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Turkey's Turns to Central Asia: Learning by Doing

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Ankara's role in Central Asia is often assessed through the "Great Game" lens, in which Turkey is supposed to challenge the influence of Russia and China. On the one hand, such a perspective attests to the growing role of Turkey in the region. On the other hand, this view ignores the agency of Central Asian states and the established multi-vector foreign policies, meaning that cooperation with Ankara is a complement to, rather than a replacement for, their interactions with other actors. As the European Union (EU) seeks to engage in Central Asia, its approach will need to accommodate the diversification pattern prevailing in the region.

In the early 1990s, Ankara was the first to recognise the independence of Central Asian states and to offer a new integration project to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ankara's plans included a common market and the Turkish lira as a common currency. Turkey was also a "door-opener and right-advocator" for Central Asia in various Western organisations. It was specifically for Central Asia that Ankara established in 1992 the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which became a stepping stone for Ankara's global outreach — TIKA currently operates development programmes in more than 170 countries worldwide.

One of the key lessons for Ankara from the 1990s was that its maximalist expectations for integration eventually "intimidated" the newly independent republics of Central Asia. Other miscalculations in-

cluded Russia's persisting role as well as Ankara's own economic capacity and changes in its foreign policy priorities. Based on its previous experience, Ankara adjusted its approach from the pan-Turkic euphoria of the 1990s to a more pragmatic form of cooperation, with the big brother attitude diminishing but not completely disappearing.

Central Asia is an important market for Turkish business. In Turkmenistan, Turkish construction companies implemented 1,080 projects totalling more than USD 50 billion in the post-Soviet period. In Uzbekistan, Turkey is the third-largest investor after China and Russia, with 2,025 enterprises (11.9%), including 438 joint ventures. This is a considerable increase compared to 2017, when there were 479 companies with Turkish capital, including 199 joint ventures. Based on its established energy partnership



with Azerbaijan, Turkey's long-standing interest also includes expanding energy cooperation in Central Asia, particularly with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

Turkey's current turn to Central Asia is characterised by opportunities for military-technical cooperation. Given the growth of its defence industry, Ankara's defence products are emerging as its "new trump card". There is also convergence on connectivity projects. Although some of Ankara's offers are attractive, the Central Asian states' responses to Turkey's present outreach are bound to remain selective due to their multi-vector approach.

Expectations of Turkic solidarity

One of Ankara's foreign policy goals outlined by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in 2023 is the "further institutionalization of foreign relations". Special attention in this regard is given to Turkey's relations with the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the EU, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation as well as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), with the latter being "a prime example" of institutionalisation efforts.

The OTS members are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan. The observers include Hungary (2018), Turkmenistan (2021), Northern Cyprus (2022) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (2023).

The OTS was initially established as the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in 2009. It was the then president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who suggested creating the Turkic Council back in 2006. Nazarbayev also played a leading role in the establishment of the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States (TURKPA), founded in 2008 with headquarters in Baku. Kazakhstan itself hosts the Turkic Academy, which opened in Astana in 2010.

During its eighth summit in November 2021 in Istanbul, the Turkic Council was upgraded and renamed as the OTS. This was a remarkable change not only in terms of

institutionalisation efforts — it also signalled the shift from a focus on linguistic affinity (Turkic speaking states) towards identity-building (Turkic states).

Ankara sees the Turkic connection as being more than just linguistic kinship. Inspired by the ideas of a pan-Turkic thinker and founder of the Jadid movement in the late 19th century, İsmail Gaspirali (Gasprinskiy), it was believed that Turkic solidarity ideally should mean "unity in language, idea and action". With a Turkic connection missing in its relations with Persian-speaking Tajikistan, both Dushanbe and Ankara consider the legacy of Mevlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi — born in modern-day Tajikistan — as a common reference point in their relations.

