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TURKIYE'S EXPANDING INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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SUMMARY

This article examines the transformation of Turkiye's strategic and economic engagement with Central Asia since 2018, arguing that Ankara has shifted from primarily cultural/linguistic outreach to an integrated strategic-economic toolkit combining infrastructure diplomacy (Middle Corridor), targeted energy partnerships, trade and investment initiatives, security cooperation, and multilateral institution-building (Organization of Turkic States). The study assesses whether Turkiye's approach constitutes a coherent project for regional influence or remains opportunistic and state-by-state. The paper contributes to debates on great power competition in Eurasia by mapping linkages between economic connectivity and security alignment, and by testing hypotheses about the effectiveness of shared Turkic identity as a mobilizing factor for durable geopolitical partnerships.

Keywords: *Middle Corridor, CSTO, OTS, Central Asia, South Caucasus.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the independence of the Central Asian republics back in 1991, Turkiye's involvement with the region has evolved through many prominent phases, each shaped by shifting geopolitical dynamics and shifts in Turkiye's own foreign-policy identity. The early post-Soviet period was identified by an eagerness for pan-Turkic solidarity, cultural diplomacy, and linguistic affinity, which Ankara sought to deploy as a bridge to the newly sovereign states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Although this soft-power helped develop initial political relations and cultural connectivity, it needed strategic depth, economic leverage, and institutional mechanisms important to influence the region's geopolitical architecture remarkably. Scholars majorly agree that during the 1990s and early 2000s, Turkiye's weak economic capacity and cautious strategic posture limited its ability to compete with Russia's ingrained influence and China's growing economic rise in Central Asia (Kahveci, 2023).

The setting in which Turkiye operates today diverges dramatically from that early period. Since approximately 2016–2018, Ankara has increasingly embraced a multidimensional and strategically assertive policy toward Central Asia, moving beyond reliance on shared cultural identity and soft-power tools. This change is driven both by Turkiye's domestic recalibrations—such as diversification of foreign partnerships, the need to lessen geopolitical vulnerabilities, and the chasing of regional autonomy—and by external geopolitical shifts, including the Russia-Ukraine war, China's Belt and Road Initiative recalibration, and emerging power vacuums in Eurasia. As a result, Turkiye's engagement with Central Asia has transformed toward a more unified and comprehensive strategic–economic approach that links infrastructure, connectivity, energy diplomacy, trade, security cooperation, and institutional engagement under a more understandable foreign-policy framework (Cornell, 2024).

One of the defining features of Turkiye's new posture is the growing centrality of **connectivity and transit diplomacy**, most visibly expressed through the **Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor**. This corridor—connecting Türkiye, the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and onward to Central Asia and China—has appeared as both a geopolitical and economic project. It serves as a substitute to the Russia-dependent Northern Corridor and the Iran-based Southern Corridor, providing Central Asian states with diversification and strategic flexibility. Turkiye's fostering of the Middle Corridor is not just economic; it shows Ankara's ambition to become an important factor in Eurasian connectivity, integrating trade routes, digital corridors, energy flows, and infrastructure networks. This approach aligns with the growing regional interest in mitigating dependence on Russia's transit routes after the Ukraine war and China's changing priorities within the BRI framework, marking the Middle Corridor of

growing relevance for the landlocked Central Asian republics (Shaffer, 2024).

Energy cooperation forms another pillar of Turkiye's deepening engagement. Central Asia's resource-rich environment—particularly Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon reserves—has long attracted Turkish interest, but real institutional and infrastructural progress has accelerated only in recent years. Türkiye's evolving role as a potential regional energy hub, combined with its demand diversification strategy, has vitalized extensive involvement in Trans-Caspian energy projects, liquefied natural gas (LNG) cooperation, and electricity grid connections. These steps, integrating with Turkiye's own domestic energy-security policy, show broader changes toward a more practical and economically grounded foreign-policy inclination. Growing energy cooperation also aligns with Turkiye's greater openness to trilateral formats involving Azerbaijan, which serve to link Central Asia more firmly to the South Caucasus and Türkiye through pipelines, fiber-optic corridors, digital infrastructure, and transport systems (Shaffer, 2024).

Meanwhile, Turkiye's trade and investment relations with Central Asia have expanded significantly. Trade volumes have gone up across Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and Turkish companies have grown their presence in construction, textiles, machinery, logistics, and energy spheres. These economic relations are increasingly related to broader strategies of economic statecraft, whereby trade and investment are used to reinforce diplomatic and strategic relations. Turkiye's economic engagement is supported by institutions such as Turkic Investment Fund, Exim bank financing mechanisms, and collaborative business councils. Although these instruments do not yet rival the scale of Chinese financing or Russian market access, they represent a more coordinated and intentional Turkish strategy than existed in previous decades. In short, economics is no longer supplemental to Turkiye's cultural diplomacy but is instead one of the core engines driving its regional presence (Kahveci, 2023).

