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# Turkey's Role as a Regional Actor in Central Asia: An Assessment

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# Turkey's Role as a Regional Actor in Central Asia: An Assessment

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## Introduction

Central Asia's geostrategic location at the crossroads of East and West has shaped substantial geopolitical rivalries in the region. Even though the region is within Russia's sphere of influence, China has made significant advances in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union due to the Central Asian republics' multi-vector foreign policy. Turkey has a considerable interest in this geopolitically crucial region for two primary reasons. First, Ankara has ethnic links with the region's Turkish-speaking countries, and second, Central Asia's energy resources and strategic location is vital to Turkey's geopolitical objectives. Ankara's recently redefined Eurasian strategy is also partially motivated by its growing dissatisfaction with the West and an aspiration to strengthen ties with Russia and China.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Turkey's relations with Central Asian countries have also been scrutinised, notably the rough course they took following a brief period of benevolence in the early 1990s.

Several factors hampered the relationships between Turkey and Central Asia following the Soviet disintegration. On the one hand, in comparison to the major players, Turkey's limited resources and a series of political, economic, and financial crises during the 1990s hindered its aspiration to connect with the region. Moreover, certain Turkish politicians and political organisations' patronising views irritated Central Asian leaders.<sup>2</sup> As

a result, the Central Asian political elites viewed the Turkish objectives with mistrust. They were wary of the Turkish form of administration, which is marked by an intense political fight between political parties representing often radically opposed viewpoints. However, these notions leave out nation-building processes that have significantly impacted Turkey's ties with Central Asian countries.<sup>3</sup>

Despite a considerable time of obliviousness, Turkey has risen to a comfortable position in Central Asia's political and economic landscape in recent years. Ankara's support for Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia has also been useful for its Central Asian policy. With Azerbaijan's victory in the war and the strengthening of Ankara-Baku ties, Turkey hopes to use Azerbaijan's geopolitical location as a catapult to reach out to Eurasia.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that China and Russia continue to be major actors in the region, Turkey might use its substantial cultural power to its advantage, aided by Central Asian countries' desire to diversify their foreign policy away from Moscow and Beijing. Against this backdrop, this brief will attempt to emphasize the methods and techniques that have aided Turkey's steps forward as a growing regional power in Central Asia.

## **Turkey-Central Asia Relations in the Post-Soviet Period: An Overview**

Turkey's relations with Central Asia were strained during the Soviet Union because the two regions belonged to opposing ideological camps: Turkey supported capitalism, while Central Asian republics backed the socialist ideology of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> However, the five Central Asian countries gained independence in 1991 and crafted their foreign policy. The Turkish government was the first to acknowledge these newly independent republics, which paved the way for collaboration and restoration of historical, linguistic, and cultural ties.<sup>6</sup>

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ties between Turkey and Central Asia may be divided into three significant phases. The Turkish government's aspiration to rebuild ties with Turkic-speaking Central Asian countries and Tajikistan (the only Persian-speaking Central Asian nation) dominated the first stage. Ankara's narrative at the time was centered on Turkic Unity and pan-Turkic identity. Based on this rationale, Turkey claimed the right to support Central Asian countries in their transition to a market economy and democracy. With the possibility of EU membership looming in the background, Turkey was confident in its capacity to bring Central Asian governments to an advanced level of development.

Consequently, the Turkish merchants flocked to Central Asia to enhance trade and commercial activities with these countries. However, they were met with a passive welcome by local governments and populations, who repudiated to be treated as a subordinate and needed to seek direction from the Turkish government. In the mid-1990s,

the Karimov administration summoned most of the students who had been sent to Turkey for education back to Uzbekistan, believing that these students had been recruited by the Uzbek opposition led by Mohammed Salih in Turkey.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the first phase ended around the year 2000, with Central Asian republics pursuing autonomous foreign policies rather than following a shared path with Turkey based on a pan-Turkic identity.<sup>8</sup>

The second stage, which activated around the year 2000, demonstrated the Turkish government's more realistic attitude towards Central Asia. Rather than setting up major regional conventions, Ankara preferred to engage through bilateral relationships and invest in specific economic sectors of these countries. It did not sit well with Moscow since it was seen as a threat to Russian interests.

