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Türkiye and Central Asia: Strategic Convergence and Pragmatic Multilateralism

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Introduction

It was not a surprise, nor a coincidence, when in the 2020s, Türkiye started to strengthen its presence in Central Asia again and made efforts to increase its activities there[1]. In fact, it started right after the Central Asian countries gained their independence, back in the early 1990s[2]. New states appeared in the region, using Turkic languages, or at least having cultural similarities. In Ankara, this strengthened the feeling of brotherhood, even if that feeling was more emotional than rational at that time. A not very strategic policy was implemented, which was influenced by optimism and by the assumption that shared culture would naturally push these countries toward cooperation with Türkiye. Some academics and politicians even believed the new states would turn to Türkiye automatically, like relatives returning after many years away, but this expectation was more wishful thinking than real analysis. In the following years, the relationship became more practical. Cooperation began to focus on areas such as trade, political

[1] Isachenko, Daria (2025) Turkey's Turns to Central Asia: Learning by Doing – Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP). https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkeys-turns-to-central-asia-learning-by-doing

[2] Aras, Bülent (2008) Turkish Policy toward Central Asia SETA Policy Brief, 2008/12 https://www.setav.org/en/turkish-policy-toward-central-asia

consultations, and certain security initiatives[3]. Identity issues played a minor role, and well-defined economic interests became the main driving force.

The regional dynamics of the region also changed. In the last few years, Russia, the real geopolitical successor of the Soviet Union, has not had the same level of influence in Central Asia as before, first of all because its focus is redirected by ongoing geopolitical pressures and conflicts with the west. This change did not leave a vacuum for long. China gradually moved in and became far more visible, especially through finances, trade and large construction projects across the region, as determined by their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For Türkiye, this situation opened new opportunities[4]. Ankara, in the framework of its multivectorial and middle-power-like foreign policy, seeks for more freedom and tries to avoid depending on a few economic partners only. Central Asia was a region where Türkiye could apply this approach with fewer obstacles, with brotherly partners. As all these shifts happened at the same time, Türkiye's presence in Central Asia was not only symbolic or cultural; it became more practical and based on concrete interests, Turkish middle power ambitions, including Pan-Turkism[5]. These developments also reflect an economic shift: diversifying export markets, securing energy supplies, and integrating into transcontinental trade routes, such as the Central Corridor, which has become increasingly important as supply chains increasingly bypass Russia.

Central Asia cannot be considered an insignificant or secondary region at all. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are located on a vast landmass between Europe and Asia. The region practically functions as a land route between continents (in fact, the only one under current geopolitical conditions)[6].

Altogether, more than 80 million people live in these countries. As is well known, the region has vast deposits of gas, oil, and various minerals, which naturally makes it attractive to outside powers. Beyond the exploitation of natural resources, the region's economic role in trade transit is becoming decisive, with complex economic corridors offering revenue potential, infrastructure investment opportunities, reduced transportation costs and improved connectivity in all respects between Asia and Europe. Highlighting the region's growing economic weight, the combined GDP of Central Asia already exceeds approximately USD 500 billion, where Kazakhstan takes more than a half of the regional output. Moreover, the agricultural potential of the region is also quite significant, the role of which is increasingly appreciated. For Ankara,

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[3] Cornell, Svante E. (2014) Türkiye's Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus: Domestic Determinants. In: Cornell, Svante. E. (ed.): Türkiye's Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus. https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/240622TRCA_merged.pdf

[4] Laruelle, Marlene (ed.) (2018) China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia – George Washington University, Central Asia Program. https://www.academia.edu/43300480/Edited_China_s_Belt_and_Road_Initiative_and_its_Impact_in_Central_Asia_Washington_DC_GW_s_Central_Asia_Program_and_Nazarbayev_University

[5] Krzyżanowska, Zuzanna (2024) On the trail of the grey wolf: pan-Turkism in Turkey's foreign policy. OSW Commentary 2024-05-17 https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-05-17/trail-grey-wolf-pan-turkism-turkeys-foreign-policy

[6] Transit volumes along the Trans-Caspian "Middle Corridor" increased more than threefold between 2021 and 2024, reflecting the shift away from northern routes through Russia.

the region is not only interesting because of natural resources or trade possibilities. It is also a space where Türkiye can show influence in a more visible way – through the idea of shared Turkic heritage – without directly confronting bigger powers.

In 2021, the Turkic countries decided to transform their symbolic-cultural cooperation, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS)[7], into a more effective and organized structure. When viewed together with Ankara's other foreign policy strategic program, "Asia Anew", it becomes clear that Ankara is placing its national development program in a Eurasian context and intends to place greater emphasis on this region. The previous bilateral, privileged partnership relations have thus been placed within a multilateral framework initiated by Türkiye, based on mutual benefits. The OTS does not fundamentally change relations in this way but offers a more structured framework where cooperation can be planned and implemented in a more expedient and efficient manner. Institutionalization reduces transaction costs, improves regulatory predictability, and facilitates cross-border investments, which are essential for sustainable economic integration.

At the same time, Türkiye's presence in Central Asia is not exclusive, dominant, or free from competition. Other major players – Russia, China, and the United States – play a visible political and economic role in the region to varying degrees[8]. The multi-vector foreign policy strategy of the Central Asian states is well known. They strive to preserve their strategic autonomy and avoid exclusive dependence on a single external partner by cooperating with all interested partners.