Beyond trade and infrastructure, Türkiye has significantly expanded its **security and defense cooperation** with several Central Asian states. Following the 2020 Second Karabakh War, Turkish defense technologies—the most notable being drones—demonstrated high operational effectiveness, elevating Turkiye's reputation as a reliable and technologically capable security partner. Central Asian states, observing the successful Azerbaijan–Turkiye military partnership, increasingly view defense cooperation with Türkiye as a means of diversifying security relationships away from Russia's CSTO dominance and China's rising security presence through the SCO. Turkiye has concluded new military agreements, training programs, defense-industrial partnerships, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms with countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. These developments mark a notable departure from the earlier decades, when Türkiye's military involvement in Central Asia was limited, symbolic, or overshadowed by Russia's control over regional security architectures. Today, Turkiye's influence in the security domain is becoming one of the pillars of its broader strategic engagement (Cornell, 2024).

The institutional dimension of Turkiye's policy is equally important. Turkiye has played the leading role in revitalizing and strengthening the **Organization of Turkic States (OTS)**, transforming it from a cultural cooperation framework into a more operational platform for political dialogue, economic coordination, transit harmonization, and digital connectivity. The OTS has expanded its agenda to include transportation strategies, customs integration, energy collaboration, security consultations, and youth exchange mechanisms. Turkiye's leadership in expanding the OTS's mandate—from cultural symbolism to geopolitical agency—reflects an effort to construct a long-term institutional anchor for the Turkic world. Ankara's commitment to institutionalizing regional cooperation shows that it views Central Asia not only as a cultural space but as a political and economic community with real potential for strategic alignment (Kahveci, 2023).

Despite these advances, scholarly debates remain divided on whether Turkiye's engagement represents a **coherent regional strategy** or remains **opportunistic and fragmented**. Some analysts argue that Turkiye is pursuing a clear long-term vision centred on connectivity corridors, multilateralism through the OTS, and partnership with Azerbaijan as a gateway to Central Asia. Others contend that Turkiye's actions are reactive, shaped by immediate geopolitical shifts or bilateral opportunities rather than a unified regional blueprint. Existing literature is also heavily descriptive, focusing on individual case studies or singular policy instruments—such as energy diplomacy or cultural cooperation—without integrating economic, security, institutional, and identity-based factors into a single analytical framework. This indicates a clear gap for comparative,

cross-country, and interdisciplinary research that situates Turkiye's Central Asia approach within theories of middle-power behaviour, regional integration, and economic statecraft (Cornell, 2024).

Furthermore, the role of **shared Turkic identity**—long assumed to be the foundation of Turkiye's influence in the region—requires more systematic evaluation. While cultural and linguistic ties certainly facilitate cooperation, identity alone does not necessarily lead to strategic alignment. Central Asian governments remain cautious, balancing relations with Russia and China while selectively engaging with Turkiye. The persistence of multi-vector foreign policies among Central Asian states suggests that identity-based solidarity must be examined alongside concrete economic incentives, political interests, and security calculations. Scholars increasingly note that Türkiye's recent success derives not simply from common heritage but from its ability to offer credible economic and strategic benefits through infrastructure, defense cooperation, and institutional leadership (Kahveci, 2023).

Taken together, these trends highlight the need for a comprehensive study that evaluates Türkiye's post-2018 engagement with Central Asia across multiple dimensions. This article contributes to that scholarly need by analyzing Turkiye's transformation from a soft-power actor to a multidimensional strategic player in the region, evaluating whether its emergence contains a coherent regional project or remains fragmented. It evaluates the interplay between economic connectivity and security cooperation, the role of OTS as an Institution, and to see if the practical relevance of shared Turkic identity actually acts as a driver of geopolitical partnerships or not. In doing so, the study offers to provides an insight into Turkiye's changing position within the broader context of Eurasian great-power competition involving Russia, China, and the European Union (Cornell, 2024).

Pan-Turkism, Identity, and the Limits of Soft Power

Early scholarly discussions on Turkiye's involvement with Central Asian countries were mainly framed in pan-Turkism as the primary driver of Ankara's regional outreach after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Common linguistic, cultural, and historical ties were widely considered as a natural base for political influence and leadership within the newly independent Turkic republics. During this period, Turkiye invested massively in public diplomacy instruments, including educational exchange programs, cultural institutions, media initiatives, and elite socialization mechanisms, to maintain itself as a normative model and strategic leader for Central Asia. These reflected a belief that identity-based affinity could play an important role in Turkiye's limited material capabilities and provide a robust base for its regional influence (Niemiec, 2019; Kahveci, 2023).