One of the key expectations that Ankara has of the Turkic states of Central Asia is alignment on the international arena. However, as the Cyprus issue shows, the Turkic world lacks unity in this regard. Northern Cyprus, recognised only by Turkey, received observer status at the OTS Summit in November 2022 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. However, the then Turkish Cypriot leader, Ersin Tatar, did not attend the OTS Summits held in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but he did participate in those held in Turkey, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan. As a response to the EU's concerns, following the First European Union-Central Asia Summit, held in Samarkand in April 2025, their joint declaration cited UN Security Council Resolutions 541(1983) and 550(1984) in support of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Cyprus.

Apart from disagreement on the Cyprus issue, OTS members also have different priorities regarding the focus of Turkic cooperation and different demands (or lack thereof) concerning integration. Turkey projects its close partnership with Azerbaijan — strengthened by the 2021 Shusha Declaration following Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War — as "a model for the Turkic world". Central Asian OTS members, on the other hand, prefer to focus on cultural and economic cooperation. Uzbekistan, for instance, prioritises coopera-

tion in trade, industry and development of economic relations. At the recent OTS Summit in October 2025, the president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, suggested establishing a Permanent Council of Turkic States for Economic Partnership with headquarters in Tashkent.

Promotion of military-technical cooperation

For Turkey, the OTS has become an important vehicle to strengthen relations with the Turkic countries of Central Asia. As its defence industry grows, Ankara is also seeking to further promote its products to Turkic states. To this end, the first meeting of the heads of defence industry institutions under the OTS framework took place on 23 July 2025 on the sidelines of the 17th International Defence Industry Fair in Istanbul. Hosted by Turkey's Secretary of Defence Industry, it was attended by counterparts from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

As countries of Central Asia seek to diversify their arms imports, it is usually procurement from Turkey — the most visible NATO member in the region — that makes the headlines. After all, two OTS members — Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan — are members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Uzbekistan suspended its CSTO membership in 2012, but it maintains close bilateral military ties with Russia that were reinforced with the latest military strategic partnership agreement signed earlier this year.

A closer look at defence item purchases suggests that Ankara is a complementary partner rather than a potential game-changing actor in Central Asian security and defence. Turkmenistan is a case in point. It is the only Central Asian country for which Russia is not the leading arms supplier, with Turkey being the top seller. Turkmenistan's interest in Turkish products includes armoured personnel carriers, drones and patrol vessels. When it comes to military equipment such as tanks, multiple rocket

launchers, infantry fighting vehicles and helicopters, Russia remains the key supplier for Turkmenistan.

Kazakhstan is especially interested in co-production, with a high share of localisation as well as procurement of armoured vehicles, drones and modern small arms. In May 2022, Kazakhstan Engineering and Turkish Aerospace signed a memorandum for joint production of ANKA drones, including technology transfer. There have been no reports that the planned start of production for 2024 has begun. Uzbekistan has been interested in the joint production of EJDER 4x4 armoured vehicles as well as cooperation in the sphere of aviation.

Kyrgyzstan has ordered all four types of Turkish drones (Bayraktar TB2, Aksungur, Akıncı and ANKA), which makes it the only country apart from Turkey to have the full range of combat drones manufactured in Turkey; the order quantity, however, has not been reported. Ankara signed a military-financial cooperation agreement and a financial aid protocol with Tajikistan in 2023. These include the allocation of USD 1.5 million by Turkey for Tajikistan to purchase “weapons, ammunition, UAVs and modern devices” from Turkey's defence industry as well as USD 62,000 for the training of the Tajik military in Turkey and visits by Turkish military staff to Tajikistan.

Regarding joint military exercises, Turkey's training programmes are particularly attractive in the field of special forces combat training. Furthermore, some Central Asian states are taking part in multinational military exercises organised by Turkey, such as Kış and the EFES. At the recent OTS Summit in October 2025, Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, suggested conducting joint military exercises among OTS members. However, the multi-vector nature of relations in Central Asia persists. Regarding the list of Central Asian military drills, one should also add those conducted under the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the CSTO as well as those carried out on a bilateral basis, for example between Russia and Uzbekistan.

