

## **Priority Directions of the Regional Cooperation Model with Turkey and the Central Asian States**

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**Abstract:** Analysis of the thirty-year experience of this cooperation, which is based on the common cultural, linguistic, historical and religious unity of the independent states of Turkey and Central Asia, has become the center of attention of many researchers. The article examines the main features of the regional cooperation model between Turkey and the independent states of Central Asia and analyzes the ways of mutual cooperation.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Central Asia, TIKA, regional security, mutual economic relations, foreign policy, integration.

Turkey is actively pursuing its policy towards Central Asia, which is seen as a strategically important region due to its geographical location, energy resources and historical ties. In addition, Turkey's historical, ethnic, religious and cultural ties with Central Asian countries provide ample opportunities for Ankara to increase its role and participation in the region. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey stated that "Turkey's desire for a stable, independent and prosperous Central Asia has determined the priority directions of our policy in the direction of establishing a free market economy and effective democratic states in the region[1]." Based on this, it should be noted that regional cooperation with the Central Asian countries is the main goal of Turkey's foreign policy in the further development of Turkey's economy and security of the country, as well as in becoming a regional leading power. Although it started long ago, we can see that it has increased to the level of regional cooperation since 2016. Turkey's regional cooperation model in relation to Central Asia is based on three main pillars: political cooperation, economic development and cultural exchange, and is based on a number of goals, including:[2]

1. Support for political reforms: Turkey has been a supporter of political reforms in Central Asia, including greater protection of democracy and human rights.
2. Development of economic and trade relations: Turkey seeks to deepen its economic relations with Central Asia, particularly in the fields of energy, transport and tourism. It is also actively promoting investment opportunities in the region.
3. Development of cultural exchange: Turkey is working to develop cultural relations with Central Asia, particularly in the fields of language and education. It also promotes exchange programs that bring Central Asian students and scientists to Turkey[3].
4. Ensuring stability and security in the region: Turkey considers Central Asia to be a crucial area for regional stability and security. Therefore, it tries to strengthen peace and stability in the region through diplomatic and economic means.
5. To use the special geopolitical position and rich natural resources of the Central Asian countries from mutually beneficial positions and to serve as an energy terminal[4].

Turkey's political influence in the region is the concept of "Turkish world" or "Turkish brotherhood". This concept envisages strengthening mutual cooperation between the Turkic peoples in various fields, including politics, economy, culture and education. By actively supporting and developing this concept, Turkey can strengthen its political influence in Central Asia. Politically, Turkey seeks to strengthen its relations with Central Asian republics by establishing diplomatic relations, signing bilateral agreements, and participating in regional organizations such as the Organization of Turkish States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ankara established a specialized organization called "Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency" in order to strengthen cultural and economic relations with Central Asian countries. Several decades later, in 2009, the "Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking Countries" was officially established. In 2021, the council decided to change itself to the "Organization of Turkish States". The organization consists of five members - Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan, and two observer countries (Hungary and Turkmenistan). About 170 million people live in the participating countries and the total gross domestic product is 1.5 trillion dollars[5] (U.S. dollars hereinafter).

Economically, Turkey seeks to increase trade and investment with the Central Asian republics, which are rich in natural resources and offer potential markets for Turkish goods and services. Turkey is expanding its export markets by investing in energy projects in the region and promoting its products and services[6]. Trade agreements are another way to strengthen Turkey's economic ties with Central Asia. The fact that Turkey has signed a free trade agreement with several countries of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, is considered as evidence of the above opinions. These agreements help to reduce trade barriers and develop the exchange of goods and services between Turkey and Central Asia. In recent years, indicators of Turkey's economic exchange with Central Asian countries have been developing rapidly. In particular, if we look at the results of 2023, Turkey has invested more than 500 million dollars in Uzbekistan and caused more than 200 enterprises to start working in our country. Thus, the total trade turnover between the two countries was 3.22 billion dollars.