Following analyses, nevertheless claimed the structural constraints of identity-driven foreign policy. While cultural affiliations ease diplomatic access and symbolic alignment, it proved insufficient to overcome Central Asian states' deep economic interdependence with Russia and their growing integration into China-centered trade and investment networks. Scholars argue that pan-Turkism functioned primarily as a supplementary diplomatic resource rather than a decisive instrument of geopolitical influence. The political elite of Central Asia was consistently focused on regime security, economic development, and strategic autonomy, prioritizing this over cultural solidarity, and practiced multi-vector foreign policies that confined Türkiye's ability to translate identity into sustained leverage (Wheeler, 2010; Kahveci, 2023).

The recent steps taken adopt the literature's more nuanced position, suggesting that Turkic identity retains relevance, but it operates under specific conditions. Rather than positioning itself as an independent driver of adjustments, shared identity is glowingly understood as a permitting factor that lowers transaction costs, grows trust, and facilitates cooperation when complementing with definite economic, political, and security incentives. This point of view challenges earlier presumption that cultural similarity alone could support a cohesive Turkic geopolitical bloc and underlines the need for an integrated analytical framework that sets identity within broader structures of material interests and strategic calculus (Kahveci, 2023).

Middle Powers, Connectivity, and Economic Statecraft

The change of Turkiye's policy toward Central Asia is more effectively interpreted through the theoretical lenses of middle-power behaviour and economic statecraft. Middle powers are distinguished not by overwhelming material dominance but by their ability to exploit a niche capability, exercise institutional entrepreneurship, and shape regional agendas through network-building strategies. With-

in this structure, connectivity—established through transport corridors, energy networks, and digital infrastructure—has presented a critical tool for projecting impact and sculpting regional order in the absence of hard-power dominance (Biró & Egeresi, 2023).

Philosophy on the Middle Corridor spotlights how framework diplomacy can serve as a geopolitical instrument by reorienting trade flows, revengement strategic dependencies, and embedding states within growing connectivity regimes. From this viewpoint, Turkiye's underscoring of transit corridors and logistical integration reflects an adaptable response to shifting power balances in Eurasia. Authority over connectivity and institutional frameworks encourage middle powers to generate disproportionate strategic returns, blurring the traditional boundaries between economic policy and security competition (Biró & Egeresi, 2023; Cornell, 2024).

Institutional Regionalism and the Organization of Turkic States

Institutional regionalism constitutes a third key angle of Turkiye's progressing involvement with Central Asia. The regeneration of the Organization of Turkic States signals a deliberate effort to move beyond ad hoc bilateralism toward a more structured and predictable framework for regional cooperation. Initially centered on cultural and symbolic interaction, the OTS has expanded its functional scope to include political consultation, economic coordination, transport harmonization, and the new opportunities in areas of security negotiations, showing both external geopolitical pressures and internal demands for institutional relevance (Özdemir, 2022; Guliyev, 2023).

From a theoretical point of view, this institutional evolution positions itself with functionalist and neo-regionalist approaches that view institutions as a procedure for reducing unpredictability, accelerating, and embedding cooperation over time. However, the efficiency of such arrangements banks on their ability to deliver tangible outcomes rather than symbolic declarations. The OTS therefore serves as a critical test case for examining whether Turkiye's institutionalized leadership can translate into sustained regional influence or whether it remains constrained by divergent member interests and the persistence of multi-vector foreign policies among Central Asian states (Özdemir, 2022; Guliyev, 2023).

Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study chooses a qualitative research design anchored in interpretive and comparative analysis to examine Turkiye's developing involvement with Central Asia. Rather than depending on a single-case or sectoral approach, the article applies to a multi-dimensional analytical framework that incorporates connectivity, energy diplomacy, security cooperation, and institutional development. This design allows for a holistic assessment of Turkiye's regional strategy and avoids the explanatory fragmentation that characterises much of the existing literature on Turkish foreign policy in Eurasia (Wheeler, 2010).

The analysis follows a process-tracing logic, examining how Turkiye's policies toward Central Asia have transformed over time and perceiving important turning points that reshaped Ankara's strategic posture. More specific attention is paid to the post-2018 period, which marks a qualitative change in Turkiye's approach from identity-driven outreach to strategic-economic engagement. Process chasing enables the identification of causal mechanisms linking geopolitical shocks, such as regional instability and shifting great-power dynamics, to policy adopted by a middle power actor (Wheeler, 2010).

Empirically, the article draws on secondary academic literature, policy analyses, and institutional assessments focusing on Turkiye's role in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The study does not target providing exhaustive country-level case studies; instead, it synthesizes cross-regional trends to assess the coherence and effectiveness of Türkiye's broader strategy. This approach is particularly suitable for promoting regional influence and institutional development, where outcomes are designed by cumulative rather than isolated bilateral decisions (Özdemir, 2022).

Connectivity Diplomacy and the Middle Corridor

Integration has emerged as a central pillar of Turkiye's contemporary involvement with Central Asia, with the Trans-Caspian East–West Middle Corridor holding a an important country to play its role. The corridor links Central Asia to Europe via the South Caucasus and Turkiye, providing an alternative to routes dominated by Russia or China. In this sense, connectivity diplomacy functions not just as an economic steps taken but as a strategic instrument designed to reshape regional dependencies and increase Turkiye's geopolitical relevance (Biró & Egeresi, 2023).

