

Uzbek-Turkish Strategic Partnership in the Context of Geopolitical Turbulence in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT *Central Asia has long captured the attention of global and regional powers due to its abundant natural resources, strategic location, potential for economic development, transportation, logistics, and connectivity. Simultaneously, global and regional actors have intensified their engagement in the geopolitics of the Central Asian region. Under these circumstances, strengthening a comprehensive strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and Türkiye is essential to maintaining the geopolitical balance of power in the region and effectively addressing the common challenges of sustainable development. The commentary is devoted to studying the current bilateral and multilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Türkiye in the context of ongoing geopolitical turbulence and shifts at the global and regional levels.*

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Türkiye, Cooperation, Geopolitics, Central Asia

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Introduction

Uzbekistan has been implementing ambitious reforms, including the recent “Uzbekistan – 2030 Strategy,” which prioritizes social protection, “creating favorable environmental conditions for the population, a fair and modern state at the service of the people, ensuring the country’s sovereignty and security,”¹ and enhancing the protection of private property with a focus on economic development and liberalization. These significant developments have not only transformed the country’s internal landscape for the better but have also contributed to its active and pragmatic foreign policy.

Indeed, the renewed foreign policy of Uzbekistan, “being an organic continuation of the course of the large-scale domestic reforms, has pragmatic and strategically verified character.”² In this regard, Uzbekistan’s comprehensive strategic relations with Türkiye have a great potential to further strengthen and deepen. According to the “Uzbekistan – 2030 Strategy,”³ Uzbekistan will consistently continue its open, pragmatic, and active foreign policy based on national interests aimed at further deepening full-scale strategic partnerships and alliances in Central Asia and also expanding multifaceted beneficial cooperation with major traditional partners, including Türkiye. In this vein, Uzbekistan’s bilateral and multilateral relations with Türkiye, which have been consistently developing and characterized by mutual respect, cooperation, and

strategic partnership, deserve special attention.

People of two countries are bound by close ties of friendship and brotherhood based on the common language, culture, traditions, and history. Türkiye was the first country to recognize the independence of Uzbekistan on December 16, 1991, and among the first to open an embassy in Tashkent in April 1992. Since Uzbekistan’s independence in 1991, the two countries have cultivated a strong and dynamic partnership, evident in their frequent high-level political engagement, unwavering support for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and active collaboration on regional and international issues.

For the period of more than 30 years of establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, remarkable results have been achieved, and today Uzbekistan and Türkiye maintain a high-level “comprehensive strategic partnership,” which was indeed given new impetus by the efforts of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Friendly relations between two leaders, their regular high-level meetings, and cordial dialogue play a significant role in establishing effective and mutually beneficial cooperation.

Furthermore, a solid foundation for developing cultural and humanitarian ties has been established over the years of cooperation between the two countries. In addition, Uzbekistan became a full member of the TÜRK-SOY organization, whose main pur-

pose is to promote cultural exchange, stable peace, dialogue, and solidarity among Turkic countries.

Since 2017, Uzbekistan and Türkiye have signed several new agreements to promote trade, investment, and economic cooperation in various sectors, including textiles, transportation, energy, healthcare, agriculture, humanitarian exchanges, and other high-priority areas. Consequently, economic ties between Uzbekistan and Türkiye have witnessed significant growth and diversification. Türkiye has emerged as a major economic partner for Uzbekistan and Türkiye's investments are actively contributing to the modernization of the country's infrastructure and the economy in general.

