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The USSR's demise in 1991 gave Turkey a chance to step in as a key foreign policy actor in Central Asia. In the early 1990s, Ankara was mainly driven by Pan-Turkic ideas and a sense of mission that determined a “big brother” (abi) approach towards fellow Turkic countries. However, after encountering some resistance — with Central Asian states expressing a sense of protectiveness over their regained sovereignty and national identity — Turkey shifted its strategy to a more pragmatic approach, which now informs its bilateral and multilateral foreign policies with Central Asian states.

This paper maps the key foreign policy actors behind Turkey's engagement in Central Asia. After a brief historical overview of Ankara's presence in Central Asia, Turkish governmental, private, and semi-private players will be considered. Turkey's role in multilateral organizations, especially the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), will also be briefly analyzed. Finally, the paper offers a few considerations on Turkey's future role in Central Asia, especially considering relevant domestic and international factors such as the Turkish presidential elections on 14 May 2023 and the regional fallouts from Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.


TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA AFTER THE USSR FALL

What drives Turkish foreign policy in Central Asia? Looking at Mustafa Aydin's definition of Turkish foreign policy as the interplay of structural and conjunctural variables may help answer this question. While structural variables (geographic position, historical experiences, and cultural and economic background) are continuous and relatively static and can exert long-term influence over the determination of foreign policy goals, conjunctural variables are made up of a dynamic

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web of interrelated developments in domestic politics and international relations and exert influence on short-term foreign policy implementation.[1] Both variables are visible in analyzing Ankara's engagement in Central Asia.

Turkey was the first country to recognize the newly independent Central Asian countries in 1991, while the "common historical, linguistic and cultural ties" - i.e., structural variables - drove an increased engagement with this region after the USSR's demise.[2] Furthermore, Turkey's economy highly depends on energy imports, and collaboration with energy-rich Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is paramount to Ankara's ambitions of becoming an energy hub.[3] Over the last years, though, conjunctural variables gained prominence, leading to renewed Turkish efforts to boost cooperation with Central Asia. These variables include the reinforcement and centralization of power in the hands of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the reinforcement of Turkey's regional role and its Eurasian foreign policy vector (at the expense of the European one), and increased cooperation with China and Russia.



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Such interplay of structural and conjunctural variables marks the three major periods of the Turkish-Central Asian history of relations identified by Assel Tutumlu. In the first period, Turkey tried to exploit the shared "Turkic" legacy to strengthen its influence over the newborn states after the end of the Cold War. The second period started around 2000: upon the failure of the "Turkic unity" narrative, Turkey shifted to a more pragmatic Central Asia regional policy – engagement through bilateral relations and investments, starting to compete with Russian interests.

The third began after Ankara's rapprochement with Russia in 2016 and stronger involvement in the Middle East prompted by the Syrian conflict; it saw Turkey cooperating with Central Asian states within a much larger regional framework of Russia-China cooperation.[4] Zeeshan Fida also recognizes the weakening of ideological factors in Turkey's action today: since the Pan-Turkic ideology failed to drag Central Asian states into Ankara's orbit, as they craved to retain their newly found exclusive nationalistic identities, Turkey became more pragmatic and focused on five key components:

1. Developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the fields of energy, economy, commerce, culture, society, politics, etc.;
2. Assisting Central Asian republics to solve frozen regional conflicts;

1. Serving as an energy terminal;
2. Assisting Central Asian republics in their nation and state-building processes;
3. Helping them develop and maintain close relations with other countries.[5]

The ongoing conflict against Ukraine is seemingly weakening Russia as a regional hegemonic actor in the post-Soviet region [6], and cementing Chinese influence. While Moscow will retain a critical economic and political role for many Central Asian states, the conflict is likely to bolster Central Asia's willingness to pursue a multivectoral foreign policy, open to collaboration with alternative actors, especially those perceived as culturally and politically close, such as Turkey.

