/decrees/kazakstan-respublikasy-syrtky-sayasatynyn-2020-2030-zhyldarga-arnalgan-tuzhyrymdamasy-turaly.