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Asia Anew Initiative: Main Aspects of Türkiye's Asia Opening

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Asia Anew Initiative: Main Aspects of Türkiye's Asia Opening

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ABSTRACT *The center of gravity in the world has shifted from the Atlantic to Asia over the last decade. The Asian continent has emerged as the geopolitical and geo-economic hub of the world, undergoing a remarkable transformation. This transformation is reshaping the global balance of power. In this context, it is apparent that the dominant theme of the 21st century at the global level is the “Rise of Asia.” This rise is primarily driven by economic dynamics, yet its supplementary elements in political, military, and cultural spheres are increasingly apparent. Initially perceived as being predominantly centered around China, it is now widely recognized that the entire Asian region is undergoing developmental strides, particularly in economic terms, positioning Asian countries as significant future actors. The Asia Anew Initiative, launched in 2019 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, represents the country's comprehensive, long-term, holistic, and systematic vision for Asia. This commentary will analyze Türkiye's overall perspective on the Asian continent and discuss the main dynamics of the initiative.*

Keywords: Asia Anew Initiative, Turkish-Asian Relations, Türkiye, Asian Countries

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An Overview of Türkiye's Perspective on Asia

In the post-Cold War era, Türkiye has become one of the leading countries trying to diversify its foreign policy objectives and outreach via multilateralism and with a multidimensional outlook. One very significant example of this tendency was toward the Central Asian republics emerging after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Türkiye's multidimensional outlook successfully deployed soft power elements to this region to systematically increase its clout in the 2000s. In Türkiye's updated post-Cold War perspective, regions such as Africa and Asia are no longer viewed as "distant and problematic" but rather as potential partners with whom Türkiye established, and extended its relations in political and economic fields and act jointly when necessary.

In addition to its extended outreach to Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia, Türkiye has formulated a new foreign policy approach toward Asia. Türkiye closely follows developments in the Asia-Pacific region, which play a significant role in global and regional peace and stability. In this framework, Türkiye argues that the challenges in the region necessitate cooperation rather than polarization, and supports bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral schemes. Moreover, the country attaches importance to the transparency and inclusiveness of regional initiatives and the creation of synergies among them. Türkiye also believes that countries in the

region should not be forced to take sides. Thus, Türkiye builds its cooperation with the countries in the region on the principles of mutual benefit and equal partnership and aims to increase bilateral and regional cooperation within the framework of common principles and priorities. Considering the colonial history of the Asia-Pacific region, it is noteworthy that Türkiye, having no colonial past, holds significant advantages in fostering trust in alignment with these principles.

A primary objective of the Asia Anew Initiative is to establish and consolidate Türkiye's influence and capability to impact developments across the entire region. Within this framework, the region is perceived not merely as an export market but also as an area for cultivating strong and positive relations with countries, i.e., Asian rising powers with global political significance. The initiative also identifies cooperation opportunities that can address technological and capital shortfalls as a crucial objective. In this context, the initiative has a realistic approach based on the effective and efficient utilization of limited resources. It is important that Türkiye's political initiative(s) in the region are supported by economic/commercial and cultural dimensions and, if possible, complemented by security cooperation opportunities, and implemented in a comprehensive framework.

Türkiye's relations with Asia are in a state of continual evolution. Boasting one of the top five largest diplomatic

networks globally, Ankara currently has 30 embassies and 24 consulates within the region encompassed by the Asia Anew Initiative. Türkiye has established embassy-level representation in all ASEAN member countries. This fact underscores Türkiye's significant commitment to its diplomatic relations with the Asian continent. In addition to diplomatic missions, important cooperation mechanisms have also been established at various levels with countries in Asia. In this context, relations with Azerbaijan, Georgia, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan are at the level of a "High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council," while relations with Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and South Korea are at the level of "Strategic Partnership." In addition, free trade agreements have been signed with many countries in the region, such as with Malaysia in August 2015, Singapore in October 2017 and South Korea in January 2020.