As part of the CSTO military drills, Russia is integrating strategies to counter drone attacks, applying its experiences in the Ukraine war, as exemplified in the “Rubezh-2025” exercise, conducted in Kyrgyzstan in September 2025.

An important trend that recently emerged are the joint military exercises between Central Asia and Azerbaijan, in which no other neighbour participated. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan twice held joint “Unity” exercises — in 2024 in Kazakhstan and in 2025 in Uzbekistan. In addition, there are also bilateral exercises, such as those between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan (UZAZ-2023), Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan (Khazri-2023) as well as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Kanzhar-2023).

Convergence on connectivity

As described by a Turkish diplomat in a conversation with the author, the OTS can be best understood as “a project-based organisation”. Currently, much of the activity of the OTS focuses on the Middle Corridor project. Officially known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, it has attracted significant attention since February 2022. In Eurasia, the Middle Corridor involves Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Georgia, running further via Turkey and the Black Sea to Europe. As a multimodal — sea, rail and road — route, it still faces many obstacles, including shipping capacity on the Caspian Sea and a lack of investment. Economically, it is not an alternative to the northern route via Russia or to the maritime route. Geopolitically, it is increasingly supported by the EU, which sees the main advantage as being able to bypass Russia.

Within the OTS, transport cooperation on the Middle Corridor has become an important driving force, with additional mechanisms being established such as ministerial meetings, a Transport Coordination Committee, a Working Group on Transport Development and a Sub-Working Group

on Digitalization. In 2024, the Alliance of Logistics Centres and Cargo Carriers was created under the framework of the OTS. Efforts aimed at the facilitation of trade flows also include the Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation and the use of electronic permits (e-Permit) in International Road Transport Operations, signed at the informal OTS Summit in Azerbaijan in July 2024 by the transport ministers of the OTS.

For Turkey, the Middle Corridor is a key pillar in its Connectivity and Multilateral Transportation Policy, which “aims to sustain not only commercial, economic and investment relations but also political and cultural relations between and beyond its surrounding regions”. As Ankara positions itself as “the most eastern of the West, and most western of the East”, infrastructure projects contribute to Ankara’s role as a bridge and a hub, thus increasing its importance for Europe and Asia. As a sign of taking connectivity seriously, in 2022 Turkey’s Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure published the Transport and Logistics Master Plan 2053.

The Middle Corridor does not have the same priority for all states in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, with the most explicit stakeholders being Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia. There are, however, plans for connections with other potential routes. From the perspective of Uzbekistan, the Middle Corridor can be connected to the China — Kyrgyzstan — Uzbekistan railway, which is currently under construction, as well as with the planned Trans-Afghan Corridor. Furthermore, there is a plan for Uzbek companies to operate ferries on the Caspian Sea together with Turkish companies.

Transport cooperation on the Middle Corridor is also underpinned by various other formats. In September 2024, heads of railway administrations from Azerbaijan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China and Austria created the Eurasian Transport Route International Association with headquarters in Baku in order to “oversee the coordination and develop-

ment” of the Middle Corridor. The Corridor also received significant attention during the second trilateral meeting involving Azerbaijan, Turkey and Uzbekistan at the level of the ministers of foreign affairs, trade/economy and transport/infrastructure that took place in Ankara in January 2025. Transport connectivity, transit potential and development of economic relations were also discussed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan during the meeting in August 2025 in Turkmenistan.

Although there has been a surge of activity surrounding the Middle Corridor after the start of Russia’s war in Ukraine in 2022, the East-West connection is not the only trade route that Central Asian states are taking an active part in. In August 2024, leaders of all five Central Asian countries adopted the concept of development for regional cooperation “Central Asia-2040”, which highlights inter alia “the promotion of transit-transport cooperation in East-West and North-South directions” and “positive effects on the diversification of transport routes”. The International North-South Transport Corridor is also a multi-modal route, initiated by Russia, Iran and India. From Russia’s perspective, its aim is “to connect northern Eurasia, the Caspian region, Central, South, Southeast Asia, and East Africa by establishing freight transportation routes through major logistics hubs on the coast of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean”.