The strategic importance of the Middle Corridor has increased amid disturbance of Eurasian trade routes and increasing uncertainty within existing transit frameworks. Central Asian states, specifically Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have shown growing interest in route diversification as a means of lowering the vulnerability to geopolitical shocks. Turkiye's promotion of the corridor positions itself with these preferences, positioning Ankara as both accelerate of regional and a gatekeeper of westward access (Biró & Egeresi, 2023).

Beyond physical architecture, the Middle Corridor revolves around a broader context of connectivity, including customs adaptation , digital infrastructure, and logistics governance. These elements reflect a shiftOrganizationrehensive connectivity, where control over regulatory frameworks and standards becomes as pivotal as transport capacity itself. By engaging in these domains, Turkiye seeks to integrate itself structurally within Eurasian trade networks rather than positioning itself as a passive transit state (Biró & Egeresi, 2023).

Nevertheless, the effective of connectivity diplomacy remains dependent on external constraints. Competing initiatives, financing limitations, and coordination challenges among corridor stakeholders continue to limit the corridor's full potential. As a result, Turkiye's intergration strategy must be understood as an incremental and adaptive process rather than a fully consolidated geopolitical project (Biró & Egeresi, 2023).

Energy Diplomacy and Strategic Interdependence

Energy cooperation holds a critical component of Turkiye's cooperation with Central Asia, showing both Ankara's domestic energy-security priorities and its broader regional goals . Central Asia's hydrocarbon-rich states—particularly Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—provide opportunities for expanding of supply routes and sources, meanwhile Turkiye's geographic posture facilitates it to pivot as a bridge between producers and global markets. Energy diplomacy thus works as a strategy for making an environment long-term interdependence rather than short-term transactional partnerships (Shaffer, 2022).

Turkiye's changing role as a regional energy power has fostered regenerated interests in Trans-Caspian energy projects, including dialogues on natural gas transportation, electricity interconnections, and complementary digital infrastructure. These ambitions are often undertaken in coordination with Azerbaijan, making a triangular energy and connectivity axis linking Central Asia to the South Caucasus and Türkiye. Such deals strengthen Turkiye's strategic significance while reducing the dominance of traditional energy transit actors (Shaffer, 2022).

Moreover, hydrocarbons and energy diplomacy increasingly incorporate renewable energy cooperation, grid integration, and regulatory dialogue. These developing areas reflect a major change toward sustainable and diversified energy systems, which are mainly attractive to Central Asian states looking for modernization and resilience. Turkiye's in these categories improves its profile as a technologically capable and forward-looking partner rather than merely a transit state (Shaffer, 2022).

However, structural limitations remain important. Russian infrastructure legacies, Chinese investment capabilities, and political sensitivities encircling Caspian energy projects continue to shape the limitations of Turkiye's influence. Energy diplomacy, therefore, should be understood as a reinforcing pillar of Turkiye's regional strategy rather than a driver of geopolitical (Shaffer, 2022).

Security and Defense Cooperation: Strategic Diversification and Middle-Power Engagement

Turkiye's growing role in security and defense cooperation with Central Asian states symbolizes one of the most important shifts in its regional connectivity since the late 2010s. For much of the post-Soviet period, Turkiye remained a small actor in Central Asian security affairs, constrained by Russia's dominance of regional military institutions and by Ankara's own limited defense-industrial capabilities. Recent years, however, have seen a gradual but noteworthy rearrangement, as Turkiye has emerged as a credible alternative security partner providing training, defence technology, and strategic cooperation without asking for formal alliance commitments (Cornell, 2021).

This change must be understood within the broader perspective of progressing threat comprehensions and institutional fatigue among Central Asian states. Russia's continued being the center within the Collective Security Treaty Organization has growingly been accompanied by concerns over reliability, asymmetric dependence, and political conditionality. At the same time, China's expanding security presence—particularly in the areas of internal security, surveillance, and border control—has caused unease among regional elites wary of excessive external penetration. Turkiye's security engagement benefits

from this environment by presenting itself as a flexible, non-hegemonic partner capable of enhancing national capacity without undermining strategic autonomy (Cornell, 2021).

A defining characteristic of Turkiye's security outreach is its emphasis on capacity-building rather than force projection. Military training programs, officer education, joint exercises, and doctrinal exchange form the backbone of Ankara's defense cooperation with Central Asian states. These initiatives are deliberately framed as professionalization efforts rather than alliance commitments, allowing recipient states to strengthen their armed forces while maintaining formal neutrality within existing security architectures. This approach aligns with Turkiye's broader middle-power strategy, which prioritizes influence through expertise and institutional engagement rather than coercive dominance (Cornell, 2021).