MAPPING THE MAIN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY ACTORS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Several entities, plus formal and informal advisory structures, make up Turkish foreign policy decision-making. The President strengthened his grip on foreign policy decision-making after the 2017 referendum that turned Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one. Foreign policy-making is a complex but highly centralized process: the Presidency is advised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Security and Foreign Policy Committee, the National Security Council (NSC), the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), formally appointed and informal advisors, as well as the Turkish military in an outside influencer role.

According to Neset et al., there is no hierarchy within these entities as they all provide information directly to the President: "the Security and Foreign Policy Committee and informal/formal advisors provide assessments, while the MFA, MIT and the military provide practical information. President Erdoğan decides on policy. [These] entities have no or very limited decision-making power, and the decisions are taken within the Presidency in a highly compartmentalized and personalized fashion"[7]. When it comes to private or semi-private actors, Tutumlu underscores patron-clan relationships dominating Turkish foreign policy. She distinguishes the state from regime interests, with many foreign policy actors linked directly to the presidential family, to the presidential circle, and the new elites born after the authoritarian shift in 2016: "As a result, foreign policy becomes an opportunity for those regime networks to receive different bonuses, contracts, and subsidies".[8]

While the President's role and inner circle are undoubtedly crucial, when it comes to Central Asia, one must consider other state institutions that act as enablers of Turkish foreign policy in several domains, especially aid, media, religion and education, and economy.

Aid: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)

Established in 1992 to help Turkic Republics become stable and peaceful market economies, it expanded to promote sustainable development in more world regions (i.e., Balkans, Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa).[9] The first TIKA Program Coordination Office opened in Turkmenistan; the number of offices in the Eurasian region increased to six in the following periods. Since 1995, TIKA has focused more on cooperation in the fields of education and culture; schools, libraries, and laboratories were built, and technical equipment was provided to Central Asia universities,[10] reinforcing the perceptions of Turkey as a "political and diplomatic channel between the Central Asian countries and the Western world".[11]

Today, TIKA remains active with offices in every Central Asia republic. At the same time, South and Central Asia is the third region receiving the highest amount of aid after the Middle East and Europe, according to the latest official data in 2019 (166 million USD of a total of 8 billion).[12]

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Media: Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) and TRT Avaz

In 1993, the TRT-Eurasia channel, which includes programs for the Caucasus and Central Asia, started broadcasting. Since 2009, TRT Avaz, which reaches 27 countries and 13 muhtar (autonomous) republics, from the Balkans to the Caucasus and Central Asia, began offering a "cultural platform" for the Turkish-speaking peoples where "where the faith, culture, art, political-economic developments and daily life" interact.[13] TRT Avaz is a potentially powerful public diplomacy tool; audience data are, however, challenging to source. Further research should show this network's effectiveness in "uniting 250 million people around a common culture".[14]

Religion and Education

After accusing Fetullah Gülen of organizing the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey and subsequently pressuring Central Asian states to close the Gülen-affiliated schools,[15] in 2016 Ankara established the Maarif Foundation, which is now the only organization

allowed to open educational institutions abroad on behalf of the government, except for the Ministry of National Education. Then Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, announced the opening of the first Maarif Foundation school in Central Asia, based in Kyrgyzstan, in 2021.[16] Despite the fanfare, it is hard to predict the extent to which Maarif schools will effectively replace the hugely popular Gülen education network: more than the Turkish state and its few cultural centers, it was Gülen's schools that promoted the Turkish language and business ties between Turkey and Central Asia countries.[17] Also, robust alumni networks in Central Asia still exist despite the prosecution.[18]

Other indicators of Turkey's academic presence in the region are the Turkic Universities Union, International Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Turkish-Kazakh University, and Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Manas University.[19]

A key institution for cultural and religious cooperation is the Diyanet Foundation. Cooperating with the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of National Education, it supports universities, faculties, and colleges and provides scholarships. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Diyanet implemented numerous initiatives to bolster links among Muslim communities in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this regard, the Islamic Council of Eurasia (Avrasya İslam Şurası), sponsored by the Diyanet, aims to create a religion-based "sense of belonging" in the region.[20]