Kazakhstan is one of Turkey's closest economic partners, and the bilateral trade turnover is estimated at 6.13 billion dollars. Turkey's investment in Kazakhstan's economy has exceeded 4 billion dollars, while Kazakhstan has invested more than 1 billion dollars in Turkey's economy. In the last two years, 16 investment projects were implemented in Kazakhstan. Today, Turkey is the 4th largest economic partner of Kazakhstan[8]. Turkmenistan also has good economic relations with Turkey, and the bilateral trade turnover is equal to 2.6 billion dollars. Kyrgyzstan has relatively low economic indicators, and the trade turnover between the two countries is 0.5 billion dollars. In addition to infrastructure development and trade agreements, Turkey also provides financial support to Central Asian countries. Turkey offers loans and grants to support the development of infrastructure, agriculture and other critical sectors in Central Asia. This financial assistance is aimed at improving economic conditions in Central Asia and expanding economic cooperation between Turkey and the region. In turn, Turkey exports various industries to Central Asia, including textiles, electronics, and construction materials[9].

In the cultural sphere, Turkey is trying to develop its historical ties with a region of common Turkish heritage by promoting cultural exchange programs such as bilateral student exchanges and language courses, as well as strengthening scientific cooperation. Turkey is conducting an active cultural policy towards Central Asia in order to strengthen its relations with the region. Here are some examples of Turkey's cultural policy towards Central Asia:

1. Language programs: Turkey has created programs to teach Turkish language and culture in Central Asian countries. Turkish Language and Culture Centers known as[10] "Turk Dili ve Kültürü Merkezleri" or TÖMER have been established in many countries of Central Asia to teach Turkish language and literature.

2. Art and cultural exchange: Turkey's cultural policy towards Central Asia is aimed at mutual cooperation and preservation of common cultural heritage. These programs and initiatives have helped strengthen cultural ties between Turkey and Central Asia. Turkey organizes cultural events and festivals in Central Asia to demonstrate Turkish culture, and Turkish artists participate in performances, music concerts and art exhibitions held in Central Asian countries[11].

3. Educational exchange programs: Scholarships and grants offered to Central Asian students from Turkey to study in Turkish universities are aimed at developing cultural exchange, as well as sharing knowledge and experience. In particular, the educational cooperation between the countries of Uzbekistan, Turkey and Azerbaijan is noteworthy. The efforts of countries to train modern personnel for various aspects of socio-economic and cultural life are becoming an international priority[12].

The special geopolitical position of the independent states of Central Asia and the availability of rich natural resources are of great importance for Turkey, as Turkey seeks to become a key player in ensuring the energy security of European countries and to diversify the energy sources of the European Union. Connecting the Caucasus and Central Asia in a single energy transport platform to Europe through Turkey is a cause of great interest, and Turkey is interested in the construction of roads, railways and pipelines connecting Central Asia to the Turkish market and beyond, in particular, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is investing in important projects that will facilitate the transportation of goods and resources between Central Asia and Turkey. This is in line with the foreign policy of Turkey and the goals of the "Energy Terminal and Corridor" (Energi Terminal and Corridor), which is one of the "energy corridors" for the delivery of world energy resources from Eurasia to Turkey and Europe[13].

Among other global actors, Turkey has a direct interest in the regulation of regional conflicts in Central Asia and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Especially in terms of regional stability and security, one of Turkey's main geopolitical interests in Central Asia is to ensure its own security and regional stability. Turkey strives to cooperate with Central Asian countries in the fight against terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking in order to prevent the spread of these threats to its territory[14].

Firstly, Turkey actively supports dialogue and cooperation between Central Asian countries, as well as other regional and international participants. As a mediator, it encourages peace talks and helps find compromise solutions.

Secondly, Turkey provides humanitarian aid and economic assistance to Central Asian countries in conflict. It helps restore damaged infrastructure, provides financial support for economic development and social programs, and supports education and health care. Such measures serve to improve the living conditions of the population and ease tension in the region.

Thirdly, Turkey actively participates in peacekeeping operations and missions in Central Asia. It provides its military forces and experts to support efforts to maintain peace and security in the region. Turkey cooperates with other countries and international organizations in the fight against terrorism and extremism, which serves to strengthen stability and security in Central Asia[15].

In conclusion, it can be said that Turkey's relations with Central Asia have a long history and these relations continue to this day. Turkey's geopolitical interests in this region are related to ensuring its security, expanding economic cooperation and strengthening its political influence. Turkey is actively developing its economic relations with the countries of Central Asia, especially in the fields of energy and transport. Cultural relations and exchanges also play an important role in strengthening relations between Turkey and Central Asia. Turkey actively participates in regional conflicts in Central Asia and strives to resolve them peacefully. Turkey's model of regional cooperation towards Central Asia is based on promoting its strategic interests

by promoting stability, security and economic development in the region, while at the same time strengthening its position as a regional power.

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