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THE RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND CENTRAL ASIA: THE COEXISTENCE OF STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

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Abstract. *Introduction.* Turkey has become an integral part of Central Asia's foreign relations. The article examines the characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of Turkey's relations with Central Asia across three dimensions: historical and cultural ties, bilateral political and economic relations, and multilateral cooperation. *Methods.* The research is based on the use of a mixed-method approach, including a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, integration of history and policy, and a merger of case studies and comparative analysis. *Materials.* The article is based on factual material extracted from the latest statistical data of international organizations and countries under study, the scientific publications of scholars, and media commentaries. Current studies on Turkish-Central Asia relations primarily focus on Pan-Turkism, the foreign policy of Turkey towards Central Asia, and the great power game in Central Asia, with less attention paid to the considerations and choices of the Central Asian countries themselves. *Analysis.* The historical and cultural connections, based on the Turkic factor, can be regarded as an important bond in Turkey's regional relations with Central Asia, laying the foundation for their educational cooperation. Influenced by political mutual trust, presidential transition, trade construction, etc., Turkey's political and economic relations with the Central Asian countries have obvious by-country characteristics. In trade and economic terms, links between Turkey and Central Asian countries have strengthened but remain at a low level. The Organization of Turkic States plays a prominent role in multilateral cooperation, making efforts in partnership building, the implementation of the Middle Corridor, the expansion of the organization, and language Latinization. *Results.* It is concluded that Central Asian countries have differences with Turkey over interests, which leads to the fact that Turkey has unique advantages in developing relations with Central Asian countries but also faces some bottlenecks. *Authors' contribution.* Yuyan Zhang conceptualized the research topic and elaborately designed the overall research framework and methodology. She also wrote the majority of the original draft, covering key sections such as the introduction, literature review, and results. Keyi Xiang collected, systematized, and analyzed statistical data of international organizations and countries under study during the research. *Funding.* The study was carried out within the framework of the National Social Science Foundation of China under Grant No. 23VXJ034 and the project research of the Gansu Provincial Department of Education 2024 Special Research Project on Curriculum and Teaching Materials for Primary and Secondary Schools and Universities under Grant No. GSJC-Z2024013.

Key words: Central Asia, Organization of Turkic States, pan-Turkism, Turkey, Turkic factor.

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ОТНОШЕНИЯ МЕЖДУ ТУРЦИЕЙ И ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИЕЙ: СОСУЩЕСТВОВАНИЕ ПРЕВОСХОДСТВА И СЛАБОСТИ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Одной из ключевых стран, на которую дипломатически ориентируются страны Центральной Азии, стала Турция. В статье рассматриваются особенности, превосходства и слабости в отношениях Турции с Центральной Азией по трем направлениям: культурно-исторические связи, двусторонние политико-экономические отношения и многостороннее сотрудничество. *Методы.* Исследование основано на использовании комплекса методов, включающего количественные и качественные методы, интеграцию истории и политики, а также объединение тематических исследований и сравнительного анализа. *Материалы.* Статья основана на фактическом материале, извлеченном из новейших статистических данных международных организаций и изучаемых стран, научных публикаций ученых и комментариев СМИ. В имеющихся исследованиях, посвященных турецко-центральноазиатским отношениям, основное внимание уделяется пантюркизму, внешней политике Турции в отношении Центральной Азии и игре великих держав в Центральной Азии, а соображениям и выбору самих центральноазиатских стран уделяется мало внимания. *Анализ.* Культурно-исторические связи, основанные на тюркском факторе, являются важным звеном в региональных отношениях Турции с Центральной Азией и служат основой для их сотрудничества в области образования. Политические и экономические отношения Турции со странами Центральной Азии имеют различные особенности под влиянием политического взаимного доверия, перехода президентской власти, торговых структур и т. д. Несмотря на укрепление экономических и торговых связей между Турцией и странами Центральной Азии, они по-прежнему остаются на относительно низком уровне. Организация тюркских государств играет выдающуюся роль в многостороннем сотрудничестве, а также прилагает много усилий для установления партнерства, реализации Среднего коридора, дальнейшего расширения Организации и латинизации алфавита. *Результаты.* Сделан вывод, что у стран Центральной Азии есть разногласия с Турцией по поводу интересов, что приводит к тому, что Турция имеет уникальные возможности для развития отношений со странами Центральной Азии, но при этом сталкивается с некоторыми узкими местами. *Вклад авторов.* Юйянь Чжан предложила идею и концепцию статьи и тщательно проработала общую структуру и методологию исследования. Она также написала большую часть первоначальной рукописи, охватывающей такие ключевые разделы, как введение, обзор литературы и результаты. Кэйи Сян в ходе исследования собрала, систематизировала и проанализировала статистические данные международных организаций и изучаемых стран. *Финансирование.* Исследование выполнено в рамках проекта Национального фонда социальных наук Китая по гранту № 23VXJ034 и специального исследовательского проекта Департамента образования провинции Ганьсу за 2024 г. по учебным программам и учебным материалам для начальных и средних школ и университетов по гранту № GSJC-Z2024013.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Организация тюркских государств, пантюркизм, Турция, тюркский фактор.