New Turkey, new Central Asia

What can Turkey’s involvement in Central Asia tell us about its foreign policy in the post – Cold War era? First, it has added to Ankara’s “self-confidence” in its regional policy and contributed to the rise of its autonomous foreign policy actions more broadly. Back in the 1990s, the idea of a “Turkic world from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China” that motivated Ankara was reportedly authored by US diplomat Henry Kissinger, not by the Turkish leadership. In an attempt to remain relevant to the West,

Ankara adopted a Western-developed role as a model country for Central Asia. Ankara’s current interest in Central Asia is not only about the Turkic world narrative, but also driven by the anticipated “Rise of Asia”, for which Turkey initiated the Asia Anew Initiative in 2019 to develop a “comprehensive, long term, holistic, and systematic vision for Asia”.

Second, Turkey’s engagement in Central Asia, as in other regions, shows that Ankara views its foreign policy as an “interactive space”. In the post – Cold War period, Ankara’s regional outreach shifted from “unilateral policy directives” to “a more collaborative and structured approach”. Although Turkey is still keen to promote its interests and agenda – including seeking support for issues important to Ankara in the international arena – its regional involvement demonstrates an ability to learn and adapt to the needs of regional partners.

Third, Turkey’s growing role in Central Asia also shows recognition of Ankara’s geopolitical weight. Ankara had already become an attractive partner for Central Asia regarding multilateral engagement with the establishment of the Turkic Council in 2009. Furthermore, upgrading the OTS in 2021 took place following Turkey’s offering of diplomatic and military support to Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War. At present, activities of the OTS are rapidly expanding to include 30 areas of cooperation. Similar to the 1990s, however, Ankara’s further engagement in Central Asia remains conditioned on its economic capacity and foreign policy priorities.

Geography is another factor to consider. According to the wave (four-zone) approach – as elaborated by Hakan Fidan back in 2010 in his capacity as Deputy Undersecretary of the Prime Minister of Turkey at that time – for Ankara, Central Asia is in the second zone (“the surrounding region”) as opposed to the first zone (“close neighbouring countries”). This means that Central Asia “is located in a geography where Turkey’s potential influence decreases to 50 per cent in comparison with the first wave”. According to Fidan, the inclusion of Central

Asia into the first zone for Ankara would necessitate “regional integration models”. However, Central Asia’s big brother syndrome makes any form of regional integration unlikely. For the time being, Turkey’s integration offer is likely to co-exist with other integration projects being promoted by Russia and China, in addition to the one initiated by the countries of Central Asia themselves.

Just as Turkey has become a self-confident player, so too has Central Asia. The Central Asian states have become increasingly keen to strengthen intra-regional cooperation and present themselves as a united front to the outside world. It started with the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of the Central Asian States, introduced in 2018, bringing together all five of the region’s republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. During his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2025, President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan described the Consultative Meetings as “an effective mechanism for deepening regional integration” while announcing “a New Central Asia” in the making. At the seventh Consultative Meeting, which took place on 16 November 2025 in Tashkent, Mirziyoyev suggested upgrading “a consultative format of regional dialogue into a strategic format, ‘The Community of Central Asia’”. At the same summit, Azerbaijan — which had participated in the meetings since 2023 as “the guest of honour” — became a full member of the format. Another important outcome of the summit was the adoption of the Concept of Regional Security, Stability and Sustainable Development and the Catalogue of Security Risks and Measures for their Prevention for 2026 – 2028.

Central Asia’s importance for Turkey has increased, as it has for others. Since 2022, there has been a considerable proliferation of “Central Asia Plus” (C5+1) formats, with some being revived and others newly established. Modelled on a cooperation framework between Central Asia and Japan introduced in 2004, followed by the same format with South Korea in 2007, C5+1 formats now include cooperation with India, Russia,

China, the Gulf States, the United States, Germany and the EU.