Today, the Foundation cooperates at secondary school and undergraduate levels with institutions such as Oş State University, Oş Imam Hatip High School (Kyrgyzstan), Almaty Foreign Languages and Professional Career University (Kazakhstan). In 2018, Erdoğan attended the opening ceremony of the largest mosque in Central Asia, Imam al-Sar-akhsi Mosque, built by Diyanet in Bishkek. The Diyanet initiatives represent Turkey's most ideology-infused way of interacting with Central Asian states since the Islam exported to the region "is also mixed with Turkishness and Turkish nationalism".[21]

Private or semi-private actors: companies

The role of private enterprises as agents of foreign policy and public diplomacy, both in general and in the Turkish case specifically, has received considerable academic attention.[22] As mentioned, it can be challenging to differentiate a non-state actor (private companies, for instance) from the state or government they are affiliated with. This is especially visible in the Central Asian region as far as Russian, Chinese, or Turkish non-state actors are concerned: "Certain foreign trade or investment initiatives might be well facilitated or encouraged by the government, which often makes them

an extension of the policy rather than the commercial endeavors of private citizens".[23] The chief example of this dynamic is Turkish Airlines (THY), privatized in 2003 but instructed by the government to serve its foreign policy strategy by reaching destinations instrumental for Turkey's energy, diplomatic and economic outreach.[24]

Even if Turkey's economic role remains modest compared to China's or Russia's, its trade ties with Central Asian states have significantly increased during the last few years.

Whether they act more independently or simply as the government's "economic arm", businesses remain important foreign policy actors. Even if Turkey's economic role remains modest compared to China's or Russia's, its trade ties with Central Asian states have significantly increased during the last few years. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, the Turkey-Central Asian trade turnover reached about US\$12.33 billion in 2022 [25], up from 8,5 billion USD in 2019, with Kazakhstan being the most relevant trading partner. In 2019, the Turkish MFA counted almost 4000 Turkish companies operating in Central Asia [26], but this number has likely grown. In Uzbekistan, Turkey overtook China regarding the number of companies in the country in 2022 (2,204 vs. 2,141 respectively).[27] Food (Ulker), mining and metallurgy, construction, and textile companies are particularly active and highly recognizable, contributing to creating a Turkey "brand".

Lately, Turkish military companies began attracting considerable interest; two scholars even argue that the empowerment of the Turkish military-industrial complex is one of the factors leading to the recent militarisation of Turkish foreign policy.[28] The role of Turkey's Bayraktar drones in Azerbaijani victory in the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, presented by Erdoğan's main advisor as a "source of pride and hope for the Turkic world", [29] and in Ukraine, war gave Baykar Defense a special place in this domain. In Central Asia, Turkmenistan is one of Turkey's leading arms buyers; in 2022, after fighting a brief but bloody battle with neighboring Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan also bought the Bayraktar drones.[30] In 2021, the public company Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) signed a deal with Kazakhstan Engineering to start producing the Anka drone, making Kazakhstan the first Anka production base outside of Turkey.[31] Turkey-Central Asia bilateral military cooperation is indicated as one of the most promising cooperation fields in the short to medium term.[32]

MULTILATERAL COOPERATION AND THE “EURASIAN VECTOR”

Another way Turkey engages with Central Asia as a region is through multilateral cooperation, which Turkey carries out first and foremost through the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The OTS, founded in 2009 and headquartered in Istanbul, comprises Turkic countries like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan and has Hungary, Northern Cyprus, and Turkmenistan as observers. While the paper cannot discuss the OTS's aims and activities extensively, it is important to stress the evolution of the organization from a tool to integrate Central Asian states into Turkey's "sphere of influence" to a more pragmatic platform to promote connectivity and energy, trade and cultural cooperation, which more and more countries are interested in benefiting from.[33]