For instance, Türkiye has grown to become Uzbekistan's fourth-largest trade and economic partner. By the end of 2022, the volume of mutual trade between Uzbekistan and Türkiye had more than doubled compared to 2017 and "reached \$3.6 billion. The number of joint ventures increased five times and exceeded 2,000. The investment cooperation indicators have grown 70 times."⁴ In the coming years, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye plan to increase the volume of bilateral trade to \$10 billion.⁵

Uzbekistan and Türkiye are actively collaborating on improving transportation and logistics infrastructure to facilitate trade and economic exchange. In particular, in 2022, the "e-Permit" pilot project⁶ was launched between Uzbekistan and

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Türkiye, and up to September 2023, "a total of 710,900 tons (an increase of 32.8 percent) of various goods were transported via road between two countries."⁷ Therefore, Trans-Caspian transport and energy corridors have great interest for Uzbekistan and for Türkiye as well. Meanwhile, both countries face challenges in fully realizing the potential of existing transportation and logistics infrastructure, as well as the planned "Middle Corridor" and other projects aimed at enhancing Uzbek-Turkish trade and economic cooperation, due to limited resources, geopolitical tensions, and instabilities. Therefore, it is critical for both Uzbekistan and Türkiye to find ways to overcome these obstacles by focusing on the practical implementation of reached agreements and maintaining pragmatic dialogue with other countries involved. Most significantly, the realization of these projects and the deepening of Uzbek-Turkish strategic relations would benefit not only both countries economically, but also contribute to regional stability and cooperation in Central Asia.

The most promising areas for Uzbekistan, Türkiye, and other member states within OTS are deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation in transportation, energy, economy, trade, diplomacy, and culture

Multilateral Platforms of Cooperation

Uzbekistan and Türkiye also recognize the importance of multilateral cooperation in addressing common challenges of global and regional stability. Their shared membership in the UN, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and other major international platforms has provided a valuable forum for promoting cooperation and advancing common interests.

Especially, the OTS' role in promoting cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries and the membership of Uzbekistan in the Organization should be emphasized. Besides being an active member, Uzbekistan has successfully hosted the OTS Summit in Samarkand on November 11, 2022, and the chairmanship of the Organization was transferred to Uzbekistan.

In turn, other members of the OTS in the Central Asian region –Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan (an observer country)– have also recognized the organization's importance in strengthening regional cooperation and promoting cultural, economic, and political ties. Consequently, these countries strive to increase collaboration within the framework of the OTS and strengthen bilateral ties with Türkiye and each other. At the same time, effective cooperation requires maintaining mutually beneficial cooperation within these multilateral platforms and implementing defined objectives. The most promising areas for Uzbekistan, Türkiye, and other member states within OTS are deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation in transportation, energy, economy, trade, diplomacy, and culture.

Geopolitical Turbulence in Central Asia and the Interests of External Powers

The recent geopolitical trends and changes might not only affect the regional power balance but also the international system and the global power balance in general. In this regard, Central Asian countries are using the current geopolitical changes as a strategic advantage. Indeed, following the recent positive changes in Central Asia and inter-regional processes in the region, especially under the rapid geopolitical tensions and uncertainties due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, global and

regional actors have increased their attention and focus on Central Asia. These external actors have also intensified their interactions with the Central Asian countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally, in various spheres, such as the political, economic, security, and humanitarian sectors.