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Introduction. Recently, Turkey has intensified its collaboration with other Turkic-speaking countries on various issues in the Eurasian region, demonstrating its presence and role in Central Asia through institution-building, cultural cooperation, energy corridor construction, and economic and trade exchanges. Meanwhile, Central Asian countries have shown more pronounced adjustments in their internal and external policies, with the trend of “De-Russification” gaining momentum, especially under the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Consequently, Turkey has become an integral part of Central Asia’s foreign relations.

This paper aims to examine the characteristics of Turkey’s relations with Central Asia from both regional and country-specific perspectives. It explores the strengths and weaknesses of these relationships in terms of historical and cultural ties, economic and trade cooperation, and the status of collaboration within multilateral mechanisms.

Materials. Current studies on Turkish-Central Asia relations primarily focus on three perspectives. The first is Pan-Turkism, which highlights Turkey’s promotion of Pan-Turkism in the “Turkic World,” including Central Asian Turkic-speaking countries [6; 15; 17; 33].

Chinese scholars value the influence of Turkey's approaches on Xinjiang [16; 42]. Second, the "proactive and assertive" foreign policy stresses that Central Asia is an important experimental field for Turkey's geopolitical goals under the emotion of imperial nostalgia [25; 40; 46; 48]. Third, great power game theory underlies that Turkey draws on building a series of institutions, like the Organization of Turkic States, to form competitive and cooperative relationships with the U.S., Russia, Iran, China [5; 10; 14; 18; 23; 37], and so on.

As the situation in the struggle against separatism in Xinjiang evolves, it is noted that research on Turkish-Central Asia relations in Chinese academia exhibits some staged features. After the independence of the Central Asian states, Chinese scholars principally study the conditions, intentions, and impacts of Turkey's engagement in Central Asia through the utilization of "Pan-Islamism" and "Pan-Turkism." As the struggle against separatism in Xinjiang becomes increasingly severe, some scholars have begun researching how to construct anti-separatism theory to reinforce counter-separatism and counter-infiltration efforts in the ideological field and to deconstruct "Pan-Islamism" and "Pan-Turkism" thoughts, which involve the relations between Turkey and the Central Asian states [22; 52]. Recently, as the world has entered a new period of turbulence and transformation, the United States is continuously trying to contain China by playing the Xinjiang card, so Chinese scholars are increasingly focusing on analyzing Turkey's policy in Central Asia from the perspective of major power rivalry [45; 50].

Scholars' interpretations of the relationship between Turkey and the Central Asian countries make sense, but they are chiefly one-way studies of Turkey's policies towards Central Asia, with less attention paid to the considerations and choices of the Central Asian countries themselves. Thus, it is difficult to analyze their relationship in depth from both a regional perspective and a country-specific perspective.

Methods. The research methodology includes (1) a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. We use the bilateral trade turnover data of Turkey with Central Asian countries combined with some scholars' points of view to do analysis on the country-specific

characteristics of Turkish-Central Asian relations; (2) an integration of history and policy. This research traces the history of Turkey's relations with Central Asia, interprets relevant political activities and policy documents, and examines the history and current status of Turkey's relations with Central Asian countries; (3) a merger of case studies and comparative analysis. In the study of Turkey's relations with Central Asian countries within the Organization of Turkic States, we make comparisons of their diachronic policies on the same matters and their synchronic policies on different matters.

Analysis. How to examine the characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of Turkey's relations with Central Asia? The authors will try to analyze this from three perspectives.