This analysis approaches Türkiye's role from three perspectives: internal relations, relations with individual Central Asian states, and broader international dynamics. It examines the practical tools Ankara relies on – economic partnerships, emerging institutions, and the idea of a shared Turkic heritage – to strengthen its influence in the region.

1. Domestic Drivers and Foreign-Policy Recalibration of Türkiye

1.1. Economic Vulnerabilities and Policy Adjustment

Since the 1990s, Türkiye's presence in Central Asia has been largely determined by its economic power. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ankara's political ambitions in the region were reawakened, but fragile macroeconomic and geopolitical conditions limited the optimal opportunities available. The 1994 currency crisis and extremely high inflation – in some

[7] https://turkicstates.org/en

[8] Alaranta, Toni & Silvan, Kristiina (2022) Turkey in Central Asia – Possibilities and limits of a greater role. FIIA Briefing Paper 328 (Jan 12. 2022) https://fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/bp328_toni-alaranta-kristiina-silvan_turkey-in-central-asia.pdf

years over 70 percent – occupied the government's attention[9], leaving virtually no financial room for strategic foreign policy initiatives. Türkiye's GDP growth averaged below 3% annually in the 1990s, limiting its external economic engagement capacity. During the last decade of the millennium, Türkiye focused mainly on domestic economic liberalization and privatization, dominated by the IMF and the World Bank.

As a result, cooperation with the newly independent Central Asian countries was mostly symbolic-cultural rather than strategic. Trade volumes remained limited in this period, reflecting weak purchasing power and underdeveloped financial systems both in Türkiye and Central Asia. Projects announced with great optimism – such as joint banks, trade corridors and education networks – rarely went beyond planning, as both the public and private sectors simply lacked the capital to support them[10].

However, at the turn of the 2000s, the situation changed abruptly. The 2001 financial crisis, largely due to a weak and mismanaged banking system, forced the Turkish government to implement major structural reforms. After the AK Party came to power in 2002, the Turkish government insisted on fiscal austerity and followed IMF guidelines[11]. With this economically more stable hinterland, Türkiye was able to rethink its strategic foreign policy plans. Turkish construction companies returned to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan[12], and state agencies such as TİKA began their activities in the region with larger budgets[13]. Turkish companies completed a total of more than $540 billion worth of foreign projects by early 2025, Central Asia has historically represented a significant part of this portfolio, with Turkmenistan alone completing projects worth over $54 billion[14]. This period also saw an expansion of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Türkiye, especially in construction and infrastructure, where Turkish companies gained a comparative advantage.

By the late 2010s, Türkiye's consumption-driven growth model had lost momentum and influence. In an effort to stimulate the economy, the government sought to broaden its export opportunities, and Central Asia, with its shared linguistic ties and shared cultural themes,

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[9] Özatay, F. (2000) The 1994 currency crisis in Turkey. The Journal of Policy Reform, 3(4), 327–352. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13841280008523409?utm_source=researchgate.net&utm_medium=article

[10] see more: Szigetvári, Viktor (2020) Turkey's dilemmas in foreign policy and external economy in the early 21st century. Dialog Campus Budapest https://real.mtak.hu/113392/2/830_Turkeys.pdf

[11] Bakker, Bas B. & Klingen, Christoph A. (2012) Chapter 17. Turkey: Managing a Forceful Rebound. In: Bakker, Bas B. & Klingen, Christoph A. (2012) How Emerging Europe Came Through the 2008/09 Crisis. An Account by the Staff of the IMF's European Department. International Monetary Fund https://www.elibrary.imf.org/downloadpdf/display/book/9781616353810/ch017.pdf

[12] Aleksandra Jarosiewicz (2013) Turkey's economy: a story of success with an uncertain future. OSW Commentary Nr. 120 (05.11.2013) https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_120_0.pdf

[13] Tüyloğlu Yavuz (2021) Turkish Development Assistance as a Foreign Policy Tool and Its Discordant Locations. German Institute of International and Security Affairs, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS), SWP Working Paper Nr. 02, April 2021 https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/CATS_Working_Paper_Nr_2_2021__Yavuz_T%C3%BCylo%C4%9Flu_Turkish_Development_Assistance_as_a_Foreign_Policy_Tool_and_Its_Discordant_Locations.pdf

[14] Türkiye Today 15.04.2025 https://www.turkiyetoday.com/business/turkish-construction-firms-maintain-global-reach-with-steady-2025-start-141960

seemed a logical area for new investment. Central Asia offered relatively low and, due to a common cultural background, even easier-to-achieve market entry barriers, growing consumer demand, and state-led development projects that made the region attractive to export-oriented Turkish SMEs. Turkish companies became welcome partners in the region, especially in the opening-up economy of Uzbekistan and the huge industrial projects of Kazakhstan. By the early 2020s, Türkiye's total trade volume with Central Asia exceeded USD 10 billion annually, with a steady upward trend.[15]

Between 2021 and 2024, Türkiye suffered perhaps the most chaotic economic period in recent times. By mid-2024, official data showed inflation around 75 percent[16]. The Turkish lira lost over 80% of its value against the US dollar between 2018 and 2023, intensifying external trade pressures.