In the third period, following its rapprochement with Russia in 2016, Turkey cooperated with Central Asian states within a much larger and regional framework of Russia-China cooperation. Previously, Ankara had strained relations with both Russia and China as a result of its growing engagement in Central Asia and its advocacy of the Uyghur issue. However, due to the agreement reached with these two main powers, Ankara has emerged as a quiet but vital partner in Central Asia.<sup>9</sup>

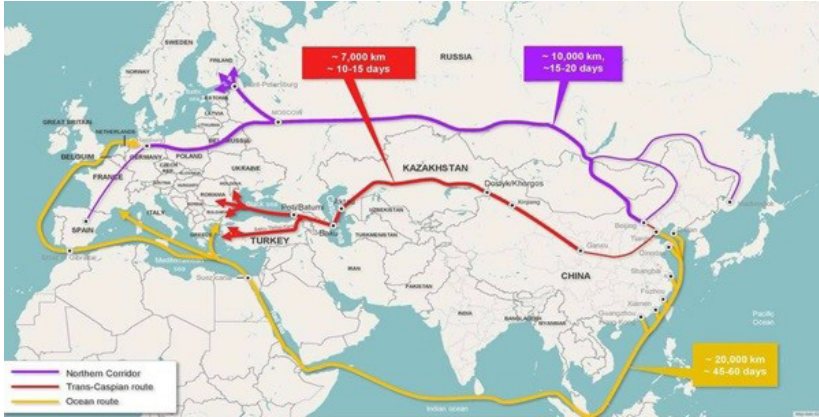
## **Significance of Connectivity and Energy Transportation**

Turkey has become one of the important economic partners in Central Asia due to its connectivity initiatives. Ankara was considered a viable alternative to Central Asia's transportation dependence on Russia. Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been working on its own Silk Road project to connect with former Soviet markets. However, issues such as a lack of intra-regional cooperation, Turkey's own limited economic potential, and inadequacies in the region's transportation infrastructure have made it difficult for Ankara to expand its cooperation with these nations.<sup>10</sup> Ankara and Georgia share a 114-kilometer border, providing the most dependable land connection from Turkey to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. Turkey's eastward connectivity expansion ambitions included Georgia as an influence multiplier. Georgia and Azerbaijan, as previously stated, serve as a launching pad for Turkey's access to the Central Asian republics.<sup>11</sup>

Ankara recently announced the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), popularly known as the 'Middle Corridor,' as a new Silk Road plan with an expectation to improve its link with the Southern Caucasus, Central Asia, and East Asia.<sup>12</sup> The TITR is a multilateral institutional development that connects the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the European Union's containerized rail freight transport networks via the economies of Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey, and Eastern Europe. The multilateral, multimodal transport institution connects rail networks in the PRC, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Poland to Caspian and Black Sea

ferry terminals. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Middle Corridor’s development is institutionally autonomous and has the capacity to reshape the economies of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure. 1 The Trans Caspian International Transport Route (TITR or Middle Corridor)**



Source: <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/caspian02.jpg>

The Middle Corridor is also intended to function in conjunction with Beijing’s One Belt, One Road initiative (OBOR). At the G20 conference in Antalya in November 2015, Ankara and Beijing signed a Memorandum of Understanding on integrating the OBOR and the Middle Corridor.<sup>14</sup> Consecutively, China renewed its currency exchange deal with Turkey in 2019; giving Ankara an additional 1 billion USD cash transfer. Furthermore, compared to the previous year, the number of Chinese containers transported across the Caspian Sea via the Trans-Caspian Corridor surged by 111 percent in 2019. The first freight train transporting merchandise from Turkey to China through the Trans-Caspian Corridor concluded its historic journey on December 19, 2020.