New reality for Russia

With Turkey’s unwitting assistance, Russia began realising the potential of the Turkic connection in its own relations with Central Asia. To this end, Russia is promoting its own Turkic narrative, which is based on the concepts of “Altai as the Homeland of the Turks” and the “Greater Altai” project, whereby Russia sees itself as “the ‘guardian’ of Turkic heritage”. The instruments include conferences, expeditions as well as high-level summits. In July 2025 in the Republic of Altai, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin hosted counterparts from Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on the occasion of the International Environmental Conference.

The OTS has received particular attention in a leaked presentation, apparently discussed in April 2024 during the Strategy Session of the Coordination Centre of the Russian Government titled “Eurasian Integration in a Multipolar World”. While mentioning that Moscow sees the OTS as an example of “integration without Russia”, the section on Central Asia also highlights other institutional formats such as C5+1, all under the telling subheading of “Self-awareness as a whole” (осознание себя целым), while acknowledging that “Middle Asia” (Средняя Азия) — a term once used to refer to this region — has become “Central”.

In this context, cooperation between Central Asia and Turkey is a manifestation of the broader reconfiguration dynamics taking place in the post-Soviet space. As Turkey becomes a noticeable factor in Central Asian affairs, it is ultimately a secondary issue for Moscow when compared to other problems in Russia’s relations with Central Asia. Among the more fundamental issues for Russia identified in the mentioned presentation is Western influence, particularly in education, where it manifests in the “rethinking of collective history” and the

“diminishing use of the Russian language”. Tellingly, during the meeting of CIS Security Council secretaries that took place in Moscow on 5 November 2025, hosted by Russia’s Secretary of the Security Council Sergey Shoigu, one of the key questions addressed was “countering the ideological expansion of the West”.

Whereas Moscow used to take Central Asia for granted, there are indications that Russia is recalibrating its approach, especially given the importance of Central Asia for Russia’s Eurasian integration projects and for transport routes. In 2022, there were more than 50 meetings between Russian President Vladimir Putin and leaders of Central Asian countries. Two directorates within Russia’s presidential administration on cross-border cooperation and on regional and cultural relations with foreign countries were abolished at the end of August 2025. In their place, a new directorate for strategic partnership and cooperation was created. This was followed by the resignation of Dmitry Kozak, who was in charge of Russia’s relations with post-Soviet states and curated the two abolished departments. The new directorate is reportedly responsible for Russia’s relations with Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as well as “certain aspects of engagement with some countries in the Global South”, with a primary focus on “humanitarian cooperation”.

Implications for the EU

The connectivity question has emerged as an area of common interest not only between Turkey and Central Asia, but also between the EU and Central Asia as well as between the EU and Turkey. The EU’s “Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region”, announced in May 2025, highlights connectivity as one of its pillars. It includes Central Asia and mentions Turkey as “an EU partner of strategic importance and a candidate country”. The Middle Corridor

was on the agenda during the high-level meeting, which was hosted by the EU in Luxembourg on 20 October of this year and attended by representatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

If the EU and Turkey choose to work together in Central Asia rather than in parallel, as is the case in other regions, recent developments within the OTS suggest an opening for potential cooperation with the EU. At its recent summit in October 2025, the OTS announced “the establishment of the ‘OTS+’ format as a flexible framework of cooperation with external parties”. Furthermore, the declaration adopted by the OTS in October 2025 has a more balanced approach towards the Cyprus question, citing “the need to reach a negotiated, mutually acceptable and viable settlement”.

If the Cyprus question continues to hinder cooperation between the OTS and the EU, Germany should consider establishing an additional communication channel within the new OTS+ format. This would complement the existing C5+Germany format with Central Asia.

As the EU seeks “to make new inroads in a region where China and Russia wield longstanding influence”, it is important not to underestimate Russia as a factor in Central Asia. Equally important for the EU will be developing an approach that is tailored to the needs of Central Asian countries, one of which is maintaining their multi-vector policies. As in other regions, Central Asia’s “geopolitical math is defined by addition, not subtraction”.



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