If the economy wasn't already strained enough, it was hit by two major shocks in quick succession. First came the pandemic, which paralyzed daily life and forced the state into emergency spending. Then, shortly after, the 2023 earthquakes destroyed entire cities and required another massive financial intervention[17]. The country relies on imported energy to power its industry, and the current account is once again in deficit as global conditions deteriorate, and most companies are operating under heavy debt loads. Exchange rate volatility and inflation further reduced companies' ability to plan long-term investments domestically, giving them a strong incentive to seek more stable or dollar-based foreign revenues.

After Erdoğan was re-elected in 2023, he made further changes to the new economic leadership. A more technocratic group took over and a quiet return to traditional monetary practices was made. Interest rates were raised, the Central Bank was given more room to manoeuvre, and Ankara became more open to foreign investors again[18]. However, public debt remained high, job opportunities for young people remained limited, and income disparities in society continued to widen.

As domestic space shrank, outward-looking activities became more of a necessity than a strategic move. Ankara sought additional export destinations, new investors, and energy sources that would reduce the pressure on the external balance. In particular, access to energy resources and transit revenues has become critical to improving Türkiye's chronic current account deficit. Central Asia – close, culturally familiar, and generally open to cooperation – offered a space where Türkiye could leverage its strengths in construction, trade, and cultural

[15] News Central Asia 14.09.2023 https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/09/14/trade-between-the-countries-of-central-asia-exceeds-10-billion-says-foreign-minister-of-kazakhstan-nurtleu/

[16] Reuters (2024) Turkish Annual Inflation Rises to Around 75% in May 2024 https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-annual-inflation-rises-7545-may-2024-06-03/

[17] World Bank Group February 6, 2024: From Earthquake Devastation to Resilient Revival in Türkiye https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2024/02/05/from-earthquake-devastation-to-resilient-revival-in-turkiye

[18] International Monetary Fund 2024 Republic of Türkiye: 2024 Article IV Consultation — IMF. https://www.imf.org/en/publications/cr/issues/2024/10/11/republic-of-trkiye-2024-article-iv-consultation-press-release-staff-report-and-statement-by-556139

ties without interfering with the asymmetric space that exists in business relations with China or the European Union.

In the long term, from the early 1990s to the mid-2020s, a recurring pattern emerges: domestic economic difficulties have repeatedly pushed Ankara's interests to Central Asia[19]. Each major disruption – the 1994 currency crisis, the 2001 banking crisis, the 2008 recession, and the 2021–24 inflation wave – has prompted a search for opportunities in the region. Central Asia has become both a key market for export-oriented companies and a place where Türkiye has experimented with acting more independently in Eurasia, now in the spirit of its Middle Power ambitions.

1.2. Ideological Narratives and Domestic Legitimacy

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Türkiye suddenly had the opportunity to engage in negotiations with the Turkic republics that had been out of reach for decades. The Turkish president at the time, Turgut Özal, saw this as an exceptional opportunity and urged Ankara to act quickly. He believed that cultural and linguistic ties could be turned into political and economic influence[20]. TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) was established in 1992 primarily for this purpose – to offer training, student exchanges, technical assistance, anything that would strengthen the Turkish presence in the Central Asian region[21]. These early initiatives also aimed to establish future economic ties by introducing the local elite to Turkish business practices and language. It was not necessarily a carefully planned strategy, but rather a case of recognizing the opportunities and launching many small initiatives and seeing what worked.

The enthusiasm waned relatively quickly. Türkiye was amid its own crisis and simply did not have the resources to lead anything. Meanwhile, Russia had also become stronger sooner than expected, and Central Asian leaders were polite but slightly distant: they accepted the support but did not allow another outsider to tell them how to run their states – we shouldn't forget, all five Central Asian states were then starting their nation-building[22]. By the mid-1990s, therefore, despite Ankara's use of the language of "brotherhood", most of the plans had slowed down or stalled; so, the idea of a wider Turkic sphere remained mostly rhetorical.

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[19] Sucu, Ali Emre; Safranchuk, Ivan; Nesmashnyi, Alexander; Iskandarov, Qosimsho (2021) Transformation of Middle Powers with the Decline of World Hegemony: The Case of Turkey – Strategic Analysis. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09700161.2021.1950409

[20] Sedat Laçiner (2009) Turgut Özal period in Turkish foreign policy: özalism. USAK Yearbook 2009/2https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368478098_Turgut_Ozal_Period_in_Turkish_Foreign_Policy_Ozalism

[21] https://tika.gov.tr/en/institutional/about-us/

[22] see more: Levin, Jonathan (2018) From nomad to nation: on the construction of national identity through contested cultural heritage in the former soviet republics of Central Asia. NYU Journal of International Law and Politics 2018/2 https://nyujilp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Levin-PDF.pdf

When the AKP (Justice and Development Party of Türkiye) came to power in 2002, the approach changed again. The earlier discourse of Turkish unity did not disappear, but it was embedded in a much broader narrative of shared civilization and regional depth[23]. The thinking of the Turkish Foreign Ministry was shaped by the view of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, the developer of the neo-Ottoman theory, that Türkiye lies at the intersection of several historical regions[24]. Central Asia was then interpreted as part of this common historical space, connected not only by ethnicity but also by religion and older imperial networks. It was less about kinship and more about positioning Türkiye as a central and unavoidable actor in several regions at once.