Turkey’s reasoning for realising the Middle Corridor is geographical and considerable progress has been made with regard to this connectivity project. In 2017, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan received Turkish President Erdogan and then-Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili to inaugurate the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway, which connects the Caspian Sea port of Alat with the eastern Turkish city of Kars. For the first time, trains were dispatched from Turkey to China and returned utilising the BTK railway line in late 2020.<sup>15</sup>

Figure. 2 Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) Railway



Source: <https://10.wp.com/www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/BTK-Rail.jpg?w=645&quality=90&strip=all&ssl=1>

These ambitious transport initiatives paved the way for better connectivity in the post-Soviet states of the South Caucasus and the landlocked Central Asian republics. The BTK railway line might also connect Central Asia to European markets. Given the significance of this project, most Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, have indicated a desire to connect with it.<sup>16</sup> The stated objective behind the development of the port at Alat (Azerbaijan), one of the major ports in the Caspian Sea, reflects the goal of developing ties with Central Asia.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the revival of the Lapis Lazuli transport corridor that connects Afghanistan with Turkey passing through Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, will be another branch of the Middle corridor. This project will economically support Afghanistan and promote peace via trade.<sup>18</sup>

Turkey's outreach to Central Asia is also influenced by its energy need. Despite Ankara's announcement of huge gas discoveries in the Black Sea in 2020, the country remains heavily reliant on external energy supply. Finding new energy sources and ensuring that neither Russia nor Iran has a monopoly on energy transit corridors is thus a crucial strategic priority for Turkey. Pipeline connections are used to supplement railway networks. Turkey's broader intention to establish itself as an energy transit hub is congruent with its desire to reach out to Central Asian countries. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which opened in July 2006, transports Azerbaijani oil from the Caspian Sea as well as oil from other nations in the region, including Russia and Kazakhstan. As of the end of 2020, 3.5 billion barrels of crude oil have been delivered to global markets from the marine terminal in the Ceyhan district of Adana province in southern Turkey, the last



endpoint of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline.<sup>19</sup> During the pipeline’s nearly 15-year duration, 4,659 tankers have passed through the Haydar Aliyev Marine Terminal. In 2019, the terminal carried 233.1 million barrels of crude oil. In 2020, that amount reached 278.2 million barrels.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 3- Operational and Proposed Oil and Gas Pipelines from Caspian to Europe**



Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Oemer-Esen/publication/301679045/figure/fig2/AS:386356535676929@1469125984110/Existing-and-planned-oil-and-natural-gas-pipelines-to-Europe.png>

Furthermore, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline, and the South Caucasus Pipeline all can transport gas across the Caspian Sea to Europe. The Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) is another planned pipeline that would transfer natural gas from Turkmenistan and a little quantity from Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan via an underwater pipeline in the Caspian seabed.<sup>21</sup> Turkmen gas exports will be linked with Turkey’s Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, eventually reaching Europe from Baku, Azerbaijan, via Georgia. This pipeline is being designed to avoid two Caspian Sea littoral states: Russia and Iran. Turkmenistan has accepted Turkey’s offer to connect the TCGP to the Trans Anatolian Pipeline. Despite receiving backing from the US and the West, the TGCP remains a proposal. Russia and Iran, which are both negatively affected by the TCGP, may find ways to unsettle this project.<sup>22</sup>

### **Azerbaijan: Turkey’s Springboard to Central Asia**

The Second Karabakh War has boosted Turkey’s interests in establishing ties with Central Asia. The fact that Baku was Ankara’s major gas supplier in 2019–2020 may justify Turkey’s assistance to Azerbaijan in this war. Furthermore, the Turkish President regards

Azerbaijan's geography as critical in enabling access to Central Asia. Therefore, Turkey struck a new commercial agreement with Azerbaijan just two months after the November ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Ankara also granted the status of the most favoured nation (MFN) to Azerbaijan. Baku responded by endowing a series of contracts to Turkish firms, including developing the lottery system, operation of three major mines, and construction of new Central Bank headquarters and roads in military conflict areas.<sup>23</sup>