Asia Anew Initiative

Before explaining the Asia Anew Initiative, it is important to underline the growing global importance of the Asian continent. The 19th and 20th centuries were the centuries of the European and American continents respectively, and the countries in these continents pioneered significant changes and transformations in the international system. However, it is an undeniable reality that Asia has become the center of gravity of the world in the 21st century.

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Today, numerous countries are acknowledging the reality that the 21st century will be the "Asian century" and are accordingly elevating the Asian continent's status within their foreign policy agendas. Consequently, all developed economies are striving to enhance their effectiveness and secure a foothold in the markets of this constantly rising region. In other words, regardless of the differences among Asian countries, the continent as a whole is gaining a central position in international relations and becoming the scene of a global great power competition. More vividly, the U.S. and China have been the pioneers of this great power competition in the region, while Russia and India are closely following it and trying to make gains. Türkiye, which pursues a dynamic and proactive foreign policy and has the connecting routes between Asia and Europe, cannot close its eyes to this reality.

As part of facing toward Asia, in 2013, Türkiye became a dialogue partner with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and later continued to diversify its relations with other state actors in Asia. Yet, in

Türkiye's pioneering and active role in mediation initiatives in platforms such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation increases its importance in conflicts in the Asian continent and allows for experience sharing

the early 2010s, there was still a need to institutionalize this aim of diversification. Thus, Türkiye's comprehensive, long-term, holistic and systematic vision for Asia was put forward through the Asia Anew Initiative. The initiative was announced to the public by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in 2019. The initiative aims to strengthen Türkiye's relations with the Asian continent and to take an active role in the continent. As a vision document, the Asia Anew Initiative aims to develop high-level cooperation not only in the field of trade but also in many other areas such as defense, energy, and high technology. With the initiative, Türkiye aims to benefit more effectively from the opportunities created by the developments in Asia and the emerging cooperation potential and to strengthen its relations with the countries in the region more systematically and consistently on the basis

of a comprehensive strategy. In this way, the initiative will not only enable our country to take its relations with the Asian continent to a new level but will also contribute to strengthening its position as a reliable partner in Asia.

The initiative is carried out through short-, medium-, and long-term projects that can adapt to the dynamism of the continent and can be adapted according to developments. Activity plans consisting of approximately 1,100 elements, which are deemed beneficial to be prioritized in the 2024-2026 period for the countries in the "Asia Anew" geography, were approved by the stakeholder institutions and organizations on March 12, 2024.

On the other hand, Türkiye's Asia policies are not only country-based but also emphasize the development of institutional relations with major international organizations in this vast geography. Türkiye is strengthening its engagement with regional organizations and the initiative aims to engage more dynamically with regional organizations and forums in Asia. In this context, the country continues its project-based cooperation with ASEAN, with which it established a sectoral dialogue partnership in 2017, while taking steps to strengthen political engagement in line with the goal of becoming a dialogue partner of ASEAN. The country takes an active role in the work of organizations such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the

Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), the Asian Parliamentary Assembly (APA), and the Indian Ocean Riparian Association (IORA); Ankara also carries out joint projects and participates in thematic forums throughout the year, especially the conferences of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Center (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which Ankara is a dialogue partner.

Today the global system is experiencing a complex nature of crises, which is also incapable of providing effective solutions to them. In other words, current global governance mechanisms are unable to address global challenges timely, fairly,¹ and effectively. And Asia is no exception to this global issue. One fundamental reason for this deadlock, particularly regarding Asia, is that the global powers approach the region with such a high-level prioritization of their interests that producing win-win situations becomes very difficult.

As Türkiye, we support and attach great importance to adopting regional ownership by focusing on a perspective of providing regional solutions to regional problems. Adopting regional ownership will help to contribute to upgrading the international system to a more inclusive, effective, fair, and secure format capable of addressing current global and regional challenges. For this reason, with an understanding based on regional ownership, Türkiye is pioneering the efforts to solve the problems in all regions by incorporating new methods, actors and platforms.