At the same time, "brotherly integration" remains a key goal of Ankara, which, over the last few years, has been investing more political resources into the organization and has undoubtedly a central place in it. The change in the premises is a telling example, according to a Turkish diplomat currently working at the OTS: "There is a huge difference from 2010 when OTS was in a small villa in Beşiktaş, and the big building in Sultanahmet that we have now. We're also working to increase the number of staff in the secretariat".[34] While there are objective limitations to the deepening of military and economic cooperation among members (many Central Asia countries being members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union), the OST has the potential to "become one of the leading platforms"[35] and to play a "stabilizing role"[36] in Eurasia, especially considering the Central Asian states' desire and need to diversify their foreign policy options after Russia invaded Ukraine.

Many analysts discuss the role of the "Eurasian vector" in Turkish foreign policy as a driver for the OST growth. Emre Esrşen highlights two main strands of Eurasianism in Turkey: one pursuing in-depth integration between Turkey and the Turkic republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, appealing to Turkish nationalist-conservative groups, and another focusing on Turkey's strategic cooperation with Russia and China as an alternative to the West, supported by national-patriotic groups.[37] While Turkey's role in the OTS corresponds to the first strand of Eurasianism, Turkey's interest in strengthening ties with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)[38] and the BRICS[39] would speak to the second one. The potential weakening or, on the contrary, the reinforcement of this Eurasian vector remains a key variable affecting Turkey's role in Eurasia more broadly, especially in relation to China, Russia, and the West. Regarding Central Asia, pragmatism and path dependency will determine a certain continuity in Turkey's engagement.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper has discussed the past and present of Turkey's foreign policy in Central Asia, mapping its essential actors. As for the future, predictions are always hard to make. While Erdoğan's rule has been confirmed in the May 2023 elections, even a hypothetical power transition in Ankara in the future, with a possible reinforcement of the "Western vector" in Turkish foreign policy, is unlikely to lead to a substantial change in Turkey's engagement in Central Asia. This is because of several reasons. First, the structural variables behind Turkey's engagement in Central Asia (geography, historical, cultural, and energy factors) will continue to matter heavily. In Köstem's words, "Central Asia has its directorate in the Turkish MFA with an important level of expertise developed since the 90s. It will always be on Turkey's agenda, it's internalized".[40]

Second, the role of ideology (ie Panturkism or Eurasianism) that used to be prominent in Turkey's engagement in Central Asia after the fall of the USSR is now less evident, giving way to more pragmatic, trade-oriented and less "abi" (big brother) foreign policy. Today's engagement is multidimensional, involving relevant economic interests and a variety of players from the private and public sectors who will keep lobbying for a stronger presence. Conjunctural factors - i.e., regional and international developments - will also play a huge role in keeping Central Asia at the center of Turkish interests, not least due to the energy and food crisis caused by the Ukraine war. As Kalin remarked, "A very important part of the world's energy reserves is located in our Turkic region".[41]

Third, the idea of Turkey as a powerful regional actor, carrying out a multivectoral and relatively independent foreign policy – although respecting its Western alliances – is likely to keep permeating Turkey's foreign policy-making even in a post-Erdoğan era, pushing Ankara to maintain an active and pragmatic role in Central Asia.

Fourth, even in the case of a substantial reorientation of Turkey's foreign policy, Western allies are likely to encourage Ankara's "positive" role in Central Asia, especially to counter Russia and China. At the same time, Central Asian states will look at Turkey as a valuable partner to diversify their foreign policy options and lessen their external dependence on Beijing and Moscow. For instance, Turkey can become a valuable alternative for Central Asia laborers in case Russia's economic and political situation worsens. In 2021, Turkstat data showed a significant upward trend in the number of Central Asia workers in Turkey compared to the previous year.[42] In accordance with a well-established image, hence, Ankara will continue to act as a bridge between Europe and Central Asia.

NOTES

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