This ideological reframing served two domestic policy goals at once. First, it reinforced national pride by presenting Türkiye as a central – not peripheral – actor in global politics. Second, it supported the AKP's quest for legitimacy among conservative voters by presenting outward-looking activism as a natural extension of the country's spiritual and historical mission. The proliferation of cultural institutions – the Yunus Emre Institute (YEI, 2007), the TRT television channel (2009), and the expanding TİKA regional offices – embodied this outward-looking nationalism.

In the 2010s, the political centre in Türkiye gradually shifted to the presidency. In parallel with this change, the government's foreign policy doctrine changed. After the failed coup attempt in 2016, nationalism not only became stronger, but also the most vocal political trend.[25] Groups that had been fighting each other for years, from hardline secular nationalists to conservative Islamists, suddenly realized that they were on the same side on this issue. The new direction was strategic autonomy, the essence of which was that Türkiye should make its decisions independently of the opinions of the world power centers.

Central Asia seemed an excellent test ground for the new doctrine, as the region was familiar and convenient – geographically close, connected by a common culture and history, but unlike the Middle East, it did not involve political tensions or the risk of a major international crisis. Türkiye could act as a confident regional player there without conflicting with the interests of other middle and great powers.

When the Turkic Council changed its name to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021, the Turkish media presented it as something much bigger than a mere administrative update. It seemed that Türkiye was returning to Eurasia – and indeed it was[26]. The name change seemed

[23] Giannotta Valeria, Çubukçuoğlu Serhat Süha, Al Qutbah Shamma (2024) Looking at Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP Rule, Trends Research and Advisory 07 Oct 2024 https://trendsresearch.org/insight/looking-at-turkish-foreign-policy-under-the-akp-rule/

[24] Murinson, A. (2006) The strategic depth doctrine of Turkish foreign policy. Middle Eastern Studies,42(6), 945–964. https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200600923526

[25] Uzel, İlhan (2022) Turkish foreign policy after presidentialism. Middle East Institute (MEI) Washington https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Turkish%20Foreign%20Policy%20After%20Presidentialism.pdf

[26] Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019) Asia Anew Initiative. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye. https://www.mfa.gov.tr/asia-anew-initiative.en.mfa

insignificant, yet it carried weight: it suggested that Türkiye was regaining its once glorious role. At the same time, Ankara was careful not to let Moscow or Beijing feel that their regional interests were being harmed by the revival of pan-Turkic ambitions. Official statements interpreted the initiative as a partnership of equals, focusing on trade, infrastructure, energy links and education – the ideology worked quietly in the background, essentially framing practical, interest-based cooperation.

In the 2020s, this synthesis of nationalism and pragmatism matured into the diplomacy of the so-called "Turkish Century" – an attempt to combine internal resilience with external assertiveness. Economic success stories, such as increasing trade volumes or visible infrastructure projects, are tangible evidence of this self-assertion for the domestic audience. In this vision, Central Asia plays a dual role: both a symbolic "ancient homeland" and a laboratory for middle-power activism. By combining civilizational discourse with concrete results – trade, logistics, and defence technology – Ankara seeks to transform identity into influence and ideology into sustainable policy.

1.3. Institutional Instruments of Outreach

Türkiye's excellent relations with Central Asia were strengthened extremely effectively by the less visible, hard and systematic work going on in the background: the activities of various agencies and foundations. Therefore, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ankara did not just rely on slogans of a common historical past, but rather worked hard to strengthen relations through schools, development programs, business forums and even various media. At first, nothing seemed too strategic, but it gave Türkiye such a solid foothold that these channels functioned unchanged even in chaotic moments of Turkish domestic politics.

The first element of the institutional network was TİKA, founded in 1992[27]. TİKA helped schools print modern textbooks, sent equipment to vocational training centers, or restored old religious sites. The budget was small, but the effect was surprisingly spectacular and lasting, and brought enormous prestige. Such projects also had the indirect aim of supporting Turkish companies by creating a good reputation and facilitating market entry into competitive sectors. After the AKP came to power in 2002, TİKA ceased to be a small aid agency and underwent obvious changes: more staff, a bigger budget, but most of all, Ankara finally had a plan. Within a few years, TİKA's name was appearing in many places from the Balkans to Central Asia.

In Central Asia, its activities shifted from distributing school materials to solving everyday problems: helping local governments, supporting farmers or modernizing small clinics, from renovating historic buildings in Samarkand to helping build hospitals in Fergana. The projects

[27] TİKA – 2020 – Turkish Development Assistance Report 2020 – Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). https://tika.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/old/2022/TurkiyeKalkinma2020ENG_Web.pdf

were not ostentatious; they showed that Türkiye was willing to help without education or political pressure.

Meanwhile, Türkiye also established another cultural diplomacy tool – the Yunus Emre Institute[28], launched in 2007.Cultural centers were opened where anyone could drop in for a Turkish language course, calligraphy class or history workshop. Over the years, thousands of students turned up at these centers. Some later studied in Türkiye on state scholarships; others learned Turkish. The institute estimates that by 2024, more than thirty thousand people in Central Asia would have participated in its programs.

It was these everyday contacts – not speeches or agreements – that built a real acquaintance with Türkiye.

