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Turkish Foreign Policy in Central Asia in the Era of Erdoğan: The Convergence of Pan-Turkism, Pragmatism, and Islamism

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Abstract

The study explores the evolution of Turkish foreign policy toward Central Asia over the past three decades. It shows how Avrasyacılık (Eurasianism) and pan-Turkism initially informed Turkish state approaches to the region following the independence of the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in the early 1990s. In the era of Erdoğan, Turkey first adopted pragmatism in the 2000s, but later underwent a course-correction in the 2010s that emphasized the development of political and military relations. As Turkey is not alone in Central Asia, the study also considers how its evolving footprint in the region was impacted by external actors, including Russia, China, and the Gulf, among others. Despite this competition, the study argues that Turkey enjoys cultural and religious advantages, as well as deep-rooted political and institutional arrangements with Central Asian states, that ensures it an enduring presence there.

Interest in the peoples of Central Asia, especially those of Turkic ethnic and cultural background, first began to appear among various Ottoman intellectual circles during the closing decades of the nineteenth century.⁽¹⁾ Nascent Turkish national identity at the time, which the Ottoman and Turkish elite shared, including the Committee of the Union and Progress (İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti, CUP), promoted Turkism and Turanism. These notions affirmed the existence of an organic and racial connection between the Turkic peoples of Anatolia and Central Asia, then governed by Romanov Russia.⁽²⁾ Some hoped such connections would bring about eventual political unification across these regions. However, the dream of a great Turkic union was never realized, even following the disintegration of the Romanov Empire and the attempt by Enver Pasha, one of the key CUP leaders, during his short-lived leadership of the Basmachi revolt (1921–1922) against the Bolsheviks.⁽³⁾

The Turkish Republic that emerged in the aftermath of the Ottoman collapse viewed Central Asia as an integral part of the Soviet Union, although it retained and cultivated connections with various diasporic networks tied to

I express my gratitude to Dr. Mohammed Al-Sudairi and the anonymous peer-reviewer for their feedback and helpful comments.

- (1) Eun Kyung Jeong, “A Study on The Formation of Early Turkish Nationalism,” *Academia Via Serica* 3, No. 1 (2018): 57–83, <https://doi.org/10.22679/avs.2018.3.1.57>.
- (2) (Pan-)Turkism refers to the core Turkic-speaking peoples in the region extending from Central Anatolia to the Caucasus and Central Asia, while (pan-)Turanism encompasses wider geography of peoples ranging from Anatolia Turkistan and Mongolia. Both terms came into common use in the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly in the Ottoman Empire, and mostly as a reaction to (pan-)Slavism and (pan-)Germanism. Kemalist Turkey dropped the rhetoric of both Turkism and Turanism, emphasizing instead Turkish nationalism centred around national unity within the borders of the republic. Turkism and Turanism experienced a major comeback after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of several new states in its former territories. For more details about Turkism and Turanism, see Caesar E. Farah, “Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation: Jacob M. Landau,” *Digest of Middle East Studies* 6, no. 1 (January 1997): 53–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1949-3606.1997.tb00708.x>; Berna Pekesen, “Pan-Turkism,” *European History Online (EGO)*, 2019, <https://d-nb.info/1194979122/34>; Ziya Gökalp, *The Principles of Turkism* (Brill Archive, 1968).
- (3) According to British intelligence then, Enver Pasha died in Kulob, a city in southern Tajikistan during a raid carried out by the Bolsheviks. He was buried in Tajikistan and remained there until his body was carried back to Istanbul in 1996. See Dietrich Jung and Wolfgang Piccoli, *Turkey at the crossroads: Ottoman legacies and a greater Middle East*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic (2001); S.R. Sonyel, “Enver Pasha and the Basmaji movement in Central Asia,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 26:1, (1990), 52–64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4283348>.

the region. For much of the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy did not reflect any particular prioritization of Central Asia.⁽⁴⁾ Following the drawn-out Soviet collapse between 1989 and 1991, Turkey responded to the new geopolitical environment by paying greater attention to its periphery, including the Balkans, the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and the newly independent post-Soviet states of Central Asia.⁽⁵⁾ Over the past three decades, Turkish foreign policy toward Central Asia has been shaped by unfolding domestic developments within Turkey, including the reign of Turgut Özal and his Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi, ANAP), that of Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), the continued instability of the economy in the 2000s, and finally the coup attempt in mid-2016. Thus, Turkish foreign policy toward Central Asia, especially in the era of Erdoğan, makes an interesting case to trace and examine the historical and contemporary connections between Turkey and the region of Central Asia, and the intersection between the domestic and international.

The aim of this study is to explore how Turkish foreign policy toward Central Asia has evolved and how it has been developing in the era of Erdoğan, and in light of the foreign policy of other powers in the region. It holistically analyzes the historical evolution and contemporary dimensions of Turkish foreign policy toward the Central Asian Republics (CARs) of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It is organized into four sections. The first section provides an overview of Turkish foreign policy *vis-a-vis* post-Soviet Central Asia and analyses it in relation to the concept of Eurasianism. The second section examines the historical evolution of Turkish foreign policy toward the CARs. This evolution is traced through thematic sub-sections corresponding to three distinct periods: the 1990s, the 2000s, and the 2010s. The third section provides a brief account of Turkish political and

(4) Bülent Aras, "Turkey's Policy in the Former Soviet South: Assets and Options," *Turkish Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 18, 2000): 36–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683840008721220>.

(5) Hakan Fidan, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards Central Asia," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 2010): 109–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950903507560>.

economic relations with each of the CARs. The fourth and last section deals with other external powers in Central Asia and explores how Turkey competes with them for influence in the region.

1. An Overview of Turkish Foreign Policy and Eurasianism

Turkey's post-Cold War orientation toward Central Asia and other parts of Asia, including the South Caucasus and the Middle East, is best described as an 'eastward turn' in its foreign policy.⁽⁶⁾ This eastward turn, which Turkish foreign policy elites in the 1990s did not necessarily see as replacing the traditional Kemalist Western orientation of its foreign policy, was viewed as an expression of a more powerful Turkey returning to the global stage. An important concept underpinning this eastward turn is Eurasianism (*Avrasyacılık*), which itself has been fueled by the increased significance of Eurasia to Turkey's political, security, and economic interests.⁽⁷⁾ Eurasianism has its early origins in the nineteenth century but only assumed maturity in the late twentieth century when Russian intellectuals reacted to the collapse of the Soviet Union and had to contend with the future and identity of the Russian (and Slavic) nations.⁽⁸⁾ Their debates sought to cast Russia as being neither European nor Asian but an entity that took from both and constituted its own special cultural, economic, and linguistic formation. This perhaps explains the appeal Eurasianism has for nations that lie between the demarcation points of European and Asian geographies such as Turkey or the CARs.

(6) Unal Cevikoz, "Turkey in a Reconnecting Eurasia Foreign Economic and Security Interests," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-reconnecting-eurasia>.

(7) Eurasia is a contested geographical term referring to a landmass enveloping Europe and Asia. Although some geographers treat Europe and Asia as distinct entities or continents, they are not naturally separated from one another. However, Eurasianism refers to various ideologies or political and cultural agendas that seek to realize some sort of union across this re-imagined and unitary landmass. See Mark Bassin, *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

(8) Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press (Washington, DC The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2008).