Türkiye seeks closer and organic relations with its regional partners to strengthen regional ownership and initiatives. Thus, we will strengthen our relations with ASEAN as well and try to take our relationship as “dialogue partners”² to a higher level.

It should also be underlined that the initiative is supported by various academic activities and studies. As the Center for Strategic Studies (SAM),³ we encourage analysis and try to intellectually enrich the opening of our country toward the Asian continent with ideas and suggestions from academia. In fact, the workshop titled “Asia Anew Initiative” organized by our center in Ankara four months after the announcement of the initiative, gave the initiative an institutional character on the one hand, and the academia’s interest in the subject and the place and weight of the Asian continent in international relations studies increased, on the other.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the whole world, slowed down the work on the Asia Anew Initiative and prevented its full realization in foreign policy. In the new post-pandemic order, Türkiye accelerated its efforts toward the initiative by utilizing the advantages of its strategic position. The pandemic in 2020 deeply affected the international economy and brought about major contractions in national economies. However, the year-end growth figures showed that China was still at a positive level. This is one of the most important indicators that the Asia Anew Initiative will

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continue to maintain its importance and relevance in the post-pandemic order.

It should be highlighted that the Asia Anew Initiative also has an important place in Türkiye's conflict resolution and mediation activities. Existing problems among the countries in the region have the potential to escalate into conflicts. Türkiye is one of the countries that retains the advantage of being a constructive dialogue partner. Türkiye's pioneering and active role in mediation initiatives in platforms such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organization of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) increases its importance in conflicts in the Asian continent and allows for experience

sharing. In this context, Türkiye aims to mediate or create dialogue channels between the parties in various conflicts that concern Asian politics. By prioritizing humanitarian aid, Türkiye has also provided humanitarian aid worth \$70 million since 2012 to Rohingya Muslims in refugee camps in Bangladesh, whose number over 1 million, covering health, infrastructure, education, shelter, and basic humanitarian needs. The operation of trilateral mechanisms, as in the case of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Türkiye's active role in the Southern Philippines Peace Process are noteworthy developments. Turkish ambassadors have been chairing the Independent Decommissioning Body (IDB), which operates within the scope of the Southern Philippines Peace Process, since 2014.

The last dimension to be mentioned in our policies toward Asia is related to our general approach toward improving our relations with the least developed countries (LDCs). With 100 years of development experience since the establishment of the republic, Türkiye has significant know-how to solve the problems faced by LDCs, and cooperation with many LDCs in the Asia-Pacific region, in line with our general foreign policy of sharing this know-how, constitutes a complementary element of our Asia strategy.

In addition to these significant observations, it is important to note that the Asia Anew Initiative encompasses various historical, economic, and strategic dimensions for Türkiye. Examining these dimensions more closely will provide insights into the role of the initiative within Türkiye's policy toward Asia.

Historical Dimensions

Türkiye has historical and linguistic connections with Asia, underlining the long-standing ties with the region.⁴ Additionally, our historical bonds with the region were strengthened by the Ottoman Empire's interactions with Muslims residing in present-day Indonesia and Malaysia during the 16th century. The Indian expedition under Suleiman the Magnificent was perceived by South Asian Muslims as a protector against the Portuguese threat, a memory that persists to this day. The first consulate in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) was established in 1864, and the frigate

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Ertuğrul made its notable visit to Colombo Port in 1889.

As such, Türkiye has long-standing historical, cultural and economic ties with the Asian continent and its countries. In this respect, the initiative does not aim for Türkiye to discover a new geography from scratch, but rather to "return" to a region with which it once had strong ties. The initiative should not be interpreted as a new direction in Turkish foreign policy, but rather as a more comprehensive and systematic focus on the region. For this reason, the initiative also aims to diversify and deepen Türkiye's relations with Asian countries with which Türkiye has close historical and cultural ties through science, education, culture, arts and sports projects that will connect people.