Ankara has long faced an economic obstacle as a result of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. With Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War, a wider opening of the Caucasus also opens the door to Central Asia, which contains substantially more energy than Azerbaijan. Turkmenistan, which has the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves, is particularly appealing to Turkey in this respect. Turkmenistan now sells the great bulk of its natural gas to China, with substantial ability to export increasing quantities of its energy resources westward to Turkey and Europe.<sup>24</sup> However, the dispute between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan regarding sharing resources of the Caspian Sea has impeded the prospects of Turkmen gas export to Europe via Turkey. Nevertheless, with the signing of the 'Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea' in 2018, the littoral states agreed to create a formula for allocating their resources and forbid foreign nations from establishing a military presence there.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, in January 2021, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan signed an agreement to jointly develop the Dostluk (Friendship) gas-field under the Caspian Sea.

Turkey views its interest in the January agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu recently emphasised Ankara's willingness to joint hydrocarbon exploration and development with the two nations, saying that trilateral talks and summits would be conducted soon. As a result, on February 23, 2021, Turkey had a trilateral meeting with the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. The progress around Dostluk might eliminate a major stumbling obstacle to the much-touted Trans-Caspian Pipeline, which would allow gas to flow from the South Caucasus to Europe.<sup>26</sup>

The Nakhchivan corridor was also reopened as a result of the ceasefire between Baku and Yerevan. According to the peace deal signed on November 10, 2020, this corridor will connect the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan to mainland Azerbaijan via Armenia. This would offer Turkey a direct route to the Caspian Sea.<sup>27</sup> Also, the reviving of the Nakhchivan corridor promises to revamp the region's transportation map. Armenia will get a railway link to Russia via Azerbaijan, which will, in turn, be linked to Turkey via Armenia, and so Russia and Turkey will finally be connected by train. However, the Nakhchivan corridor will harm Georgia and Iran, which have benefited as important regional transit countries for years.<sup>28</sup>

## Turkey-Central Asia Economic Relations

Turkey's economic footprint in the region is still limited. China and Russia overshadow its commercial capabilities; with the exception of Turkmenistan, none of the regional countries consider Turkey to be a top trading partner. Nevertheless, Turkey's exports to the region grew significantly (Table 1). Its exports to Kazakhstan increased from 62.5 million USD in 2000 to 2156.2 million USD in 2020. For the same period, Turkey's export to Kyrgyzstan grew from 7 million USD to 75 million USD, while Tajikistan's imports from Turkey increased from 58.4 USD million to 198 USD million. In 2020, Turkmenistan imported products worth 301 USD million, while its 2000 indicator was low and amounted to 186 USD million. Turkey's exports to Uzbekistan grew from 306 USD million in 2000 to 985 USD million in 2020. According to the data below, Uzbekistan was the largest exporter to Turkey in 2020, followed by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Turkey's exports to Central Asia range from textiles to industrial items and machinery, while imports from Central Asia consist of hydrocarbons, metals, and agricultural.

**Table 1. Turkey-Central Asia Trade 2020 (in USD million)**

Year	2000			2010			2020		
	Export	Import	Total Trade	Export	Import	Total Trade	Export	Import	Total Trade
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	62.3	144.0	206.3	1236.8	618.7	1855.5	2156.2	880.9	3,037.1
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	7	27	34	37	85	122	75	195	270
<b>Tajikistan</b>	58.4	4	62.4	377	60	437	198	92	290
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	186	253	439	364	1,208	1,572	301	834	1,135
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	306	232	538	615	652	1,267	985	1073	2,058

Source: Data availed from ADB and compiled by Author

Nonetheless, Turkey seeks to establish an economic and cultural foundation for cooperation by 2026–2028, which includes establishing a common market for commodities, investment, labour, and services. Ankara has resurrected a regional trade agreement during a virtual conference of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) on March 4, 2021. This organisation was established in 1985 to boost trade between Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. While its efficacy has been limited, the timing of its re-emergence is significant since it corresponds to Ankara's wider eastward movement.<sup>29</sup>