The discourse on Eurasianism in Turkey began to gain traction among political and intellectual circles around the same time as the articulation of the eastward turn, and gradually influenced Turkish foreign policy in a pragmatic and quasi-strategic sense.⁽⁹⁾ The growth and popularization of Eurasianism at the level of Turkish foreign policy were informed by various geopolitical structural pressures and events that bridged the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. For much of the twentieth century, Turkey was encouraged by the United States and Western Europe to act as a buffer zone against Soviet influence.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, as Turkey faced repeated rejections in its attempt to join European political-economic arrangements since the late 1980s, combined with the end of the Soviet threat in 1989–1991, Turkish elites felt that their Western partnerships had frayed. Accordingly, they began to search for alternative regional partnerships, and as a result, the CARs, with their Turkic cultural connections, appeared to be the most promising.⁽¹¹⁾ Moreover, this eastward turn toward the CARs was supported by Ankara’s Western allies, who, against the backdrop of the War on Terror in the early 2000s, saw Turkey as a potential model for nationalist, secular, democratic, and Western-oriented Muslim-majority states.

Eurasianism is not a uniform discourse within Turkey. The idea is understood in multiple ways: Western-oriented, pan-Turkist, Russian-oriented, and neo-Ottomanist Eurasianism.⁽¹²⁾ The first and most widespread is Western-oriented Eurasianism, which conceptualizes Turkey as a bridge

(9) Özgür Tüfekçi, “Turkish Eurasianism: Roots and Discourses,” in *Eurasian Politics and Society: Issues and Challenges*, edited by E. Akilli O. Tufekci, H. Tabak (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017),

<https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-4438-5511-2>; Oktay Tanrısever, “Discourses and Politics of Eurasianism in Turkey During the 2000s,” in *Turkey: Towards a Eurasian Shift?*, edited by Valeria Talbot (Milano: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2018), 13–34, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/turkey_report_.pdf.

(10) Carlo Frappi, “Central Asia’s Place in Turkey’s Foreign Policy,” *Istituto per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale (ISPI)*, December 2013, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analysis_225_2013.pdf.

(11) Christos Kassimeris, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Options: Europe, the USA or Central Asia?” *Contemporary Politics* 16, no. 3 (September 16, 2010): 321–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2010.501653>.

(12) Tanrısever, “Discourses and Politics of Eurasianism in Turkey During the 2000s.”

between different parts of Eurasia, allowing the country to play a potential modernizing and Westernizing role in Central Asia and beyond. This “civilizing” conception is unsurprisingly supported by secular elites. Pan-Turkist Eurasianism, by contrast, considers the core of the Eurasian landmass as being primarily populated by Turkic peoples who should therefore be supported and brought together against other political–cultural claimants such as Russia. This understanding resonates with pan-Turkist and ultranationalist groups. Russian-oriented Eurasianism, the least influential and most anti-Western one, views Eurasia as a pathway for Turkey to leave the Western alliance system behind and pursue an independent foreign policy. Some leftist parties support this view, such as the Worker’s Party of Doğu Perinçek, now renamed the Vatan Partisi (Homeland Party). Finally, neo-Ottomanist Eurasianism is a pragmatic understanding that does not seek to confront Russia while also retaining Turkey’s Western-oriented policies and partners. Furthermore, it does not solely emphasize racial-cultural identities but also religion (Islam) as a basis for Eurasianist solidarity. Islamist elites and parties, including the AKP, subscribe to such an understanding.

While these are all different and perhaps irreconcilable interpretations of Eurasianism, they are unified in their emphasis upon wider Eurasianist geography in which Central Asia assumes greater prominence as a space for Turkish interests.

2. The Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy

Relations between Turkey and the CARs can be understood as having passed through three different phases, each overlapping with a particular decade (the 1990s, 2000s, 2010s) since the end of the Cold War. Each of these decades was colored by particular Turkish domestic developments and approaches to the region. For example, the early 1990s, when Turgut Özal served as president, was defined by a strong emphasis on forging cultural links guided by a Turkic Eurasianist spirit. In the 2000s, as the Erdoğan era began,

continuities and pragmatic adjustments took place, as seen in the expansion of economic and political ties, as well as growing cooperation in infrastructure and energy. In the 2010s, as the era of Erdoğan and the AKP consolidated, particularly in the years after the mid-2016 coup attempt, Turkey began to focus on its security and military ties with the CARs, substantially improving its relationships with them in turn.

2.1 Turkish Foreign Policy in the 1990s: Guided by Turkism and Turanism

Turgut Özal formed the Motherland Party, a center-right, neoliberal, and pro-business party, just before Turkey's return to multiparty democracy in 1983. After a decisive victory in the 1983 elections, he formed a government, won a second term in 1987, and served as prime ministership until 1989. The period of his presidency between 1989 and 1993 was crucial in shaping early foreign policy toward Central Asia, coinciding as it did with the collapse of the Soviet Union. While not deviating from the traditionalist Kemalist approach, the Özal government reached out into regions that were beyond the legacy of the Ottoman Empire while strengthening ties with Europe and the United States (US).⁽¹³⁾ At the beginning of the 1990s, Turkey was among the first countries to recognize the independence of the CARs and establish diplomatic relations with them. In addition to pragmatic political and economic calculations, this decision was driven by the belief of Turkish policymakers in Turkic unity, which centered on the notions of pan-Turkism, and Turanism. This can be evidenced by the projects supported by Turkish policymakers in the early post-Cold War period, which had a strong cultural flavor. For example, in 1992, Turkey created the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, TİKA), an international entity entrusted with facilitating bilateral and multilateral relations between the country and the

(13) Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 7, 2008, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2008/10/07/turkey-s-middle-east-policies-between-neo-ottomanism-and-kemalism-pub-22209>.

states of not only Central Asia, but the Caucasus, and later Africa, the Middle East, and other regions.⁽¹⁴⁾ In 1993, the International Organization of Turkic Culture (Uluslararası Türk Kültürü Teşkilatı, TURKSOY) was established to oversee and protect the shared heritage and culture among its member states, stretching from the Caucasus to Central Asia.⁽¹⁵⁾

These attempts were not limited to state-level relations as Turkey actively sought to reach out to, and build ties with, the populations of the region. Again in 1993, the state-run Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu, TRT), along with TİKA, launched TRT-Avarasya, a TV channel aimed at Turkic-speaking audiences, and particularly those in the CARs.⁽¹⁶⁾ Through such efforts, Turkey sought to use the media to project its soft power toward Turkic populations who were perceived to have been cut off from Anatolia due to decades of Russian rule, and in equal measure, to strengthen their sense of identification in a common Turkic identity.⁽¹⁷⁾ Besides these Turkic guided institutions of culture and media platforms (see Table 1), Turkey also started to interact with the CARs through several international religious organizations in which all these states shared in a common membership, and among which the most important was the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Under the latter's rubric, Turkey

(14) Mustafa Aydın, "Foucault's Pendulum: Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus," *Turkish Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 21, 2004): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468384042000228576>.

(15) The International Organization of Turkic Culture, "About," accessed August 2, 2021, <https://www.turksoy.org/en/turksoy/about>.

(16) It is estimated that the number of those who understand Turkish, or its vernaculars worldwide stands at around 250 million. TRT Avarsya, later renamed as TRT Türk in 2002, has sought to reach such Turkish-speaking audiences across the globe. For more details on TRT transnational TV channels including TRT Kurdi, TRT Arabi, and TRT World, among others, see Gökçen Karanfil, "Continuities and Changes in the Transnational Broadcasts of TRT," in *Television in Turkey*, edited by Yeşim Kaptan and Ece Algan (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 151–71, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46051-8_8.