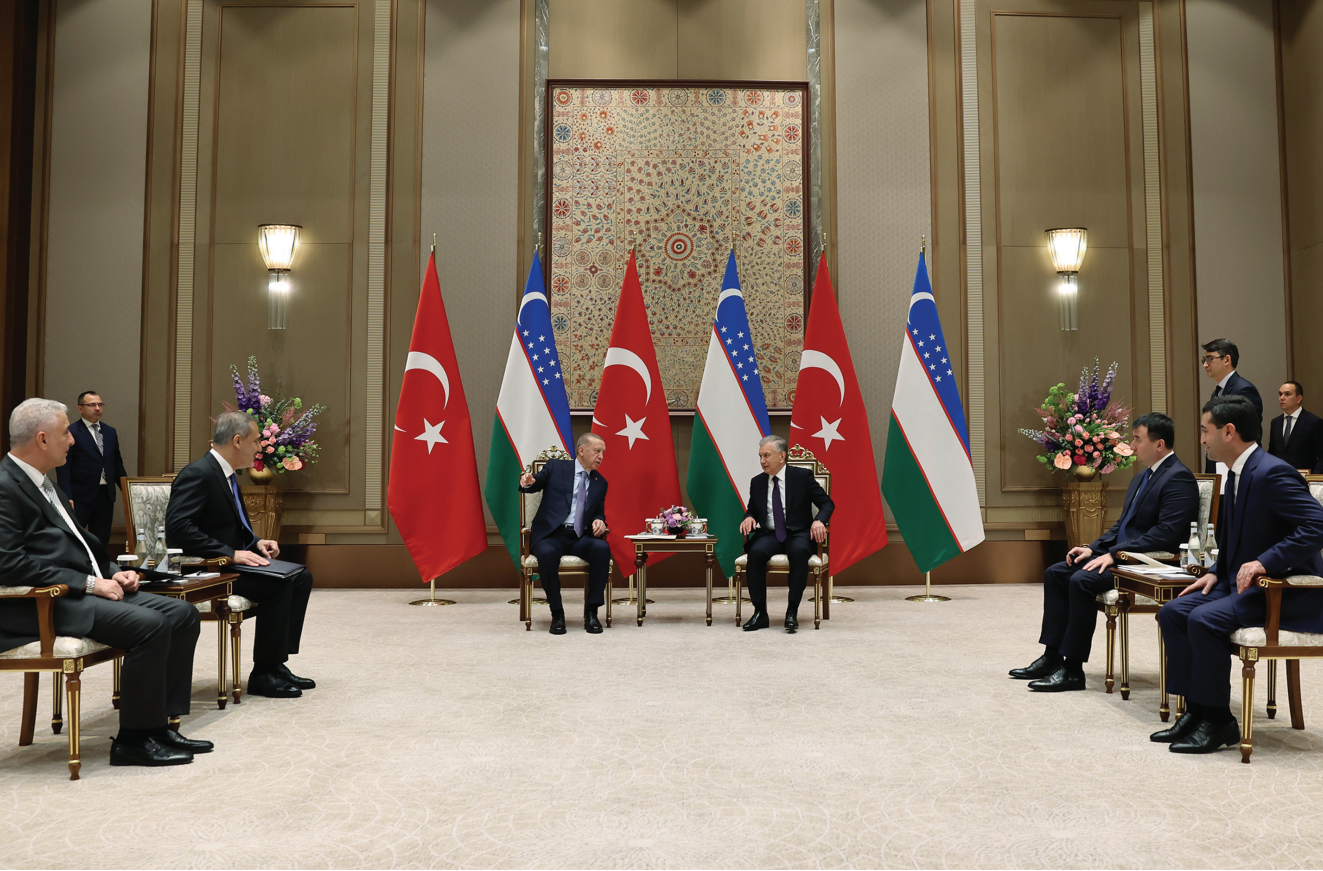
For example, the U.S. and the EU have revised their strategies towards Central Asia. At the same time, traditional players such as Russia and China have also worked to increase their presence in the region through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), respectively.

Furthermore, for China, Russia, the U.S., the EU, Germany, and others, the so-called “C5+1” format (five Central Asian states and an external partner country) at both the presidential and ministerial levels has become a platform for multilateral discussions on regional challenges and the strengthening of cooperation between Central Asian countries and their major strategic partners.

According to observers, as a result of sanctions and disruptions in the global supply chain, “Russia’s global influence has suffered over the past year, and Central Asia is no exception in this regard.”⁸ However, “Russia has been a leading geopolitical actor in Central Asia for a long time, and the region has an important place in the geopolitical architecture of Russian foreign policy.”⁹ On the other hand, “Central Asia is becoming more important for Russia, not least econom-

ically, as other trade routes have been closed off and redrawn.”¹⁰ At the same time, although Russia is currently in an adverse position to finance large international projects and promote economic activity in Central Asian countries, which limits its geopolitical maneuvering, Russia will likely remain the most influential external actor in the region from a mid-term perspective.