Economic Dimensions

As a result of the economic development processes in Asia over the

Although Türkiye is unlikely to close its foreign trade deficit in the short term against economic giants such as China and India, it has the potential to increase its foreign trade volume by gaining a larger share in the market of weaker importing countries

last 20 years, the economic center of the world is shifting toward this region. According to World Bank and S&P Global forecasts, the share of the Asia-Pacific region in the global economy is expected to increase to 42 percent by 2040. In addition to the main players such as China and Japan, this economic pivot is accelerating, with South Korea, India, Malaysia, Singapore and many other countries making remarkable strides. The growth models of South Asia, East Asia and Asia Pacific countries have blossomed forth over the last 20 years. For this reason, one of the most important dimensions of Türkiye's Asia Anew Initiative is the economy and trade. The initiative is based on the principles of common interests and mutual gains. Its primary objectives include increasing, diversifying and balancing trade with Asian countries, as well as increasing mutual investments.

It is essential for Türkiye that economic and trade relations with the

Asian continent become more export-oriented. Türkiye has a significant foreign trade deficit in the current trade relations with Asian countries, especially with China and India. In this respect, the vision put forward with the Asia Anew Initiative will enable the continent to be considered as an export market and eliminate the imbalance in trade relations. Although Türkiye is unlikely to close its foreign trade deficit in the short term against economic giants such as China and India, it has the potential to increase its foreign trade volume by gaining a larger share in the market of weaker importing countries. In addition, the increase in the number of tourists coming to Türkiye from Asian countries in recent years is a factor helping to eliminate this imbalance. While only 28,000 tourists from China came to Türkiye in 2002, this number reached 426,000 in 2019, before the pandemic.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes major countries such as Japan, China, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia, constitutes the world's largest free market. The Asia Anew Initiative also requires close monitoring of new formations such as the RCEP and understanding the opportunities they may present.

It should be emphasized at this point that Türkiye's Asia Anew Initiative is not just about China, even though it is the second-largest economy in the world. Although countries such as China, Japan and South Korea are at the center of the initiative, Southeast

Asian countries also have an important place in this initiative. In fact, there are 10 countries in the Southeast Asia region with a population of 650 million and a total market of nearly \$3 trillion. In this respect, the region includes the promising countries of the Asian continent. Türkiye, which pursues a multilateral and multidimensional foreign policy, should not be expected to remain unresponsive to such a market. In 2019, the year in which the Asia Anew Initiative was announced, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid three official visits to Russia, one each to China, Japan, Tajikistan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and South Korea, and hosted the heads of state of Iran and Russia in Ankara. Former Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu visited Indonesia on December 20-22, 2020 and Bangladesh on December 22-23, 2020. The minister of foreign affairs of Türkiye, Hakan Fidan, visited Indonesia and Malaysia from July 13-16, 2023, to attend the 5th ASEAN-Türkiye Sectoral Dialogue Partnership Trilateral Meeting,⁵ just 10 days after assuming his ministerial position. He also traveled to Kazakhstan⁶ on September 11, 2023, and to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at the beginning of 2024. These diplomatic engagements signify Türkiye's ongoing commitment to establishing multilayered and multi-actor cooperation within the region.

Strategic Dimensions

Türkiye's geopolitical position places it in the easternmost part of Europe and the westernmost part of Asia.

Making good use of this position requires establishing a high level of relations with both continents. In the 21st century, a country without good relations with the Asian continent will not be able to achieve a strategic position in the new global order. Türkiye has an advantage that other countries do not have due to its geographical location. The Asia Anew Initiative offers a vision and road map that will enable the country to utilize its geographical advantage well and correctly.⁷

The geopolitical struggle in Asia has begun to be shaped by the great power competition between China and the U.S. It is important for Türkiye to position itself in such a way that it will not be a part of this struggle but will also be able to seize the opportunities it will create. In fact, it is seen that the countries in the region are seeking to alleviate Beijing's regional security concerns and the U.S. is trying to balance its concerns with its investments in the field of defense. Consequently, these developments bring important opportunities for Türkiye's defense industry. Especially for Southeast Asian countries, Turkish defense industry products offer a unique source of supply diversity in the field of defense in terms of price-performance.