(17) In 2009 TRT established TRT Avaz, emphasizing Turkishness while also according considerable attention to Ottoman and Islamic history. TRT Avaz "aims at disseminating Turkish culture and Anatolian cultural values to populations speaking Turkish, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Turkmen living in 27 different countries in the relevant geography." Assel Tutumlu, "Turkey-Central Asia Relations: A Strategic Overview," *Yakın Doğu Enstitüsü (YDE)* (Nicosia, 2020); Karanfil, "Continuities and Changes in the Transnational Broadcasts of TRT."

utilized Islamic religious and civilizational ties as a means of engagement and deepening ties with the CARs—as did other Muslim-majority states such as Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar. This Islamic-centric outreach will be expanded upon in the fourth section of this study.

Name	Year	Headquarters	Members
International Organization of Turkic Culture ⁽¹⁸⁾	1993	Ankara, Turkey	Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.
Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries	2008	Baku, Azerbaijan	Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.
Organization of Turkic States, previously known as the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (“Turkic Council”)	2009	Istanbul, Turkey	Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.
International Turkic Academy	2012	Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan	Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.
Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation	2012	Baku, Azerbaijan	Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

Table 1: Turkic-Based Organizations

Educational cooperation carried out by both non-state organizations as well as state actors was an important component of Turkey’s outreach in the region. Up to 1997, more than 75 Turkish high schools were founded across the CARs (30 in Kazakhstan, 18 in Uzbekistan, 11 in Kyrgyzstan, 5 in Tajikistan, and 12 in Turkmenistan) by networks associated with the exiled and now US-based

(18) The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the autonomous republics of the Russian Federation, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Altai, Sakha, Tyva, and Khakassia as well as the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Moldova), all have observer status in this organization.

preacher Fethullah Gülen and the Turkish World Research Institute.⁽¹⁹⁾ Many of these were closed in the aftermath of the 2016 coup. Moreover, between 1991 and 1994, Turkey helped found three universities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.⁽²⁰⁾ Further bolstering these efforts, the Turkish Ministry of Education initiated the Great Student Exchange Project during this period, awarding scholarships for more than 14,000 students in Central Asia (and including the Caucasus) between 1992 and 2002.⁽²¹⁾ As of 2020, among the 3,680 scholarships were granted by this program, 793 were given to students from Central Asia (and the Caucasus), amounting to 21% in total.⁽²²⁾ This indicates how Turkey has energetically sought to attract students from the region, a practice that goes back to the 1990s.⁽²³⁾

Such educational, academic, and cultural exchanges between Turkey and the CARs have helped build community connections beyond the state-to-state level. In celebrating figures like Ahmed Yassawi, for example, they reconceptualize the cultural solidarities between Turkey and the CARs as being rooted in an older history.⁽²⁴⁾ They also serve to cultivate a public perception across the CARs of Turkey (along with Russia and the West) as a leading center for education and science.

(19) Aras, “Turkey’s Policy in the Former Soviet South: Assets and Options.”

(20) The first is Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University (Akhmet Yassawi University) in Turkestan, Kazakhstan. The second is Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, an institution named after a national leader. The third is the International Turkmen-Turkish University, which is based in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

(21) In 2010, this program was renamed Türkiye Bursları (Turkey’s Scholarships) and is now administrated by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities. See Türkiye Scholarships, “About Us,” accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/en/page/about-us/turkiye-scholarships>.

(22) Türkiye Scholarships, “2020 Annual Report,” 2020, <https://storage.tbbsweb.blob.core.windows.net/tbbsweb/Page/About/TB-Report-2020.pdf>

(23) Although Turkey has backed this project for years and appears to be an expression of soft power projection directed particularly at Central Asia, it did not translate into political influence as within the United Nations General Assembly from 1985–2018. In fact, more support for Turkey came from scholarship non-receiving countries. See Fatma A. Felkitli, “The Role of International Educational Exchange in Turkish Foreign Policy as a Reconstructed Soft Power Tool,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 10, no. 1 (April 3, 2020): 41-58, <https://doi.org/10.20991/allazimuth.707710>.

(24) Mesut Idriz, “Ahmad Yasawī as a Leading Early Central Asian Sūfi: Reexamination of His Perceptions on Tariqah (Order),” *Afkar-Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam*, 9(1), (2008), 39–50.

2.2 Turkish Foreign Policy in the 2000s: Pragmatic Ambivalence

In 2002, the AKP, headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, took power, bringing about a significant shift in Turkish foreign policy, especially toward the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. While reinforcing some of the trends of the Özal era, the shift was marked in terms of a new emphasis on neo-Ottomanist and Islamist rationalizations, as will be explained in the last section. Nevertheless, in many respects, it upheld and continued the policy of cultural outreach, predicated on ideas of Turkic unity and dialogue that first crystallized in the 1990s. For instance, in 2008, the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries (Türk Dili Konuşan Ülkeler Parlamenter Asamblesi, TURKPA) was formed with the aim of formalizing Turkic cooperation and developing legal frameworks for bilateral and multilateral relations.⁽²⁵⁾ The following year, the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Türk Dili Konuşan Ülkeler İşbirliği Konseyi Sekreteryası, or the Türk Konseyi Sekreteryası), also known as the Turkic Council, was established as a regional association to foster closer ties among member states and their populations.⁽²⁶⁾ Later, the Turkic Council became an umbrella for all Turkic organizations, including the Turkish Business Council, the International Turkish Academy, and the International Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation.⁽²⁷⁾ As a result of these organizational efforts and cooperation, the state-run Yunus Emre Institute, a conduit for the promotion of linguistic and cultural ties, opened a branch in Kazakhstan in 2007.⁽²⁸⁾

Yet the early 2000s were also defined by a relative ambivalence on the part of Turkish foreign policymakers regarding the CARs. Hakan Fidan, an

(25) Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries (TurkPA), "About TURKPA," accessed August 1, 2021, https://turk-pa.org/en/content/about_turkpa.

(26) The Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, "Türk Konseyi Hakkında," accessed August 1, 2021, <https://www.turkkon.org/en/turk-konseyi-hakkinda#:~:text=Turkic>.

(27) Ruslan Rehimov, "Bakü'de Türk Kültür ve Miras Vakfının yeni binası açıldı," *Anadolu Ajansı*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/bakude-turk-kultur-ve-miras-vakfinin-yeni-binasi-acildi/1613226>.

(28) It was founded in 2007 and named after a Turkic Sufi poet (1238–1320). Yunus Emre Institute, "Yunus Emre Institute," accessed August 1, 2021, <https://www.yee.org.tr/en/corporate/yunus-emre-institute>.

academic and later head of the national intelligence service, explains that this was because Central Asia was not among the top priorities of Turkey at the time, in part due to its growing involvement in the Middle East.⁽²⁹⁾ Another factor that may explain this ambivalence is that there had been a growing realization among Turkish foreign policymakers about the limits of their Turkic outreach *vis-à-vis* Central Asia, especially as it alienated ruling elites there who wanted to promote their own national identities and solidarities in the post-independence period. Together, these factors—a re-focusing of foreign policy toward the Middle East, domestic issues, and the problems inherent in the previous approach—explain the ambivalence of the 2000s. This contributed to a more pragmatic Turkish foreign policy that emphasized strengthening bilateral relations with the CARs, mainly focusing on expanding trade and business opportunities.⁽³⁰⁾

2.3 Turkish Foreign Policy in the 2010s: Course-Correction

In the 2010s and in the spirit of the AKP's vision for Turkish foreign policy, Turkish-CARs relations deepened and assumed a strategic character, reversing the relative drift of the preceding decade. At its core, this process was driven by Ankara's search for regime security, economic security and its increasing focus on developing military ties. In terms of regime security, the July 2016 coup attempt looms large.⁽³¹⁾ Because of the prevailing belief that the Gülen network was involved, the Turkish leadership sought to counter its presence around the globe, including in Central Asia. Across the region, Turkey actively pressured governments to shut down Gülen-affiliated schools

(29) Fidan, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards Central Asia."