China primarily had economic interests in Central Asia; however, with major advances in Chinese national development and its foreign policy strategy, particularly after the launch of the BRI, China’s goals and presence in the Central Asian region have shifted. In turn, “for Central Asian countries BRI has become very favorable initiative which has a potential to boost regional connectivity and trade, and also modernize local infrastructure.”¹¹ In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and geopolitical tensions at the global level largely between the U.S. and China, there are indications that “China stands to benefit the most from the current situation.”¹² Meanwhile, “China’s attempts to enlarge its influence in Central Asia shouldn’t only be seen as a simple expansion of Chinese economic power; they should be seen as a counter-offensive against Western economic and strategic interests.”¹³ At the same time, the present geopolitical turmoil has offered a genuine opportunity for China to improve its existing relationships and position in the Central Asian region. After becoming a major economic partner of all the Central Asian states, China is



President Erdoğan met with the Uzbekistan President Mirziyoyev in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where he came to attend the 16th Summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization.

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now expanding its security cooperation as well.

Given Central Asia's geostrategic importance, the U.S., for example, has a distinct geopolitical interest in the region. The main geopolitical mission of the U.S. in Central Asia is to prevent the rise of any dominant force in the region. Furthermore, Afghanistan's role in counter-terrorism has been a key to U.S. policy in Central Asia. Meanwhile, the new U.S. strategy for Central Asia focuses on creating a stable and prosperous region that freely engages in political, economic, and security activities with diverse partners. It aims for Central Asia to be globally connected, open to international investment, and grounded in democracy, rule of law, and human rights. A stable Central Asia is crucial for countering terrorism, regional stability, energy secu-

ity, and boosting economic prosperity in the region and beyond.¹⁴

The EU also regards Central Asia as one of the most geostrategically vital regions. Trans-regional challenges such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism have an impact on EU interests. As a result, the EU has aided Central Asian countries through several development and partnership measures. In this sense, the new "EU Central Asia Strategy 2019" sees potential for collaboration and economic growth, "whereas the old strategy (2007) mostly saw challenges in terms of security."¹⁵

Furthermore, the new strategy portrays the EU as neither a partner nor a competitor in the Central Asian region against any global or regional actor. Evidently, the EU, as the world's

largest economy, “remains an important economic partner for Central Asian countries, both in terms of trade and as an investor.”¹⁶ The regional conference on the European Commission’s connectivity project, “the Global Gateway,” co-organized by the EU in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on November 17, 2022, “proves that Central Asia plays a key role in this mechanism.”¹⁷

Central Asia is the subject of rivalry over influence not only between global powers such as Russia, China, the U.S., and the EU¹⁸ but also between regional powers such as Türkiye, India, Iran, Japan, South Korea, and others.¹⁹ All of these external powers involved in Central Asian geopolitics have coinciding and sometimes conflicting interests in the region.

As an emerging regional power, India is establishing “its new position at the regional and global levels and also striving to establish itself as an important regional actor in Central Asia since the region belongs to its so-called extended neighborhood.”²⁰

India’s collaboration with all five Central Asian republics is expanding both bilaterally and multilaterally. Moreover, on January 13, 2019, at the ministerial level, the first meeting of the “India-Central Asia” Dialogue, with the participation of Afghanistan, was organized in Samarkand. Energy projects with potential Indian participation, such as the “CASA-1000”²¹ and “TAPI Pipeline projects,”²² might become a possible “peace pipeline” if

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the Afghan and Indo-Pakistan disputes are resolved peacefully.

The first “Central Asia + Japan” or commonly known “C5+1” cooperative format at the ministerial level was established by Japan in 2004, followed by South Korea in 2007, and others later (Germany being the most recent). The Central Asian states regard Japan as a global economic giant, and relations between Japan have been and will continue to be predominantly commercial in character.