The national airline of Türkiye, Turkish Airlines, played a surprisingly central role in Türkiye's expansion into Central Asia[29]. It all started quietly, with just one flight to Almaty in 1992. From there, the network gradually expanded. Today, flights depart from Istanbul to all the Central Asian capitals, and even to some smaller cities that previously seemed out of reach.

Istanbul suddenly became the most important hub between Europe, Asia and the Middle East[30]. This function as a hub generates significant revenues in the service sector and strengthens Türkiye's position in global value chains, especially in logistics and aviation. The airline's activities were not limited to ticket sales. In places like Tashkent and Astana, the airline opened maintenance facilities with local partners, which meant jobs, training and the feeling that Türkiye was not just skimming the market. During the pandemic, when many airlines stopped flying, Turkish Cargo continued to deliver medical supplies and relief packages[31]. For the region's leaders, this was a moment that mattered – Türkiye showed up when others didn't.

Media followed these all almost naturally. TRT Avaz was launched in 2009 and began broadcasting in Turkish[32]. Some programs were news, others were travel shows or documentaries, but the point was to express emotions: people in the region could watch something that seemed familiar. Anadolu Agency correspondents were present in every Central Asian country and interpreted events from a Turkish perspective – in a different tone, more understanding than the Russian or Western media.

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[28] Sakka, Celal & Yurtsever, Serdar (2024) The Role of Yunus Emre Institutes in the Educational and Cultural Diplomacy Acting as a Soft Power in the Turkish and GCC Relations. The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology 23(3) https://tojet.net/articles/v23i3/23313.pdf

[29] Koç, Tuğba (2025) Turkish Airlines' influence: A crucial actor in diplomacy, Daily Sabah 07.02.2025. https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/turkish-airlines-influence-a-crucial-actor-in-diplomacy

[30] Turkish Airlines serves more countries than any other airline globally (over 130), strengthening Istanbul's role as a global logistics hub. https://simpleflying.com/turkish-airlines-most-countries-served/

[31] Cargo Connect (2021) Turkish Airlines and Turkish Cargo rise to the top amidst pandemic https://cargoconnect.co.in/turkish-airlines-and-turkish-cargo-rise-to-the-top-amidst-pandemic/

[32] https://azertag.az/en/xeber/trt_avaz_channel_launched-581756

Economic diplomacy is an important part of the overall picture. DEİK (Foreign Economic Relations Council)[33] works with organizations such as MÜSİAD (Union of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen)[34] and TOBB (Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye)[35] to organize trade events, investor trips, and establish joint business councils. These organizations, as unofficial state bodies, bring Turkish companies together with Central Asian partners and help them close deals. These mechanisms reduce information asymmetry and transaction risks, which are often significant obstacles in emerging markets.

More than 7,000 Turkish companies are active across Central Asia, particularly in construction, textiles, and services[36]. In this way, when Ankara wants to promote a foreign policy idea, it can rely on the companies involved and interested in the background. The role of the Turkish Eximbank[37] is similar. Although it was established in 1987, it only became an active economic outreach tool after 2010, when it began to provide favourable credit lines for Turkish companies' projects abroad. Export financing has become a key tool in increasing the competitiveness of Turkish companies against Chinese and Western partners. Türk Eximbank has significantly increased its support to Turkish exporters, exceeding $40 billion by the mid-2020s, with a strategic focus on expanding its presence in Central Asia. In 2024, the bank provided a record $49 billion in support and aims to increase this to over $50 billion by the end of 2026.[38]

By the mid-2020s, these various organizations had gradually become a coherent and effective institutional system. This structure has allowed Türkiye to achieve stable influence in the region without huge state financial resources. Each organization does its job differently: TİKA disburses development aid, Yunus Emre Institute promotes the Turkish language and culture, Turkish Airlines maintains transportation links, TRT Avaz shapes media narratives, and DEİK and its associates develop and nurture business relationships.

Unlike larger powers that use money or military force to strengthen their influence, Türkiye relies on its network of institutions created through diligence and hard work. With no single agency in a sole management role, they adapt quickly to the needs of local partners and continue to work even when policies change. This diverse ecosystem allows Türkiye to emphasize its narrative that its presence is about shared growth, not pressure or dominance

[33] https://www.deik.org.tr/deik-about-us
[34] https://www.musiad.org.tr/en
[35] https://www.tobb.org.tr/Sayfalar/Eng/AnaSayfa.php
[36] open.kg 31.01.2026 https://open.kg/en/news/exclusive/67444-dilorom-mamatkulova-turcija-i-ca-strojat-novuju-arhitekturu-svjazej.html
[37] https://www.eximbank.gov.tr/
[38] https://www.madeinturkeynewspaper.com/turk-eximbank-providing-40-bln-financing-produces-its-own-rating-system/

1.4. Strategic Autonomy and "Asia Anew"

In 2019, Türkiye launched the so-called "Asia Anew" initiative[39]. It is important to note that before this, its relations with Asian countries did not follow a single, long-term plan. They were mostly isolated visits, random diplomatic meetings, or small projects that were not connected to each other. "Asia Anew" tried to organize all this into a single, clearer direction. The four main areas that Türkiye wanted to promote more seriously were: economy, technology, education and cultural cooperation. In this process, Ankara also realized that relying solely on the same well-established partners would not move things forward. For this reason, instead of bilateral relations, it began to open up to broader regional groupings and multilateral cooperation, such as ASEAN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

Central Asia was, of course, the first place where these goals could be tested in practice. Its geographical location made cooperation faster and more practical, without political complications. Turkish officials often describe Central Asia as a place where discussions flow easily and joint projects do not get stuck for years. Through the "New Asia" initiative[40], Türkiye hoped to tap new export markets, attract Asian investment, and demonstrate that it could serve as a link between Asia and Europe via the Middle Corridor route. This economic corridor represents a strategic alternative to maritime routes, potentially reducing transportation times and costs, and increasing resilience to geopolitical disruptions.