(30) Yohanan Benhaïm and Kerem Öktem, "The Rise and Fall of Turkey's Soft Power Discourse," *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, no. 21 (December 31, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.5275>.

(31) Iskander Akylbayev, "Internal Challenges of Turkey's Foreign Policy: The Impact on Central Asia," *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting* (CABAR.asia), August 12, 2016, <https://cabar.asia/en/iskander-akylbaev-internal-challenges-of-turkey-s-foreign-policy-the-impact-on-central-asia-2>.

and to deport their teachers.⁽³²⁾ On multiple occasions inside Turkey and during official visits overseas, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu called for the closure of such entities.⁽³³⁾

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were targets of Turkish pressure in this regard. Both countries declined to cooperate with such requests, arguing they infringed upon national sovereignty.⁽³⁴⁾ In fact, Turkish–Kyrgyz relations have yet to fully recover due to the ongoing presence of the Gülen-affiliated and supported schools.⁽³⁵⁾ However, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan had all closed Gülen-affiliated schools prior to 2016 and were thus unaffected by Turkey’s new “political” interest in the region.⁽³⁶⁾ Resistance to full closure by some of the CARs may have prompted Turkey to counter the Gülen presence by negotiating a transfer of control of these schools to trusted state organs, such as the Maarif Foundation. The latter, formally known as Türkiye Maarif Vakfı (Turkish Education Foundation), was established in early 2016 as a state-

(32) M. Hakan Yavuz and Rasim Koç, “The Turkish Coup Attempt: The Gülen Movement vs. the State,” *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4 (December 2016): 136–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12239>.

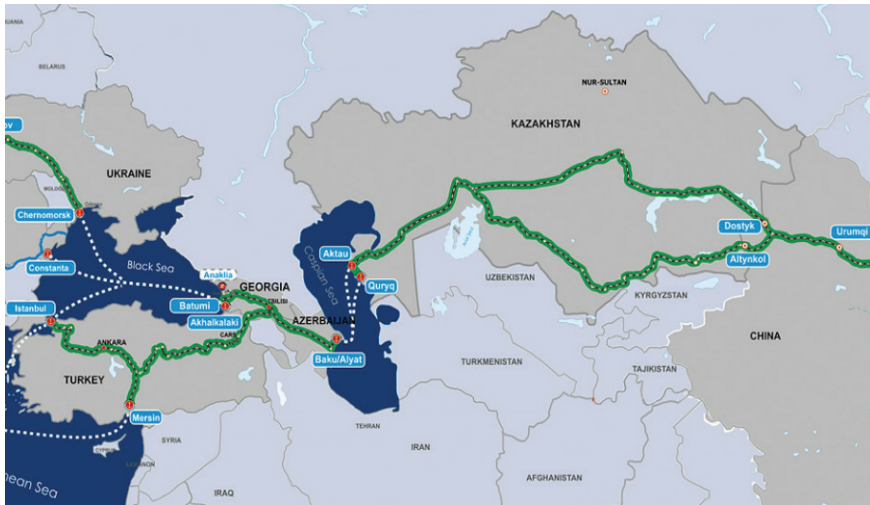
(33) “Erdogan Urges Kyrgyzstan to Shut down Gulen Network,” *Reuters*, September 1, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-turkey-gulen/erdogan-urges-kyrgyzstan-to-shut-down-gulen-network-idUSKCN1LH3Q2>.

(34) Catherine Putz, “Turkish Targeting of Gülen Movement Reaches into Central Asia,” *The Diplomat*, July 15, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/turkish-targeting-of-gulen-movement-reaches-into-central-asia/>; “Erdogan Urges Kyrgyzstan to Shut down Gulen Network,” *Reuters*, September 1, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-turkey-gulen-idUSKCN1LH3Q2>.

(35) Orhan İnandı, who is a Turkish and Kyrgyz national educator and founder of the Turkish-Kyrgyz Sapat schools’ networks, went missing in Bishkek in early June 2021. For details see Catherine Putz, “Founder of Kyrgyzstan’s Gulen-Linked Schools Missing, Kidnapping Suspected,” *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/founder-of-kyrgyzstans-gulen-linked-schools-missing-kidnapping-suspected/>.

(36) Bayram Balci, “What Future For the Fethullah Gülen Movement in Central Asia and the Caucasus?,” *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 2, 2014, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13006-what-future-for-the-fethullah-g%C3%83%C2%BClen-movement-in-central-asia-and-the-caucasus?.html>; Samantha Brletich, “Tajikistan, Turkey and the Gülen Movement,” *The Diplomat*, August 15, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/tajikistan-turkey-and-the-gulen-movement/>; Safure Cantürk, “Turkey’s Allies Mobilizing Support against Gülen Movement’s Schools Abroad,” *Sabah*, May 19, 2015, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/05/19/turkeys-allies-mobilizing-support-against-gulen-movements-schools-abroad>.

run, non-profit organization overseeing educational activities and institutions ranging from kindergartens to high schools.⁽³⁷⁾ According to existing data, it manages over 357 education institutions located in 44 countries and has ties with 99 countries.⁽³⁸⁾ It is reported that the foundation has taken over 213 of the Gülen-affiliated educational centers and institutes worldwide.⁽³⁹⁾ In March 2021, the Maarif Foundation indicated that it would soon open its first school in Central Asia in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan.⁽⁴⁰⁾



Map 1: The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route⁽⁴¹⁾

- (37) Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, “Türkiye Maarif Vakfı,” accessed July 30, 2021, <https://turkiyemaarif.org/page/524-Turkish-Maarif-Foundation-12>.
- (38) Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, “Dünyada Türkiye Maarif Vakfı,” accessed July 25, 2021, <https://turkiyemaarif.org/page/42-MAARIF-IN-THE-WORLD-16>.
- (39) Birol Akgün and Mehmet Özkan, “Turkey’s Entrance to International Education: The Case of Turkish Maarif Foundation,” *Insight Turkey*, March 30, 2020, 59–70, <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2020221.05>.
- (40) Nazli Y. S. Cetin, “Turkey’s Maarif Foundation to Open School in Kyrgyzstan,” *Anadolu Agency*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkeys-maarif-foundation-to-open-school-in-kyrgyzstan/2170803>; Adinai Kurmanbekova, “Kyrgyzstan and Turkey: Has a New Level of Relations Begun?,” *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR.asia)*, June 16, 2021, <https://cabar.asia/en/kyrgyzstan-and-turkey-has-a-new-level-of-relations-begun>.
- (41) “The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route starts from Southeast Asia and China, runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and further to European countries,” *Middle Corridor Trans-Caspian International Transport Route*, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://middlecorridor.com/en/route>.

The pursuit of economic security, both with respect to energy and markets, has played a role in Turkey's interest in the CARs. Turkey imports 74% of its primary energy requirements, with oil and natural gas accounting for 60%. Most of these imports originate from Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan (see Tables 2 & 3).⁽⁴²⁾ Turkey's reliance on countries like Russia and Iran, both of which have tense relationships with the US and the European Union (EU), poses problems for it as a NATO member state. This is compounded further by the international sanctions placed on Moscow and Tehran. Against this backdrop, the CARs emerge as politically less sensitive alternatives for energy imports (see Table 4). Market-wise, Turkey has positioned itself as a transit hub through the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative (shortened to the Middle Corridor, see Map 1)—a project that essentially seeks to develop region-wide networks of railroads and pipelines beginning from Turkish territory and extending throughout Southern Caucasia and into Central Asia *via* Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.⁽⁴³⁾ The Middle Corridor is conceived as operating in a complementary fashion with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and would allow Turkey to access markets across the CARs while also acting as a gateway to EU markets.