South Korea has also made significant investments in all countries in the region and is keen on growing its economic footprint in Central Asia. Furthermore, South Korea’s engagement with Central Asian countries might be regarded in combination with its “New Northern Policy Strategy,” which symbolizes Korea’s present regional objectives for energy resources and connectivity promotion. Meanwhile, “despite some positive changes, the level of economic cooperation between South Korea and Central Asian states does not corre-

As Uzbekistan and Türkiye continue to navigate the complexities of current geopolitical trends, the two countries are determined to strengthen their comprehensive strategic partnership aimed at regional stability, peace, and sustainable development by promoting mutually beneficial cooperation

spond to the existing potential and capabilities; therefore, it is necessary to implement a strategy for the development of inter-state relations both separately and in the whole region.”²³

Concerning the regional actors involved in the geopolitics of Central Asia, Türkiye’s changing pragmatic foreign policy in Central Asia should be highlighted. As in previous years, “Ankara has also been striving to build a silent but important strategy towards Central Asia.”²⁴ In this vein, once Türkiye “recognized the realities on the ground and began respecting these national identities, its policies in the region grew significantly more successful.”²⁵

Although Türkiye’s trade and economic role in Central Asia remains modest compared to China or Russia, its trade relations with Uzbekistan

and other Central Asian countries have strengthened significantly in recent years. For example, according to the latest data, “Central Asian republics’ share of the trade turnover with Türkiye is high –4.7 percent in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, 5.3 percent in Kyrgyzstan, and 6.4 percent in Uzbekistan.”²⁶

Consequently, in the context of geopolitical changes in the broader Eurasian region, Türkiye’s geopolitical role is expanding not only in the South Caucasus but also in Central Asia. Ankara’s economic and cultural ties to the region have been strengthened, and a stronger security partnership has been formed.²⁷ Indeed, “the geopolitical outlook of the region in general and Uzbekistan in particular indicated that Ankara should restore its relations with Tashkent as soon as possible.”²⁸ As a result, Uzbekistan’s new economic liberalization policy is seen as a huge opportunity for Türkiye.

The transformation of the “Turkic Council” into the “Organization of Turkic States,” as well as the institutionalization of Türkiye’s connections with Eurasia’s Turkic-speaking countries, enabled its multilateral relations with Central Asian republics, except Tajikistan. However, due to Tajikistan’s cultural and historical heritage, mostly associated with Turkic civilization, the country could be involved as an observer or dialogue partner with the OTS. As such, border issues between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan could be well mediated and facilitated collectively by OTS or individ-

ually, which will positively influence the prestige of the Organization.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states aim to benefit from trade and economic ties with all foreign partners; therefore, they prioritize diversified economic relations and promote close regional cooperation without relying on any external power. The ongoing conflict with Ukraine appears to be undermining Russia's regional leadership as an external actor in Central Asia and increasing China's influence. Despite the fact that Moscow will play an important economic and political role for many Central Asian states, the conflict is likely to strengthen Central Asia's desire to pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy, willing to cooperate with alternative actors who are culturally close and share many commonalities.

In this regard, under changing geopolitical developments and conditions, maintaining a multipolar region with more than one external actor and concentrating more on trade-economic cooperation is essential. Expanding regional cooperation is critical to increasing Central Asia's relevance, addressing economic and security concerns, and maintaining geopolitical balance for the region's benefit.

The proximity of Turkic-speaking states to one another benefits them in terms of transportation costs, regional trade, and economic cooperation. Furthermore, developing alternative

international transport corridors and logistics infrastructure would help reduce transportation costs and increase Central Asian region exports to the global market. Moreover, in the context of the global pandemic and geopolitical turbulence, trade facilitation within the OTS through the provision of trade-related services in digital forms to simplify import and export procedures would promote active trade and economic relations.

As Uzbekistan and Türkiye continue to navigate the complexities of current geopolitical trends, the two countries are determined to strengthen their comprehensive strategic partnership aimed at regional stability, peace, and sustainable development by promoting mutually beneficial cooperation. ■

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