## Security Cooperation

Russia continues to be the region's primary supplier of military weaponry. Turkey, China, and Israel are among the other significant military equipment suppliers to the region. Turkey is one of the biggest arms suppliers to Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, whereas China exports to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.<sup>30</sup> Drones from Turkey were crucial in Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh battle. Since then, there has been a surge in demand for Turkish drones worldwide. Since the second Karabakh war, central Asian countries have also shown a strong interest in Turkish military technology, particularly its combat drones. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan reportedly intend to buy Bayraktar TB3 drones, while Turkmenistan displayed its TB2 drones in a military parade in September 2021. Given Russia's long-term military dominance, Turkey's NATO membership, and the escalating intra-regional rivalries that drive weapon purchase, Turkish participation in the Central Asian weapons market is pivotal.<sup>31</sup>

Turkey's outreach to Central Asia has strengthened due to official visits from both sides. Turkish Foreign minister, Cavusoglu visited Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan in March 2021. In response to a query about defence cooperation, Cavusoglu stated that Uzbekistan is interested in Turkish defence items and collaborates with many Turkish enterprises. With Turkish-made armament making headlines during the Second Karabakh War, its transfer to Central Asian republics appears to be a viable option. According to reports, Uzbek officials were particularly interested in Turkish weapons. Cavusoglu also stated that Ankara was negotiating with Uzbekistan on a preferential trade agreement and a free trade agreement. Other topics considered were energy, trade, and transportation.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, security cooperation extends beyond the arms trade, with joint drills and pledges from all four Turkic countries in the region pledging to increase military cooperation.<sup>33</sup> Following the demonstration of Kyrgyzstan's defence inadequacy during the spring 2021 border conflict with Tajikistan, Bishkek – a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) turned to Ankara for regular military-technical assistance to help modernise the Kyrgyz armed forces and enhance their defence capabilities.<sup>34</sup> Increased military and security cooperation between Turkey and Central Asia will be challenging for Russian interests in the long run and prompt sharp reactions from Moscow.

## Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

SCO is a Eurasian regional organization that was established in 2001 with Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as its founding members. The Shanghai Five mechanism was a predecessor to SCO.<sup>35</sup> India and Pakistan were granted

membership in 2017, while Iran became a full member of SCO in 2021<sup>36</sup>. At the 2008 Dushanbe Summit, a new mechanism known as “the Status of Dialogue Partner of the SCO” was created with the goal of institutionalising interactions with third nations and international organisations that do not have observer status but want to communicate with the Organization. The Dialogue Partnership status allows third nations who do not have observer status to work with the Organization on a limited basis in specific areas. In terms of institutional relations with the Organization, this position lies between search participants and observer status.<sup>37</sup>

Turkey requested the Status of Dialogue Partnership in the Organization on March 23, 2011. Turkey’s application to become a Dialogue Partner was granted at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s (SCO) Summit of Heads of State held in Beijing, China, on June 6-7, 2012. On April 26, 2013, in Almaty, a Memorandum outlining cooperation arrangements between Turkey as a Dialogue Partner and the SCO was signed.<sup>38</sup> In the Official Journal, the adoption of the Cabinet of Ministers Decision of May 1, 2017, completed the ratification procedure for the mechanism mentioned above. The Dialogue Partnership aims to increase Turkey-SCO collaboration in various areas, primarily regional security, counter-terrorism, drug trafficking, and organised crime prevention.<sup>39</sup>

## **Cultural Influence**

During the Soviet period, the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic phenomena of central Asia’s Turkic populations were overshadowed by the communist ideology. Therefore, Turkey’s soft power policy concerning this region has been centered on reviving those aspects. Ankara seems to succeed in boosting its soft power, notably through funding Turkish schools in the region. To support its expanding cooperation and interaction with Central Asia, Ankara established multiple mechanisms of cooperation in diverse fields. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) was established in 1992 to revive the cultural links between the two regions. Another tool of Turkish cultural projection was the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) which was established in 1993 to ensure the safeguarding of shared cultural heritage.