This multi-vector diplomacy has matured into a doctrine of strategic autonomy. The term encompasses Türkiye's desire to make independent policy decisions while remaining committed to NATO and maintaining selective, pragmatic partnerships with Russia and China[41]. In practice, this means maximizing flexibility between competing geopolitical axes. Central Asia provides an ideal testing ground for this balancing act: engagement there does not provoke NATO allies or directly conflict with Russian or Chinese interests, yet it allows Ankara to demonstrate initiative and leadership. From an economic perspective, this means diversifying trading partners, minimizing dependency risks, and maximizing bargaining power in international markets.

In recent times, Turkish President Erdoğan has tied his foreign policy to a grand vision of "Türkiye's Century," which he launched after winning the 2023 elections[42]. In this vision, he frames the republic's next hundred years (until 2123) as a period in which the country must stand on its own two feet technologically, rely less on others, and take more initiative in its

[39] Muhittin Ataman (2023) The Century of Türkiye: A New Foreign Policy Vision for Building the Türkiye Axis https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/the-century-of-turkiye-a-new-foreign-policy-vision-for-building-the-turkiye-axis

[40] Yılmaz, Nuh (2024) Asia Anew Initiative: Main Aspects of Türkiye's Asia Opening – Insight Turkey. https://www.insightturkey.com/commentaries/asia-anew-initiative-main-aspects-of-turkiyes-asia-opening

[41] Pierini, Marc (2023) Turkey's Geopolitical Role. Between National Ambitions, Western Anchors and Russian Sway. IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2023. https://www.iemed.org/publication/turkeys-geopolitical-role-between-national-ambitions-western-anchors-and-russian-sway/

[42] https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-erdogan-set-for-election-victory/

region. In this narrative, he portrays the Turkic countries of Central Asia as natural partners – not only because of their shared cultural roots, but also because cooperation with them fits into his vision of a world where power is no longer concentrated in the West.

The idea of independent action has become a central theme in Türkiye's foreign policy. Central Asia has ultimately become both a testing ground and a key area in which to put these ideas into practice. This is a place where Türkiye can try its hand at a middle-power role – focusing on trade, cultural ties, and technology rather than pressure or hard power.

2. Central Asia: Regional Transformation and National Trajectories

After 2010, some Central Asian governments no longer felt so dependent on Russia and began to look for other partners. Türkiye happened to be in a better position at the time – more money, better technology, more trust. The cooperation hence developed almost naturally, without dramatic announcement. Then came the leap in 2020 – COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and sudden changes in energy markets shook the region. Strangely enough, these crises opened new doors for Türkiye. The country found more room to act, simply because everyone else's attention was diverted.

Today, Türkiye does not follow a single template with the region. Each Central Asian state is given a different approach. Ankara is adapting based on the needs of individual governments and the political climate, rather than imposing a single grand strategy.

2.1. Kazakhstan: Strategic Partnership and Industrial Cooperation

Kazakhstan has been close to Türkiye almost from the moment Kazakhstan became independent. In the early 1990s, the personal trust between Turgut Özal and Nursultan Nazarbayev was more important than any official rules or committees. In the first years, various agreements were signed – in the fields of trade, culture and education. One of the first tangible results was the establishment of the Ahmet Yesevi University in Turkestan. The project also had symbolic weight, as Ahmet Yesevi is a historical Sufi figure who is connected by a common Turkish heritage.

The 1990s were not impressive in terms of numbers. Trade was slow and somewhat stagnant, as both countries were still struggling with their own internal problems, compounded by bureaucracy, unclear regulations, and poor transport links. Nevertheless, Turkish construction companies had already appeared, building in Almaty and later helping to shape the new capital, Astana. Construction projects have become a major arena of Turkish economic presence, often implemented through a combination of state-backed loans and private investment. In 1992, the

two sides established a joint economic commission to continue dialogue and keep cooperation alive, even if progress was modest. Things changed a lot in the 2000s. Türkiye's economy began to grow steadily, while Kazakhstan benefited from the oil boom. Turkish companies appeared in sectors such as construction, consumer goods, and textiles. Around the same time, Kazakh investors began buying real estate in Türkiye, especially in tourist areas. In 2009, both countries jointly established the Turkic Council – nowadays Organization of Turkic States – showing that the relationship was no longer just about trade.

Under President Tokayev, cooperation has become much broader. It no longer only includes construction, but also energy, logistics, technology, and even pharmaceuticals. Trade reached $6.5 billion by 2024, and more than 2,200 Turkish businesses operate in Kazakhstan. These companies contribute significantly to bilateral trade, employment and technology transfer, especially in construction, retail and manufacturing.