Country/Year	2007	2010	2013	2016
Iran	8.35	7.26	5.25	6.93
Iraq	0.86	2.01	6.00	9.25
Russia	9.36	3.32	1.46	3.23
Saudi Arabia	3.55	1.96	2.75	2.16

Table 2: *Turkey's Oil Imports by Countries (million tons)*⁽⁴⁴⁾

(42) Iraq and lesser extent from Algeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. See Pınar İpek, "Turkey's Energy Security in Eurasia: Trade-Offs or Cognitive Bias?" in *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order*, edited by Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem (Routledge, 2019), 129-146, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429023064>.

(43) Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Turkey's Multilateral Transportation Policy*, accessed August 1, 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa.

(44) Pınar İpek, "Turkey's Energy Security in Eurasia Trade-Offs or Cognitive Bias?" 133.

Country/Year	2007	2010	2013	2016
Russia	22,762	17,576	26,212	24,540
Iran	5,054	7,765	8,730	7,705
Azerbaijan	1,258	4,521	4,425	6,480

Table 3: Turkey's Gas Imports by Countries (million cubic tons)⁽⁴⁵⁾

Country/Resource	Gas (bt)	Oil (bb)
Kazakhstan	2.4	30
Uzbekistan	1.8	0.594
Turkmenistan	7.5	0.6
Kyrgyzstan	0.006	0.04
Tajikistan	0.006	0.01

Table 4: Available Energy Resources by Country (bt = billion tons, bb = billion barrels)⁽⁴⁶⁾

Yet another factor is military cooperation. Since the early 1990s, Turkey has signed several bilateral agreements with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan to enhance military exchange and education.⁽⁴⁷⁾ This cooperation has involved training the CARs' armed forces and police in Turkey.⁽⁴⁸⁾ It is important to note that such military training agreements were

(45) Pınar İpek, "Turkey's Energy Security in Eurasia Trade-Offs or Cognitive Bias?" 133.

(46) Asian Development Bank Institute, "Renewable Energy in Central Asian Economies: Role in Reducing Regional Energy Insecurity," August, 2019, <https://www.adb.org/publications/renewable-energy-central-asian-economies>; World Bank Group, *Central Asia - Water and Energy Program : Working for Energy and Water Security*, accessed March 10, 2022, <http://bluepeace-centralasia.ch/knowledge/publications/EnergyandWaterSecurity/>. For more details on energy resources in Central Asia, see Kedar Mehta et al., "The Energy Situation in Central Asia: A Comprehensive Energy Review Focusing on Rural Areas," *Energies* 14, no. 10 (May 13, 2021): 2805, <https://doi.org/10.3390/en14102805>.

(47) Arestakes Simavoryan, "Turkey's Military-Technical Cooperation with the Turkic Nations," *ORBELI - Analytical Research Center*, November 11, 2019, https://orbeli.am/en/post/316/2019-11-18/Turkey's+Military-Technical+Cooperation+With+the+Turkic+Nations?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_35dea656c3b653431296baae33366f4e3c3d1641-1628589943-0-gqNtZGzNAk2jcnBszQiO.

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

not operationalized until the early 2000s and were only expanded in the 2010s through additional agreements concluded with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In 2013, Turkey began joint military equipment and armament production with Kazakhstan.⁽⁵⁰⁾ This form of cooperation was replicated with Uzbekistan in 2017.⁽⁵¹⁾ In the following years, military cooperation and agreements continued to deepen, as indicated by the latest Turkish–Uzbek joint military drill in March 2021, as well as a Turkish–Kazak meeting in May to boost military and defense relations.⁽⁵²⁾ The increase in military cooperation can be understood as arising from the need of the CARs to diversify and improve their military capacities on the one hand, and Turkey’s desire to project independent influence in Central Asia distinct from other external powers on the other. The latter can be read as an extension of Turkey’s security assertiveness in multiple arenas over the past few years: its interventions in Syria and Libya, its backing of Azerbaijan against Armenia, and even its purchase of Russian-made S-400 missile defense system despite NATO and US objections.

(49) Levon Hovsepian, “Military-Political Aspects of Cooperation Between Turkey and The Central Asian Countries: Overall Dynamics of Development,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 11, no. 2 (2010): 81–87,

<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/military-political-aspects-of-cooperation-between-turkey-and-the-central-asian-countries-overall-dynamics-of-development/pdf>.

(50) In 2013, Aselsan, Turkey’s largest military company, opened a \$44 million USD plant in Kazakhstan in partnership with Kazakhstan Engineering. It aims at modernizing Kazakhstan’s T72 tanks, helicopters, and armored vehicles. Such a project does not only target Kazakhstan as a market, but seeks to export to the neighboring CARs as well. Burak B. Amman, “Turkish Firm Aselsan Seeks Global Role in Defense,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 16, 2014,

<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-firm-aselsan-seeks-global-role-in-defense-75656>.

(51) Bahtiyar Abdulkerimov, “Uzbek-Turkish Joint Military Drill Kicks Off,” *Anadolu Agency*, March 23, 2021,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/uzbek-turkish-joint-military-drill-kicks-off/2184418>.

(52) Bahtiyar Abdulkerimov, “Uzbek-Turkish Joint Military Drill Kicks Off”; Meiramgul Kussainova, “Kazakhstan, Tajikistan Agree to Boost Strategic Ties for Sustainable Development,” *Anadolu Agency*, May 20, 2021,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/kazakhstan-tajikistan-agree-to-boost-strategic-ties-for-sustainable-development/2248773>.

3. Overview of Turkey's Political and Economic Relations with Central Asia

While Turkey has developed multilateral frameworks of engagement with CARs as discussed above, bilateral ties remain an important dimension, with varying degrees of closeness marking Ankara's relationship with each one of these states. This is reflected in the increased economic and political ties with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan over other CARs. In 2020, Turkey's trade volume with the CARs was about US\$6.2 billion (see Table 5). As of 2021, according to Turkish official sources, it was reported that around 4,000 Turkish companies operated across Central Asia.⁽⁵³⁾ Some of this economic activity is centered on Uzbekistan, the most populous country in the region with an estimated 33.5 million people (Kazakhstan has 18.5 million people, Tajikistan 9.3 million, Kyrgyzstan 6.4 million, and Turkmenistan 5.9 million). Turkey did not have close relations with Uzbekistan until recently.⁽⁵⁴⁾ This shows that the situation in the political domain does not necessarily mirror the economic one. A discussion on the state of bilateral relations between Turkey and each of these states is provided below, ranging from the most intimate/significant politically and economically to the least so.

(53) Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Turkey's Relations with Central Asian Republics," accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa.

(54) The World Bank Group, "Population, Total - Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan," 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=UZ-KZ-TM-KG-TJ>.