The growing outlook of Turkiye's defence-industrial sector has further grown its attractiveness as a security partner. The export of defense-related technologies—particularly cost-effective, operationally proven systems—has kept Turkiye as an alternative supplier to both Russian and Western markets. For Central Asian states with the difficulties in budgets and political limitations, Turkish defence products offer a very attractive and lucrative offer pragmatic balance between affordability, effectiveness, and political acceptability. Defense-industrial cooperation thus works as both an economic and strategic tool, strengthening Turkiye's regional presence while incorporating long-term technical dependencies (Cornell, 2021).

Turkiye's security relation is also crafted by its experience in asymmetric warfare, counterterrorism, and border security, areas of direct relevance to Central Asian states. Mutual concerns over extremism, transnational militancy, and regional instability—especially in relation to Afghanistan—have created overarching security priorities. Turkiye leverages this junction by providing training and intelligence sharing, concentrating on internal security and resilience, rather than a conventional force stance. This concentration boosts the practical relevance of cooperation while minimizing geopolitical disharmony with dominant external actors (Cornell, 2021).

Significantly, Turkiye's security cooperation does not seek to displace existing regional security institutions but rather to supplement them. Ankara bypasses direct challenges to the CSTO or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, instead placing itself as an auxiliary partner whose engagement improves national capabilities without changing formal relations. This strategy showcases an acute awareness of regional sensitivities and underlines Turkiye's inclination for incremental strength rather than confrontational rearrangement. Such restraint has enabled Turkiye to increase its security footmark without provoking strong counter reaction from Russia or China (Cornell, 2021).

Despite these advances, structural limitations continue to constrain Turkiye's security influence in Central Asia. Russia retains overwhelming advantages in terms of military basing, legacy infrastructure, and institutional authority, while China's economic leverage increasingly translates into security cooperation. Turkiye's role, therefore, remains inherently supplementary and context dependent. Its influence is strongest where it aligns with Central Asian states diversifying strategies and weakest where hard-security guarantees are at stake. This imbalance features the boundaries of middle-power engagement in a region dominated by great-power competition (Cornell, 2021).

Nonetheless, the strategic importance of Turkiye's security relations lies less in its scale than in its metaphor and adaptability. By offering credible alternatives in training, technology, and cooperation formats, Turkiye collaborates to the gradual pluralization of Central Asia's security environment. This pluralization does not dismantle existing power structures but presents greater adaptability in regional security governance. In this sense, Turkiye's defense cooperation strengthens broader trends toward strategic hedging and multi-vectorism rather than alliance realignment (Cornell, 2021).

From an analytical perspective, Turkiye's security relations demonstrates the interconnection of pragmatism and strategic ambition within its broader Central Asia policy. Security cooperation functions not as an isolated domain but as an integral component of a multidimensional strategy, linking connectivity, economic engagement, and institutional participation. By integrating defense cooperation within this broader framework, Turkiye expands its overall regional presence while reducing the risks associated with overextension or geopolitical confrontation (Cornell, 2021).

In sum, Turkiye's increasing security and defense cooperation with Central Asian states reflects the progressive behavior of a middle power operating within a competitive and uncertain regional order. While persuaded by structural asymmetries, Turkiye has successfully leveraged niche capabilities,

defense-industrial assets, and strategic restraint to shape a meaningful—if limited—role in Central Asia's changing security landscape. This role supplements rather than substitutes existing security arrangements and underlines the importance of diversification, flexibility, and institutional sensitivity in liberal Eurasian geopolitics (Cornell, 2021).

The Organization of Turkic States: From Symbolic Cooperation to Strategic Institutionalization

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) hold an important position in Turkiye's evolving relations with Central Asia, reflecting Ankara's expanding emphasis on institutionalized regionalism as a mechanism for steady influence. Originally established as a forum for cultural and linguistic cooperation, the organization has experienced a slow but important transformation in both scope and ambition. This evolving situations mirrors broader shifts in Eurasian geopolitics, where uncertainty, fragmentation, and competition have escalated the value of flexible multilateral avenues that operate below the threshold of formal alliances (Özdemir, 2022).

From a historical viewpoint , the early institutional iterations of Turkic cooperation were largely symbolic and lacked operational dimensions. Meetings focused primarily on identity consideration, cultural exchange, and rhetorical expressions of solidarity, producing limited tangible outcomes. Özdemir argues that this symbolic orientation constrained the organization's relevance, particularly as Central Asian states prioritized sovereignty reinforcing and external balancing over deep regional incorporation. As a result, the early Turkic institutional framework remained peripheral to core political and economic decision-making processes (Özdemir, 2022).

The reinvigoration of the OTS in the late 2010s marked a qualitative shift toward functional growth and strategic relevance. This change was not driven solely by Turkiye but arose from converging interests among member states facing increasing geopolitical uncertainty and economic volatility. Guliyev notes that disruptions to global supply chains, growing competition among external powers, and weakening confidence in existing regional arrangements created demand for possibilities in coordination mechanisms that could increase determination without forcing rigid obligations (Guliyev, 2023).