Kazakhstan is Türkiye's largest trading partner in Central Asia, accounting for nearly 50% of the region's total bilateral trade with Türkiye[43]. The port of Aktau, on the Caspian Sea coast, is becoming a key point on the Middle Corridor, essentially a transport route from Asia to Europe via Russia. The port's capacity is more than 15 million tons annually, making it a critical hub for Caspian logistics[44]. Defence projects are also expanding, with Kazakhstan purchasing Turkish communications systems and drones as part of its military modernization[45].

2.2 Uzbekistan: Anchor of Reform and Defence Cooperation

The relationship between Uzbekistan and Türkiye has not been a straightforward one, but can be divided into three main periods. In the early 1990s, when the founding president Islam Karimov was still forming the new state, he did not really believe Ankara's talk of Turkish unity, on the contrary, he maintained distance and control. Despite Türkiye's provision of scholarships and aid, by the end of the 1990s the atmosphere had cooled considerably. Tashkent officials even accused Turkish-funded schools of interfering in politics.

Things changed after 2016, when Shavkat Mirziyoyev took power after Karimov's death and embarked on a determined policy of opening up and reform. Türkiye quickly recognized the opportunity and acted. Erdoğan's visit in 2017 – the first in almost twenty years – broke the ice. Trade figures have jumped rapidly, from around USD 1.2 billion in 2016 to over USD 5 billion today[46]. This rapid growth reflects the success of Uzbekistan's liberalization reforms, including

[43] https://qazinform.com/news/trkiyes-trade-with-turkic-states-over-last-5-years-hit-626b-044b1e

[44] https://timesca.com/kazakhstan-launches-dredging-project-to-expand-aktau-port-on-key-trans-caspian-corridor/

[45] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – 2023 – Turkey's Anka Military Drones to Be Assembled in Kazakhstan – RFE/RL. https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-turkey-anka-drones/32639593.html

[46] Daily Sabah (2023) Türkiye Aims to Boost Trade with Uzbekistan Through Private Sector – Daily Sabah. https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiye-aims-to-boost-trade-with-uzbekistan-through-private-sector

currency convertibility and improving investment conditions. The number of Turkish companies operating in Uzbekistan increased from less than 500 in 2016 to more than 1,500 by the mid-2020s.[47] Turkish companies have emerged in manufacturing, construction, pharmaceuticals and food processing. Uzbek students have started to reappear in Turkish universities, and even Turkish universities have emerged in Uzbekistan, while TİKA has funded smaller but visible projects such as clinics and agricultural laboratories.

Security ties have also strengthened. In 2021, the two governments signed agreements on military training and defence industrial cooperation. Uzbek officers have received advanced training in Türkiye, and the two sides have begun talks on joint production of drones. Defence cooperation also has economic implications, as it paves the way for joint ventures, technology transfer, and long-term industrial partnerships. Politically, Uzbekistan's decision to join the Organization of Turkic States (OSA) in 2022 has confirmed its desire to participate in regional projects – but on its own terms. Mirziyoyev's foreign policy is pragmatic and multi-pronged, which actually fits well with how Türkiye operates: cooperate where it is useful, do not demand loyalty, and treat each other as equal partners.

2.3. Kyrgyzstan: Development Aid and Soft-Power Engagement

Türkiye also approached independent Kyrgyzstan without any particular strategic goals. In the early 1990s, TİKA opened a tiny office in Bishkek – not even a ribbon-cutting or an opening speech. Then came the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University. For a whole generation, this campus became a gateway to something bigger – Turkish teachers, new textbooks, the idea of studying in two languages, and perhaps working abroad.

Kyrgyzstan's politics are highly unstable, with three revolutions in fifteen years, but the Turks have stayed. Trade has continued, even if the numbers have not been huge. Thousands of Kyrgyz guest workers travel to Türkiye each year for seasonal or permanent work. Remittances do more to hold the relationship together than any formal agreement. Remittances and small-scale trade are a significant part of bilateral economic relations, highlighting the importance of informal economic ties. Remittances account for around 30% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, with Türkiye becoming an increasingly relevant place of emigrating workers[48]. It feels less like diplomacy between states and more like families connecting two countries.

A new element has recently been added to the cooperation, security. In 2021 and 2022, Kyrgyzstan purchased Bayraktar TB2 drones, and Turkish troops trained local crews[49]. Ankara has not used them to influence politics or demand loyalty. This quiet approach gives it weight in a region where major powers usually demand something in return. Meanwhile, on the cultural

[47] https://timesca.com/uzbekistan-and-turkey-aim-to-increase-bilateral-trade-to-5-billion/
[48] https://www.ogresearch.com/news/cis-countries-among-the-worlds-top-remittance-recipients
[49] DefenseMirror / Eurasianet (2023) Kyrgyzstan Acquires Bayraktar TB2 and Other Turkish Drones and Opens New UAV Base https://defensemirror.com/news/35308/Kyrgyzstan_Inducts_Turkish_Akinci__Aksungur_Drones

side, Türkiye hardly needs to advertise itself. TRT Avaz plays in living rooms, the Yunus Emre Institute is usually packed, and people talk about Türkiye in the casual tone of a place they already know – even if they have never been on a plane.

2.4. Turkmenistan: Energy, Construction, and Neutrality

Turkmenistan is full of contrasts. The people speak a language close to Turkish, and the cultural familiarity is obvious, but politically Ashgabat is aloof. When Turkmenistan announced in the mid-1990s that it would remain permanently neutral – even submitting its status to the UN – Ankara did not fight it or try to ally Turkmenistan. Türkiye simply accepted the choice and worked with every opportunity that arose.