In 2019, statistics show that around 2,000 Turkish companies operated in Kazakhstan with investments totaling US\$25 billion, covering approximately 487 projects from airports to artificial islands.⁽⁶²⁾

Turkey's relationship with Uzbekistan was not as cordial or cooperative as the one with Kazakhstan, at least prior to 2016. This was because of President Islam Karimov's reserved attitude toward multilateral Turkic organizations and his reluctance to liberalize the economy and open it to foreign activity. The two countries have a history of political tension, moreover due to Turkey's role in hosting Uzbek opposition groups in the early 1990s and the Uzbek state's handling of peaceful protests in Andijan in 2005.⁽⁶³⁾ The breakthrough in Turkish-Uzbek relations came only after the death of Karimov in 2016, after which the new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, adopted different policies and approaches for the country. It was only under his term that Uzbekistan joined the Turkic Council and established an HLSC with Turkey, with its first meeting held in February 2020.⁽⁶⁴⁾ TICA has established a presence in Uzbekistan as a result, and by 2018 became involved in over 700 projects.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Notwithstanding the political ups and downs in the relationship, however, bilateral trade has experienced consistent growth, increasing from US\$412 million in 2005 and reaching US\$2.1 billion in 2020 (see Table 5). The total number of Turkish companies present in Uzbekistan has reached 1,300.⁽⁶⁶⁾

(62) "Turkey's Cooperation with Kazakhstan to Broaden after New Set of Deals," *Daily Sabah*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/2018/09/14/turkeys-cooperation-with-kazakhstan-to-broaden-after-new-set-of-deals>.

(63) Esref Yalinkilicli, "Uzbekistan as a Gateway for Turkey's Return to Central Asia," *Insight Turkey* (20, no. 4 (2018): 27–44, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/26542171>.

(64) Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan," accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-uzbekistan%20.en.mfa>

(65) Zuhul Demirci and Tugcenur Yilmaz, "Turkey Carried out Hundreds of Projects in Uzbekistan," *Anadolu Agency*, April 29, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-carried-out-hundreds-of-projects-in-uzbekistan/1130927>.

(66) Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan."

Turkey's relationship with Turkmenistan is likewise relatively good. Turkmenistan is a member of most Turkic organizations. More than 600 Turkish companies have benefited from construction projects cumulatively valued at US\$50 billion.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Bilateral trade has fluctuated even as it has grown, from US\$341 million in 2005 to US\$1.5 billion in 2010, peaking at US\$2.4 billion in 2015 before dropping back to US\$1.1 billion in 2020 (see Table 5). Turkish–Kyrgyz relations are good but limited, likely because of the country's strong orientation toward Russia. The bilateral relationship is built upon one agreement signed in 1997. The two countries established an HLSC in 2012 to increase their level of cooperation.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Although bilateral trade seems modest, it has experienced some growth, increasing from about US\$94 million in 2005 to \$508 million in 2020 (see Table 5).

The only Persian-speaking country among the CARs, Tajikistan, maintains a working relationship with Turkey based on over 60 bilateral agreements signed since its independence.⁽⁶⁹⁾ The two countries established the Tajik–Turkish Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation in 1993, which seeks to coordinate policies to facilitate mutual growth in trade and development.⁽⁷⁰⁾ TIKA has sponsored over 300 projects in Tajikistan.⁽⁷¹⁾ However, bilateral trade volumes remain modest, reaching just US\$322 million

(67) Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Relations between Turkey and Turkmenistan," accessed August 3, 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-turkmenistan.en.mfa>.

(68) Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Relations between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan," accessed August 2, 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-kyrgyzstan.en.mfa>.

(69) Tutumlu, "Turkey-Central Asia Relations: A Strategic Overview," 30.

(70) Embassy of the Republic of Tajikistan to the Republic of Turkey, *Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation*, July 11, 2018, <http://www.tajembankara.org/index.php/en/tajikistan-and-turkey/relations-and-cooperation/economic-commission>; Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Relations between Turkey and Tajikistan," accessed August 4, 2019, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-tajikistan.en.mfa>.

(71) Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, "First Lady Erdoğan: 'It Is Our Shared Duty to Help People with Disabilities Unleash Their Hidden Potential,'" June 15, 2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/105682/first-lady-erdogan-it-is-our-shared-duty-to-help-people-with-disabilities-unleash-their-hidden-potential->

in 2020 (see Table 5), making this the smallest of the trading partnerships between Turkey and the CARs.

4. Turkey's Competition with the External Powers

Due to its strategic significance and abundant natural resources, Central Asia has attracted many actors beyond Turkey and has historically been an arena of intense competition between the major powers. In the nineteenth century, the British and Russian empires vied for influence over the region in what was known as the “Great Game.”⁽⁷²⁾ Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, several new players entered Central Asia, initiating what some analysts have called a New Great Game.⁽⁷³⁾ While Russia remains a dominant force given its imperial connections to the region, China has expanded its footprint over the past decade. External powers such as the US, the EU, regional players like Iran and India, and the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have done the same (see Table 6).

4.1 The Different Players in Central Asia

Despite its loss of control over the region since the early 1990s, Russia has continued to maintain some degree of influence. For instance, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia formed, with the support of the newly independent CARs, several regional and intergovernmental organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Moreover, Russia maintains power projection capabilities in the region, building military bases and stationing troops in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Russian trade with the CARs has also increased over the past three decades from US\$6.3 billion in 2001 to US\$28.4 billion in 2020 (see Table 6).

(72) Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules* (Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929825.001.0001>.

(73) Dianne L. Smith, “Central Asia: A New Great Game?” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 23, no. 3 (September 1996): 147–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.1996.9933727>.

Another major power in Central Asia is China. Its interest in the region has been long tied to its security concerns over the stability of the border region of Xinjiang. Following the launch of its BRI in 2013, China has articulated a more substantial economic interest in the CARs, although engagement in that sphere, particularly concerning energy, certainly dates to the 1990s. China has been the region's biggest trade partner since 2015, with the total value of trade reaching US\$38.5 billion in 2020.⁽⁷⁴⁾ In addition, China has long utilized entities like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established in 2001, which includes Russia among its members, to further cooperate with the CARs in the military, political, and economic arenas.

Country/ Trade Volume	2001	2005	2010	2015	2020
Turkey	565,797	1,970,430	5,469,315	6,213,459	6,228,362
Russia ⁽⁷⁵⁾	6,312,727	12,681,569	21,437,181	20,966,915	28,492,959
China ⁽⁷⁶⁾	1,508,996	8,726,764	30,112,563	32,603,854	38,555,171
US ⁽⁷⁷⁾	1,069,264	2,548,859	3,067,870	1,751,225	1,805,213
EU ⁽⁷⁸⁾	6,937,193	20,969,852	32,486,969	28,942,484	33,023,581

(74) International Trade Centre, "Bilateral Trade between China and Central Asian Republics Product: TOTAL All Products," accessed August 1, 2021, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7C156%7C%7C%7C23%7CTOTAL%7C%7C%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C2%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1.

(75) International Trade Centre, "Bilateral Trade between Russian and Central Asian Republics Product: TOTAL All Products," accessed August 1, 2021, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7C643%7C%7C%7C23%7CTOTAL%7C%7C%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C2%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1

(76) International Trade Centre, "Bilateral Trade between China and Central Asian Republics Product: TOTAL All Products," accessed August 1, 2021, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7C156%7C%7C%7C23%7CTOTAL%7C%7C%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C2%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1

(77) International Trade Centre, "Bilateral Trade between United States of America and Central Asian Republics Product: TOTAL All Products," accessed August 1, 2021, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7C842%7C%7C%7C23%7CTOTAL%7C%7C%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C2%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1

(78) International Trade Centre, "Bilateral Trade between European Union (EU 28) and Central Asian Republics Product: TOTAL All Products," accessed August 1, 2021, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7C%7C14719%7C%7C%7C23%7CTOTAL%7C%7C%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C2%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1

between the EU and the CARs since the 1990s was convened in Astana in 2018, and the second in Tashkent in 2019. That same year, the EU announced a Central Asia strategy focusing on bilateral cooperation in economic and energy investment, counterterrorism, and the promotion of free markets and human rights. The EU's trade volumes with the CARs are significant and have generally exceeded US \$20 billion since 2005 and increased to US \$33 billion in 2020 (see Table 6).⁽⁸³⁾

Beyond the major external powers, several regional actors, notably Iran and India, play a role in Central Asia. Iran has actively invested in improving its bilateral ties with all the CARs since the 1990s.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Ironically, its most difficult relationship has been with the only other Persian-speaking country in the region, Tajikistan. However, this began to change following the collapse of Iran's nuclear deal with the P5+1 and the EU and Tajikistan's limited choices in regional cooperation.⁽⁸⁵⁾ As a result, Iranian–Tajiki bilateral relations have improved since 2019, especially in the security and military domains.⁽⁸⁶⁾ Emphasis on developing interconnectivity, which itself is driven by economic need, has shaped Iranian approaches to the region. An important project backed by Tehran is the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan–Afghanistan–Iran project, known as KTAI, a transport road network for moving goods from the Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas to the CARs.⁽⁸⁷⁾ Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan share in another

(83) European Commission, *Central Asia*, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/central-asia/>.