Officially, the OTS has its agenda to encompass economic collaboration, transportation policy, customs coordination, and connectivity governance. These working areas collaborating closely with Türkiye's broader strategic priorities in particular to its focus on the Middle Corridor and transregional integration . By ingraining connectivity objectives within a multilateral framework, Turkiye has been able to legalize its ambitions while reducing perceptions of unilateralism or dominance. This institutional integration enhances both the sustainability and political acceptability of Turkiye's regional involvement (Özdemir, 2022).

The OTS also provides a stage for political consultation and agenda-setting, empowering member states to collaborate positions on regional and international issues without formal policy co-existence. This flexible structure reflects a practical understanding of regional diversity and political dealings. Guliyev emphasizes that the organization's strength lies in its adaptability, allowing states to participate selectively while preserving multi-vector foreign policies and bypassing zero-sum alignments with major powers (Guliyev, 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, the expansion of the OTS positions with functionalist and neo-regionalist strategy that conceptualize institutions as incremental and problem-driven rather than ideologically hard. Rather than pursuing complete integration, the OTS prefer sector-specific collaboration where interests converge. Özdemir argues that this operational logic boosts institutional durability by grounding cooperation in practical benefits rather than abstract identity claims, thereby enhancing the organization's long-term relevance (Özdemir, 2022).

However, the institutional capacity of the OTS remains restricted by structural and political limitations. Diverse economic profiles, varying levels of political commitment, and asymmetrical relationships with external powers complicate efforts to deepen cooperation. Guliyev showcases that while member states help the organisation general objectives, they remain careful about transferring authority or accepting binding commitments that could restrict strategic autonomy (Guliyev, 2023).

Turkiye's leadership role within the OTS is therefore best understood as agenda-setting rather than directive. Ankara has played a key role in expanding the organization's functional scope and maintaining momentum, but it lacks the capacity to impose outcomes unilaterally. This leadership style reflects both necessity and strategic choice, enabling Turkiye to shape regional norms while respecting the sovereignty sensitivities of its partners. Such an approach has proven effective in sustaining participation and

avoiding institutional stagnation (Özdemir, 2022).

At the same time, the OTS provides Turkiye with an important mechanism for converting bilateral initiatives into multilateral norms. Projects connected to transport, economic cooperation, and digital connectivity gain supplemental legitimacy when connecting under the organization's umbrella. Guliyev notes that this multilateralization process improves Turkiye's influence by diffusing influence and decreasing perceptions of asymmetric dependence among smaller member states (Guliyev, 2023).

Despite its increasing agenda, the OTS should not be overstated as a fully unified regional bloc. Its institutional depth continues to be shallow compared to organizations such as the European Union or even the Eurasian Economic Union. Özdemir warns that expectations of rapid institutional integration risk misinterpreting the organization's purpose, which is better considered as a coordination platform than as a means for supranational governance (Özdemir, 2022).

The strategic importance of the OTS remains in formal authority than in its capacity to normalize cooperation among Turkic states across multiple sectors. By fostering routine interaction and shared frameworks, the organization contributes to incremental arrangement without demanding exclusivity. Guliyev argues that this incrementalism is particularly well suited to regions characterized by geopolitical competition and uncertainty, where rigid institutional arrangements are often politically untenable (Guliyev, 2023).

In analytical terms, the OTS indicates an institutional expression of Turkiye's broader middle-power strategy in Central Asia. It allows Ankara to expand its initiatives, distribute costs, and embed its priorities within a collective framework, thereby increasing resilience against external pressure. Özdemir highlights that this form of institutional leadership reflects a change from identity-driven symbolism toward interest-based collaboration grounded in functional outcomes (Özdemir, 2022).

The Organisation of Turkic States incorporates a critical, though limited, pillar of Turkiye's regional involvement strategy. Its evolution from symbolic cooperation to functional institutionalization displays Ankara's attempt to establish a durable framework for regional influence under conditions of geopolitical instability. While constrained by structural asymmetries and member-state caution, the OTS benefits Turkiye's strategic reach by providing a flexible, legitimizing, and adaptive platform for cooperation in Central Asia and beyond (Guliyev, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Turkiye's involvement with Central Asia has experienced a substantial transformation since the early post-Soviet period. What began in the 1990s mainly as a culturally driven outreach embedded in pan-Turkic identity and soft-power diplomacy has slowly transformed into a multidimensional strategy incorporating connectivity, economic statecraft, security cooperation, and institutional regionalism. This transformation displays both the maturation of Turkiye's foreign-policy ambitions and the changing geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. Central Asia, once got in relations largely through the context of cultural affinity, is now increasingly seen by Ankara as a strategic region in which economic corridors, energy partnerships, defense cooperation, and institutional leadership can overall enhance Turkiye's geopolitical significance.