However, Turkish construction workers arrived at the very beginning of independent statehood. They built ministries, schools – whatever the state needed at the time. It has become almost routine to see Turkish contractors on scaffolding in Ashgabat. The construction sector remains one of the few reliable entry points into Turkmenistan's otherwise quite closed economy.

Turkmenistan holds the world's fourth-largest proven natural gas reserves, estimated at over 13 trillion cubic meters[50]. The idea of transporting Turkmen gas to the West comes up again and again, and the plan is always the same: to transport the gas across the Caspian Sea and connect it to TANAP, which is heading to Europe. If realized, such projects could significantly alter regional energy markets and provide Türkiye with transit revenues and enhanced energy security. Politics and environmental concerns slow things down time and time again, but the topic never goes away.

When Serdar Berdimuhamedow took over from his father in 2022, Türkiye saw an opportunity to intensify relations. A year earlier, Turkmenistan had been granted observer status in the Organization of Turkic States. This did not mean a sudden political change, but it showed that Ashgabat was willing to appear on the regional stage – as long as it could control the barriers. Turkmenistan prefers practical cooperation: construction, trade, energy[51]. And Ankara respects this distance. It is moving step by step, showing that partnership does not necessarily require political pressure.

2.5. Tajikistan: Selective Engagement Beyond Linguistic Boundaries

Tajikistan is a kind of exception in Central Asia. It is the only Persian-speaking country in the region, and that in itself gives it a different place in Türkiye's thinking. When the Tajik civil war broke out in the early 1990s, Ankara did not try to influence events. It provided mostly humanitarian aid and stayed away from political intrigue. Real diplomacy came later. In the

[50] https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/1-Turkmenistan%20Policy%20Brief.pdf
[51] https://timesca.com/strategic-cooperation-between-turkey-and-turkmenistan-gains-momentum/

2000s, embassies were opened, small education and health projects were launched, and Turkish companies began to appear – first in construction and textiles, later in sectors related to hydropower.

The cooperation is not always smooth. The languages are different, as are everyday customs and expectations. Nevertheless, Türkiye tends to describe its presence in Tajikistan in terms of a shared Islamic heritage and the idea of mutual development. Both TİKA and the Yunus Emre Institute have offices in Dushanbe and organize language courses, cultural events, and small, practical projects that are really noticeable to people. Trade between the two countries is still modest – around USD 420 million in 2024 – but it is gradually increasing[52]. Tajikistan's economy remains the smallest in the region, with GDP around USD 10–12 billion, limiting trade scalability. Growth remains constrained by the limited infrastructure and financing, but niche sectors such as hydropower, digital services and textiles offer future potential.

Tajikistan pursues a cautious foreign policy and remains in close contact with Russia and Iran, which of course limits how far Türkiye can go. Ankara does not push; things are done in a practical way. In regional platforms such as ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization), the two sides cooperate on practical issues such as transport or disaster relief. It is important for Türkiye to have Tajikistan at the table – it reinforces the idea that Ankara's regional approach includes all of Central Asia, not just the Turkic-speaking states.

Conclusions

Türkiye's ambitions in Central Asia are in fact about gradual change, based on a reflection of internal circumstances, on the one hand, and on a recognition of the region's potential and the changing geopolitical environment, on the other. In the early 1990s, the country was just one of many NATO members, and on the fringes of Europe; three decades later, Türkiye has emerged as a country that knows what it wants – confident, stable, informed, and familiar with the region, and not least as a middle power. From an economic perspective, this transformation is reflected in Türkiye's transformation from a capital-constrained player to an outward-looking investor and a stimulant of regional trade.

What distinguishes Türkiye's presence from other actors interested in Central Asia is that it does not operate with money or pressure. On the contrary, its approach is slow and sure. Türkiye's presence is manifested in small, practical ways, in everyday things. There are regular flights, so that travel between cities becomes more of a routine than a challenge. Cultural centers remain open even when politics change. Over time, certain names become part of the local landscape – TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, Turkish Airlines, DEİK. People see them so often that they become part of everyday life. TİKA, for example, might modernize a school or help a clinic

[52] Trend News Agency (2024) Trade Turnover Between Tajikistan and Türkiye Reaches Around $450 Million; Tajikistan Trade Balance, Exports and Imports by Country https://www.trend.az/casia/tajikistan/3845493.html

buy new equipment; it's not flashy, but people see it and use it, and that counts. Yunus Emre teaches Turkish and organizes small cultural events. Turkish Airlines connects the region with direct flights. DEİK introduces business people to each other. None of these institutions make a big deal out of it, but they stay, and because they stay, Türkiye never feels truly distant.

Central Asia is also where Ankara tests its ambitions. The region reminds Türkiye that it cannot beat the bigger players, but it also proves that patience works. Influence grows when people trust you and when cooperation solves real problems. Sustainable influence actually depends on the creation of measurable and perceived economic benefits, including jobs, infrastructure and trade opportunities. If Türkiye continues to combine shared cultural roots with practical partnerships, it will not have to compete with or follow the great powers. It can simply do what it has always done – act as a bridge between different regions and different perspectives.

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