(84) Omid Rahimi, "Iran's New Pivot to Central Asia," *The Jamestown Foundation*, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-new-pivot-to-central-asia/>.

(85) Parviz Mullojdjanov, "Tajik-Iranian Relations Under the New Conditions," *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting* (CABAR), March 30, 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/tajik-iranian-relations-under-the-new-conditions>.

(86) Paul Goble, "Iran and Tajikistan Announce Formation of Joint Military Committee," *Jamestown Foundation*, April 15, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/iran-and-tajikistan-announce-formation-of-joint-military-committee/>

(87) "Iran Officially Launches KTAI Corridor, Sending Cargoes to Kyrgyzstan," *Tehran Times*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/450487/Iran-officially-launches-KTAI-corridor-sending-cargoes-to-Kyrgyzstan>

two countries signed the largest investment deal to date, worth US\$6.1 billion and covering more than 21 projects in fields related to agriculture, logistics, petrochemicals, and space.⁽⁹⁴⁾ In 2019, the UAE signed a similar \$10 billion agreement with Uzbekistan.⁽⁹⁵⁾ In addition, in 2020, Saudi Arabia signed a 25-year contract with Uzbekistan to develop power and energy generation.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Qatar has also concluded investment memorandums with the CARs, including a US\$100 million residential and business hub in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.⁽⁹⁷⁾ The GCC's trade volume with the CARs is higher than Iran's, and is almost similar to India's as it reached only \$2 billion in 2020, doubling from 2015 (see Table 6).

4.2 Turkey's Comparative Advantages

Among this constellation of powers in Central Asia, Turkey is perhaps the most dynamic in its relationship to the CARs and certainly outranks—in both tangible and intangible aspects—Iran, India, and the GCC states. In comparison to all these other external powers, Turkey enjoys a comparative advantage embodied in its shared ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties with most states in this region. Understandably, it has continued to capitalize on these, with substantive results. The eighth meeting of the Turkic Council, which took place in November 2021, allowed Turkey to articulate a new vision for the

(94) Gaukhar Erubaeva, "Kazakhstan, UAE Sign Deals Worth Over \$6 Billion," *Caspian News*, October 19, 2020, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakhstan-uae-sign-deals-worth-over-6-billion-2020-10-15-56/>.

(95) Dominic Pratt, "The Geopolitical Implications of Expanding Ties Between the Gulf and Central Asia," *Global Security Review*, June 9, 2019, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/relationship-gulf-cooperation-council-central-asia/>.

(96) Khaled Abou-Zahr, "Central Asia Could Be a Testing Ground for Regional Stability," *Arab News*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1779001>; "ACWA Power Signs Milestone Agreements with Ministry of Energy of Uzbekistan," *ACWA*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.acwapower.com/news/acwa-power-signs-milestone-agreements-with-ministry-of-energy-of-uzbekistan/>.

(97) Natalie Koch, "Qatar and Central Asia: What's at Stake in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan?" *PONARS Eurasia*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/qatar-and-central-asia-what-s-at-stake-in-tajikistan-turkmenistan-and-kazakhstan/>.

Turkic nations.⁽⁹⁸⁾ One significant move resulting from this meeting was the renaming of the Turkic Council into the Organization of the Turkic States (OTS), giving it special status among world organizations and affirming pan-Turkism moreover as a binding connection between the member states. In addition, the newly-founded OTS announced the “Vision for Turkic World—2040” as a road map for deepening cooperation over the next twenty years and unveiled plans for a new Turkic Investment Fund to boost investment across the region. Another development was that Turkmenistan agreed to join as an observer. The event, as a whole, marked an important development in Turkey’s presence in Central Asia. This continued institutionalization of Turkic connections has elicited fears from external powers such as China, which has long been concerned that it may strengthen Turkic nationalism and solidarities within Xinjiang and beyond.⁽⁹⁹⁾ Others, such as Russia, have taken a more nuanced position, expressing interest in becoming an observer in the OTS.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ The US and the EU have cautiously found Turkey’s expanded influence in the region as a potential counterbalance to traditional powers like Russia and China.

It should be noted that beyond its Turkic cultural and linguistic connections, during the era of Erdoğan, Turkey has drawn heavily on Islamic and neo-Ottomanist themes in expanding its ties to Central Asia, especially in the last decade. Neo-Ottomanism refers to invocations of the history and nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire in service of contemporary Turkey’s foreign policy.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ The Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyamet), the state institution

(98) The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, “Joint Declaration of the 8th Summit of the Organisation of Turkic States,” November 11, 2021, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/joint-declaration-of-the-8th-summit-of-the-organisation-of-turkic-states>.

(99) Jun Mai, “Revamped Turkic States Group ‘Adds to Extreme Uncertainty’ at China’s Door,” *South China Morning Post*, December 26, 2021, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3161085/revamped-turkic-states-group-adds-extreme-uncertainty-chinas?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article&campaign=3161085.

(100) Eric Mcglinchey, “Questioning Sinophobia in Central Asia,” *PONARS Eurasia*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/questioning-sinophobia-in-central-asia/>.

(101) M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*. (Oxford University Press, 2020).

focused on managing religious affairs inside and outside Turkey, has engaged with various institutions in the Caucasus, Balkans, and Central Asia since the 1990s. For example, it established the Ankara-based Eurasian Islamic Council (Avrasya İslam Şurası) in 1995, intending to facilitate religious cooperation among states across Eurasia; its last took place in Istanbul in October 2016.⁽¹⁰²⁾ The creation of this organization indicates Turkey's longstanding interest in exercising religious soft power. Moreover, as per the proceedings of the last meeting, which took place after the attempted coup in mid-2016, Turkey has used the organization to serve its domestic and foreign goals: in the final report of the meeting, the Council strongly condemned the Gülen movement as well as terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda and ISIS.⁽¹⁰³⁾

Through the Diyanet, Turkey has constructed mosques and schools across the region. For example, it funded the iconic Ottoman-style Central Imam Sarakhsi Mosque in Bishkek (see Figure 1), Kyrgyzstan, which opened in September 2018.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ The mosque's design and naming were not arbitrary but instead intended to convey the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and its links to Central Asia. It is named after Imam Sarakhsi, an Islamic scholar within the Hanafi school of Islam, the dominant school in the Eurasian territories of the former Ottoman Empire as well as in Pakistan and Central Asia.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ The mosque was opened by Turkish President Erdoğan (see Figure 2), who was accompanied by other officials, including senior cabinet ministers (of

(102) Avrasya İslam Şurası, "Avrasya İslam Şurası Hakkında," accessed March 10, 2022, <https://avrasyaislamsurasi.diyaret.gov.tr/tr-TR/Content/Detail/1>.