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that Turkiye's contemporary approach to Central Asia is best understood through the framework of middle-power behaviour. Inadequately, the overwhelming economic resources of China or the entrenched security dominance of Russia, Turkiye has chosen a strategy that depends on niche capabilities, connectivity diplomacy, and institutional entrepreneurship. By emphasizing areas where it can provide practical benefits—such as logistics networks, military training, defense technology, and multilateral coordination—Turkiye seeks to expand its influence without directly challenging existing great-power structures. This pragmatic approach has permitted Ankara to gradually grow its presence in the region while avoiding confrontation with the geopolitical competition of the bigger powers in the region.

Connectivity diplomacy, especially through the development of the Trans-Caspian East–West Middle Corridor, comprises of one of the most visible fundamentals of Turkiye's regional strategy. The corridor extends Central Asian states with an alternative route linking them to European and global markets while decreasing reliance on northern routes dominated by Russia. At the same time, it aligns with Turkiye's broader interests to become a central part of Eurasian trade networks. By integrating in transportation infrastructure with customs harmonization, digital connectivity, and logistics governance, Ankara has positioned itself structurally within growing transregional supply chains. Although financial limitations and coordination challenges continue to limit the corridor's full realization, its strategic im-

portance exists in providing diversification options to Central Asian states and reinforcing Turkiye's role as a gateway between Asia and Europe.

Energy diplomacy similarly pushes Turkiye's involvement with the region. Central Asia's hydrocarbon resources present prospects for expanding supply routes and boosting Turkiye's aspiration to function as a regional energy hub. Cooperation with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, often is established in partnership with Azerbaijan, shows how energy projects can simultaneously function for economic and geopolitical objectives. Through ambitions related to natural gas transportation, electricity interconnections, and potential renewable-energy collaboration, Turkiye has desired to promote long-term strategic interdependence with Central Asian partners. However , structural barriers—such as the dominance of prevailing Russian infrastructure and the scale of Chinese investment—restrict the extent to which energy cooperation alone can change regional power dynamics. Rather than serving as a singular driver of influence, energy diplomacy operates as an additional pillar within Turkiye's broader multidimensional strategy.

Security and defense cooperation showcase another domain where Turkiye has increased its regional profile. While historically supplementary to Central Asian security structures, Ankara has slowly itself as a flexible partner qualified for providing military training, defense-industrial cooperation, and counterterrorism expertise. This kind of relations attracts Central Asian states seeking to broaden their security partnerships while maintaining strategic autonomy. Turkiye's focus on capacity-building, professionalization, and affordable defense technologies—rather than permanent military presence—has permitted it to enhance regional cooperation without directly confronting existing security institutions such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Consequently, Turkiye provides to the pluralization of the regional security environment, providing alternatives that compliments Central Asian states' multi-vector foreign policies.

Institutional regionalism further solidifies Turkiye's evolving role in Central Asia. The changes in the Organisation of Turkic States from a largely symbolic cultural forum into a platform for practical cooperation demonstrate Ankara's efforts to regulate its regional engagement. Through ambitions directing transportation, economic coordination, digital connectivity, and political consultation, the organisation provides a multilateral framework that legalizes Turkiye's initiatives while encouraging broader regional participation. Significantly, the OTS works according to a flexible model of cooperation that respects member states' sovereignty and avoids binding commitments. This adjustability enables Central Asian countries to take part without jeopardising their relationships with other major powers, thereby reinforcing the organisation's significance within a complex geopolitical environment.

Despite these developments, Turkiye's influence in Central Asia is contained by structural realities. Russia continues to manage significant military, political, and cultural influence, while China's economic presence—specifically through the Belt and Road Initiative—far exceeds that of any other external actor. Additionally, Central Asian governments remain devoted to multi-vector foreign policies to balance relations among competing powers. These dynamics limit the possibility of any single external actor, including Turkiye, establishing dominant influence over the region. Therefore, Turkiye's role is fundamentally supplementary rather than hegemonic, operating within a global environment defined by great-power competition and regional strategic caution.

Another significant aspect of this study concerns the evolving role of shared Turkic identity in defining regional cooperation. While cultural and linguistic ties continue to facilitate diplomatic engagement and societal exchange, they no longer function as the primary basis for geopolitical alignment. Instead, identity functions as a supporting factor that increases trust and lowers political constraints when integrating with tangible economic, security, and institutional incentives. Turkiye's recent accomplishments in Central Asia therefore stem less from symbolic appeals to common heritage and more from its ability to provide practical opportunities for cooperation in infrastructure development, defense modernization, and economic connectivity. This growth emphasises the broader transition of Turkiye's foreign policy from identity-based outreach toward interest-driven strategic manoeuvring

From a theoretical point of view , the case of Turkiye in Central Asia showcases how middle powers can change regional dynamics through network-building and institutional involvement rather than through traditional power projection. By connecting economic corridors, energy diplomacy, defense cooperation, and institutional leadership, Turkiye has adopted a multifaceted approach that

connects various instruments of influence. This strategy allows Ankara to grow its presence gradually while maintaining impartiality in a region characterized by geopolitical ambiguity and contesting with external interests.