The Asia Anew Initiative has an important place for Türkiye's relations with the Central Asian republics and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). It would not be an exaggeration to say that the relations established with the Turkic republics in the 1990s formed the core of the

Finally, this initiative will allow Türkiye to intensify its focus on the Asian continent and to consolidate its role as a central, unifying force bridging the West and the East

opening toward Asia. Today, the importance attached to Central Asia continues, and the OTS has become one of the priority files of Turkish foreign policy. Every interaction and communication with OTS member and observer countries through the Asian opening will contribute to Türkiye's partnerships.

As a part of both Asian and European cultures, Türkiye is at the center of the transportation routes from Europe to Asia. As the war in the North continues, and the security problems on the sea routes, Türkiye is the safest and shortest route from Asia to the West. It is inevitable for the country to include this reality in its foreign policy. In particular, the realization of connectivity projects such as the Middle Corridor, which will connect Asia to Europe and strengthen the integration of OTS countries, will contribute to the institutionalization of the Asia Anew Initiative. The signing of the "Memorandum of Understanding on the Harmonization of the Silk Road Economic Belt in the 21st Century Maritime and the Middle Corridor Initiative" in 2015 is important to harmonize Türkiye proposed "Middle

Corridor" project with China's "Belt and Road" initiative. On December 19, 2020, the arrival of the first export train from Türkiye to China in Xi'an, the final destination, marked an important milestone in Turkish trade and growing connectivity with the Asian continent. It was noted as one of the major achievements of Ankara's "Asia Anew" approach.

Finally, the Asia Anew Initiative should be viewed as an embodiment of Türkiye's multilayered and multidimensional foreign policy approach, aligning with the dynamics of a multipolar world. This initiative will allow Türkiye to intensify its focus on the Asian continent and to consolidate its role as a central, unifying force bridging the West and the East.⁸

Conclusion

As previously stated, a country lacking solid relations with the Asian continent cannot secure a strategic position in the 21st century's new global order. Hence, Türkiye's Asia Anew Initiative should be recognized as a significant and timely breakthrough, reflective of the current era's demands and opportunities. Türkiye, as a historical part of Asia, has realized this initiative to take its place in this rise of the continent. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye has sought to strengthen its ties with the Central Asian republics on cultural, economic and political grounds, thus forming the core of the opening toward Asia. With the globalization process that gained momentum from

the 1990s onward, new actors and new opportunities emerged in Asia and the Far East, which led Türkiye to shift its attention beyond the Tur-kic region.

It is important to recognize that Tür-kiye holds several advantages over Western nations concerning the Asian continent. Due to its deep-rooted historical connections and lack of a colonial past, Türkiye can more readily establish trust com-pared to other international actors. Consequently, the country emerges as a natural and dependable partner for regional countries. Furthermore, Türkiye's geographical positioning offers a significant advantage, en-hancing potential connectivity. Ad-ditionally, it is pertinent to consider potential challenges to Türkiye's Asia Anew Initiative. Notably, there has been a decline in interest in China's Belt and Road Initiative, launched at the end of 2013, both internation-ally and within China itself. At this point, it is important that Türkiye's projects such as the Middle Corridor are not indexed to the Belt and Road Initiative. In addition, it is crucial that state institutions, academia and civil society work together under the coordination of the Ministry of For-eign Affairs to ensure the long-term success of the Asia Anew Initiative.

The responsibility for the success of the initiative will be a comprehensive working environment in which civil society and universities will also be involved. ■

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