(103) Avrasya İslam Şurası, "Sonuç Bildirgesi, IX. Avrasya İslâm Şûrasi Toplantisi. Istanbul, 11-14 October 2016," accessed March 10, 2022, <https://avrasyaislamsurasi.diyaret.gov.tr/tr-TR/Meeting/Detail/9/>

(104) Having the capacity to host 30,000 worshippers, the mosque was opened by Turkish President Erdoğan and then Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov. See Johan Engvall, "Religion and the Secular State in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, June 2020, https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/Religion_and_the_Secular_State_in_Kyrgyzstan_-_Johan_Engvall_-_10.06.20_-_FINAL_wCover.pdf.

(105) Born in Sarakhs, a place between Mashhad and Marw in 1009. Died in 1090. See "al-Sarakhsi, Muhammad ibn Ahmad." *Oxford Reference*, accessed March 10, 2022. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095405644>.

religious affairs and defense), showing the tremendous significance Turkish policymakers attached to the mosque-building projects.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

However, in terms of Islamic outreach, Turkey is not alone in Central Asia. OIC members and GCC states have pursued their own forms of religious cooperation with the CARs. For instance, Qatar funded over 70% of the US\$100 million allocated for constructing the Dushanbe Central Mosque in Tajikistan, one of the largest mosques in Central Asia.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ It has also supported the building of the Nur-Astana Mosque in Kazakhstan. The UAE funded the construction of the Shymkent Cathedral Mosque, located in the south of Kazakhstan.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ Through the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), which has an office in Bishkek, Saudi Arabia (along with the UAE), helped build the Suleiman-Too Mosque in Osh Kyrgyzstan, which was completed in 2012.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ In addition, the WAMY has begun a project to erect an educational, cultural mosque complex in Kyrgyzstan.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ All this suggests that Central Asia is not only a space of economic, political, and security competition but one that increasingly sees religious rivalries play out there from across the Muslim world. Even though Turkey is not alone in the Central Asian Islamic landscape, it is more dynamic than its competitors in large part because of its

(106) Handan K. M. Tosun and Ilkay Gude, “Turkish President Opens Mosque in Kyrgyzstan,” *Anadol Agency*, September 2, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkish-president-opens-mosque-in-kyrgyzstan-/1244380>.

(107) The mosque was planned to be inaugurated by the Emir of Qatar and the President of Tajikistan in mid-2020, but this was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “Official opening of Dushanbe’s Central Cathedral Mosque suspended due to coronavirus pandemic, says Tajik official,” *Asia-Plus*, February 10, 2021, <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20210210/official-opening-of-dushanbes-central-cathedral-mosque-suspended-due-to-coronavirus-pandemic-says-tajik-official>

(108) “Mosque Diplomacy in Central Asia: Geopolitics Beginning with the Mihrab,” *Voices on Central Asia*, December 16, 2020, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/mosque-diplomacy-in-central-asia-geopolitics-beginning-with-the-mihrab/>.

(109) “Mosque Diplomacy in Central Asia: Geopolitics Beginning with the Mihrab.”

(110) “President Sadyr Zhaparov: Now Every Day for Kyrgyzstan Is Equal to Century,” *KABAR*, January 31, 2021, <http://en.kabar.kg/news/president-sadyr-zhaparov-now-every-day-for-kyrgyzstan-is-equal-to-century/>.

collective and bilateral series of socio-economic, political, cultural, linguistic, and educational links with the region.



Figures 1: *The Ottoman-style Central Mosque of Imam Sarahsi in Bishkek.*⁽¹¹¹⁾



Figure 2: *Opening ceremony for the Central Mosque of Imam Sarahsi involving Turkish President Erdoğan and the then Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov.*⁽¹¹²⁾

- (111) Presidency of The Republic of Turkey, “President Erdoğan inaugurates the Central Imam Serahsi Mosque in Bishkek,” September 2, 2018, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/96363/president-erdogan-inaugurates-the-central-imam-serahsi-mosque-in-bishkek>
- (112) Presidency of The Republic of Turkey, “President Erdoğan inaugurates the Central Imam Serahsi Mosque in Bishkek.”

Conclusion

Turkish foreign policy toward Central Asia has been motivated by different factors and has evolved significantly over the past three decades. In the 1990s, during the Özal era, Turkey was animated by Eurasianist discourses and pursued a Turkic-centric agenda toward Central Asia based on state institutions essentially, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Diyanet, and TİKA. Non-state actors, including Gülen-affiliated schools and private businesses, also played a role. As the AKP swept into power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy toward Central Asia experienced further developments that reflected neo-Ottomanist approaches. Under Erdoğan, relations between Turkey and the Central Asian Republics developed in the form of much enhanced institutional cooperation, with the formation of several regional organizations such as TURKSOY, TURKPA, and OTS.

The next important phase in Turkey's foreign policy outreach in Central Asia began after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Turkey's confrontation with the Gülen movement facilitated a corrective policy that created an opening for a reset to strengthen relations even further. Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev was the first head of state to visit Turkey after the coup, and the other CARs expressed political support for Ankara.⁽¹¹³⁾ Turkic-centric outreach was not abandoned but adjusted and centralized, exemplified by the forced transfer of Gülen-related schools to the control of the Maarif Foundation. In this period of correction, Turkey has sought to alleviate tensions with the CARs and has developed deeper security links with them, particularly with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Another increasingly important factor guiding recent Turkish foreign policy changes toward Central Asia (and the Caucasus) has been Turkey's desire to become a hub in the emerging web of economic links via the so-called Middle Corridor stretching from China to Europe.

(113) Catherine Putz, "Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev First World Leader to Visit Post-Coup Turkey," *The Diplomat*, August 6, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/kazakhstans-nazarbayev-first-world-leader-to-visit-post-coup-turkey/>.

Turkey is certainly not alone in Central Asia. Despite ongoing tensions, the US and the EU, who also engage in the region, continue to see Turkey (a fellow NATO member) as a close partner especially compared to China and even more so now Russia. The US and the EU still retain their respective mechanisms in dealing with the CARs, but they lag behind Russia and China. The latter two, by contrast, have developed a strong presence in the region over the past few decades, although there are differences between them. While Russia has longstanding political and security legacies in Central Asia, China has established itself as a significant economic player in the region. Competition with these major players does not appear to affect Turkish foreign policy, and cooperation is sometimes operative, as is the case with Russia through the Astana peace process or Turkey's discursive linkage of the Middle Corridor with the BRI. Given the sanctions it faces, Iran has sought to build its economic interests with the landlocked countries such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan by granting them seaports and creating shared trade corridors with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. In parallel, the GCC member states, including the largest investors, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have also directed targeted (albeit limited) investments in Central Asian projects.

Considering its presence holistically, and especially in the era of Erdoğan, Turkey can be considered a major and successful player in Central Asia. It benefits from unrivaled and substantive cultural, linguistic, and religious links with most of the CARs, although it faces growing competition in the religious sphere from other Muslim state actors such as those of the GCC. Turkish foreign policy will likely continue to deepen cooperation and institutional ties with the CARs, as the recently enunciated OTS-related vision plan suggests. Its approaches in the region will probably continue to be well-received. For the CARs, considering the pressures they face from Russia and China, as well as their own complex political and economic needs, Turkey offers an important alternative for resources and political support.

Nevertheless, the future of Turkish foreign policy toward the Central Asian Republics depends on Turkish domestic politics. Turkish governing elites, including President Erdoğan and the AKP, face general elections in 2023. As Turkey's citizens go to the polls to elect the next president and the 600 members of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, it is an open question as to how the incumbent elites will fare, especially whether they will be able to retain their over 20-year grip on power.

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