In future, the practicality of Turkiye's regional integration will depend on different factors. Continued progress in developments in the Middle Corridor and related infrastructure projects will be critical and important for translating connectivity ambitions into tangible economic outcomes. Similarly, the success of the Organisation of Turkic States in providing practical cooperation will decide whether institutional regionalism can transform beyond symbolic coordination. Finally, the broader geopolitical environment—involving the trajectory of Russia-West relations, China's economic strategy in Eurasia, and the stability of Afghanistan—will importantly influence the opportunities and constraints facing Turkiye's regional policy.

In conclusion, Turkiye's evolving relations with Central Asia demonstrates a broader transition in its foreign-policy orientation toward strategic autonomy, regional connectivity, and institutional leadership. While structural restrictions prevent Ankara from substituting the dominant roles of Russia or China, Turkiye has nonetheless emerged as an important and increasingly influential middle-power actor in the region. By combining connectivity diplomacy, economic statecraft, security cooperation, and multilateral institutional initiatives, Turkiye provides diversity to Central Asia's external partnerships and the gradual pluralization of Eurasian geopolitics. This multidimensional involvement in all the above-mentioned spheres underscores the progressive significance of flexible, network-based strategies in developing regional order within a growing, complicated, and multipolar international system.

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РАСШИРЕНИЕ ИНТЕРЕСОВ ТУРЦИИ В СТРАНАХ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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РЕЗЮМЕ

В данной статье рассматривается трансформация стратегического и экономического взаимодействия Турции со странами Центральной Азии с 2018 года. Утверждается, что Анкара перешла от преимущественно культурного и языкового взаимодействия к комплексному стратегическому и экономическому инструментарию, объединяющему инфраструктурную дипломатию (Средний коридор), целевые энергетические партнёрства, торговые и инвестиционные инициативы, сотрудничество в сфере безопасности и развитие многосторонних институтов (Организация тюркских государств).

В исследовании оценивается, представляет ли подход Турции целостный и последовательный проект по укреплению регионального влияния или же он остаётся оппортунистическим и ориентированным на взаимодействие с отдельными государствами. Статья вносит вклад в научные дискуссии о конкуренции великих держав в Евразии, выявляя взаимосвязи между экономической взаимосвязанностью и сближением в сфере безопасности, а также проверяя гипотезы об эффективности общей тюркской идентичности как мобилизующего фактора для формирования долгосрочных геополитических партнёрств.

Ключевые слова: *Средний коридор, Организация Договора о коллективной безопасности (ОДКБ), Организация тюркских государств (ОТГ), Центральная Азия, Южный Кавказ.*

TÜRKİYƏNİN MƏRKƏZİ ASİYA ÖLKƏLƏRİNDƏ GENİŞLƏNƏN MARAQLARI

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XÜLASƏ

Bu məqalədə 2018-ci ildən etibarən Türkiyənin Mərkəzi Asiya ilə strateji və iqtisadi əlaqələrinin transformasiyası araşdırılır. Məqalədə Ankaranın əsasən mədəni və dil əsaslı əməkdaşlıqdan infrastruktur diplomatiyasını (Orta Dəhliz), məqsədyönlü enerji tərəfdaşlıqlarını, ticarət və investisiya təşəbbüslərini, təhlükəsizlik sahəsində əməkdaşlığı və çoxtərəfli institusional quruculuğu (Türk Dövlətləri Təşkilatı) birləşdirən kompleks strateji-iqtisadi yanaşmaya keçdiyi irəli sürülür. Tədqiqat Türkiyənin yanaşmasının regionda təsir imkanlarını genişləndirməyə yönəlmiş ardıcıl və sistemli bir layihə olub-olmadığını, yaxud fürsətçi və ayrı-ayrı dövlətlərə əsaslanan siyasət olaraq qaldığını qiymətləndirir. Məqalə iqtisadi bağlantılar ilə təhlükəsizlik sahəsində yaxınlaşma arasındakı əlaqələri müəyyənləşdirməklə Avrasiyada böyük güclər arasında rəqabətə dair elmi müzakirələrə töhfə verir. Eyni zamanda, ortaq türk kimliyinin davamlı geosiyasi tərəfdaşlıqların formalaşdırılmasında səfərbəredici amil kimi effektivliyinə dair hipotezləri təhlil edir.

Açar sözlər: *Orta Dəhliz, KTMT, TDT, Mərkəzi Asiya, Cənubi Qafqaz.*

Rəyçi: Tarix elmləri doktoru, professor
Nərgiz Axundova

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