Culture has also been a subject of deliberation during the Heads of State Summits of the ‘Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States’ (Turkic Council) held regularly since 1992. Surprisingly, Turkish is the official language of the Turkic Council, yet Russian has been the lingua franca during such meetings. The Turkic Council’s Eighth Summit was held in Istanbul, Turkey, in November 2021. During the Summit, the Turkic Council was renamed the ‘Organization of Turkic States’. Also, Turkmenistan has become an observer in this organisation, which is a significant achievement. Turkmenistan maintains a policy of neutrality and avoids membership in any regional organisation. So, Ashgabat’s admission to the Turkic Council as an observer is crucial for Central Asian regional cooperation and

achievement for Turkey's Central Asia policy.<sup>40</sup>

## Challenges

Despite its efforts to re-engage with the region, Ankara encounters significant challenges. Relationships with China are critical in this context. Despite Beijing's repeated attempts to strengthen links with Turkey, including investments in industry, energy, transportation, and telecommunications, substantial agreements have yet to be reached. Moreover, Chinese efforts to modernise Turkey's train network have halted. Ankara is hesitant to offer large contracts to Chinese companies because Turkey sees China as a rival. Turkey has increased customs taxes and import limits in the previous three years, affecting China more than any other country. However, relations with Beijing are important because they are linked to Ankara's efforts to improve transportation and commercial ties with Central Asia, China's economic powerhouse.

While China and Russia remain big players in the region, Turkey has tremendous cultural clout and might take advantage of Central Asian republics' desire to diversify their international relations away from Moscow and Beijing. Dependence on either power has generated problems for these countries at times. Furthermore, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan require funds, focusing on Turkey's potential for economic growth.

Another interesting element of Turkey's policy for the Caspian Basin and Central Asia is how well it aligns with the Western approach to Russia and the two regions. This opens up the possibility for Turkey and the West to cooperate. Both want to get gas and overcome Central Asia being landlocked to reduce the region's dependence on Russian and Chinese infrastructure. Therefore, Turkey and the West share similar geopolitical goals, if not identical. However, Central Asia's relations with Russia and China are more strategic than Turkey or the West at the moment. Against this backdrop, envisioning a strong collaboration between the West and Turkey in Central Asia seems a long way off.

The Turkish Lira lost 44 percent of its value against the dollar in 2021, making it the worst performer in emerging markets in the last several years. The second currency crisis since 2018 has severely damaged the savings and earnings of Turkish citizens, while record volatility has thrown domestic and company budgets and future plans into disarray. The recorded decline in the Turkish economy and a depreciation of the Turkish Lira has presented another challenge in Turkey's economic capabilities to invest in Central Asia.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, Turkey's power projection into Central Asia will continue to be overshadowed by Chinese and Russian efforts. Nevertheless, Ankara's moves signal a more robust Turkish policy towards the region that has been lacking until recently. Anchoring its approach to Central Asia on Azerbaijan will be critical, as the country's geographic position could allow Turkey to push eastward across the Caspian.

## **Conclusion**

Ankara successfully proclaimed the Organization of Turkic States as the successor of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in November 2021. The Turkic Council's seventh Summit, which initiated this organizational transformation from an informal cultural association to a political and economic entity, resulted in the new name. The Turkic Council's upgrading was yet another proof of Turkey's increasing involvement in Central Asia, which has grabbed the attention of leaders of Central Asia. The single most important long-term factor pulling Turkey and the region's nations closer together is Turkey's drive for increased strategic autonomy and the Central Asian states' preference for a multi-vector foreign strategy that would enable them to oppose any single power's dominance. Despite Ankara's lack of economic strength and foreign policy overstretch; the sky is not the limit for Turkey's growth. Furthermore, while Turkey and the Turkic republics of the Central Asian region frequently discuss bilateral ties based on shared ethnic and cultural history, Turkey remains one of the significant options among many as the Central Asian countries seek to diversify their foreign policy options.

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