1. Historical cultural connection: the important bonds of Turkish-Central Asia regional relations. The Turkic factor is a historical and cultural root among the six Turkic-speaking countries and Turkic peoples [52]; nonetheless, this paper focuses principally on Turkey's historical and cultural ties with the Central Asian countries in the modern period, without deriving back to its historical roots.

Official contacts between Turkey and Central Asia date back to the early modern era, specifically to the interactions between the Ottoman Empire and the Khanates of Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand. These Khanates, particularly the Emirate of Bukhara in western Central Asia, held the Ottoman Sultan in high regard and exchanged envoys with the empire.

In the late 19th century, Pan-Turkism prevailed in Russian Turkic Muslims, and especially after its core leadership's transference from Russia to the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century, Turkey's cultural influence developed further in Central Asia, and the "Jadid movement" was one of the instrumental approaches. Although the "Jadid movement," a significant component of the Pan-Turkism ideology, was proposed by Ismail Gasprinskiy, a Crimean Tatar from Russia, the main force of Pan-Turkism has shifted from the Russian Empire to the Ottoman Empire when the "Jadid movement" in Central Asia is on the rise, which means Turkey has a greater effect on Central Asia. At first, the Soviet regime accepted the "Jadid movement"; however, they defined this

movement as a “reactionary bourgeois nationalist ideology” [3, pp. 28-29; 29, pp. 362-363] when they sequentially found it related to Turkey. But now, Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan are re-evaluating the “Jadid movement,” and their assessments are converging, all recognizing that the “Jadid movement” has played a positive role in the rise of nationalism in Central Asia [13].

Following the October Revolution, V.I. Lenin invited Enver Pasha – one of the Young Turks’ leaders and a former Ottoman chief of general staff – to Central Asia to seek support from Muslim armed groups such as the Basmachi for the Soviet cause. However, Enver Pasha defected and became a key leader of the anti-Soviet forces in Central Asia. Concurrently, the Soviet regime labeled the Basmachi as “counter-revolutionary, anti-Soviet Muslim bandits” [1, pp. 126-127; 38]. After this event, Turkey was isolated from Central Asia in the Soviet period. Nowadays, Central Asian countries’ historical academia has reassessed the Basmachi with a consensus forming, particularly following Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s posthumous exoneration of 115 Basmachi figures in August 2021 [20]. It is now recognized that “the Basmachi movement was a national liberation movement in Central Asia” [2; 34], and Enver Pasha has been given a positive reevaluation as a significant figure in strengthening the historical ties between Central Asia and Turkey.

Turkey is one of the first countries to recognize the independence and establish the diplomatic relations of the five Central Asian nations after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Turkey intervenes apace into Central Asia and expands its influence, which has been generalized as “neo-pan-Turkism” by some scholars in Tajikistan, Russia, China [12; 16; 49, pp. 222-224], and elsewhere. Based on historical and cultural ties, Turkey has made significant investments in the educational sector of Central Asia, particularly in higher education. One notable example of this commitment is the joint establishment of the Yassawi Kazakh-Turkish International University (national university, reconstruction of Turkestan State University in 1992), Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University (national university, established in 1998), and Ala-Too International University (private university,

originally built as International Ataturk-Alatoo University in 1996). After the Gulen Movement in Turkey in July 2016, led by Erdogan’s opponent Gulen, was purged in Central Asia, Erdogan established the Marif (Knowledge) Foundation of Turkey, which operated schools in Central Asia in place of the Gulen schools, and the Turkmen-Turkish International University (established in 1993), the “Bashkent” Turkish Education Centers, and others, which were formerly supported by the Gulen movement, were also closed.

Significantly, Turkish schools and universities established in Central Asia or in collaboration with Central Asian countries are popular with the local public due to their lower tuition fees, higher education quality, and various opportunities for studying in Turkey. The teaching content of these institutions is imbued with the idea of a unified historical and cultural community within the “Turkic World.” For example, Zhanar Temirbekova, who has served as the president of the Yassawi Kazakh-Turkish International University since March 2021, has stated that “our key purpose is to cultivate students for the unity of Turkic world” [51]. Such a phenomenon enhances the Central Asian people’s cultural identity with Turkey in turn.

2. Bilateral political and economic relations: the country-specific features of Turkish relations with Central Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey actively sought to develop relations with the Central Asian countries; however, their reactions were mixed, as shown in Figure, demonstrating evident country-specific features influenced by a number of factors.

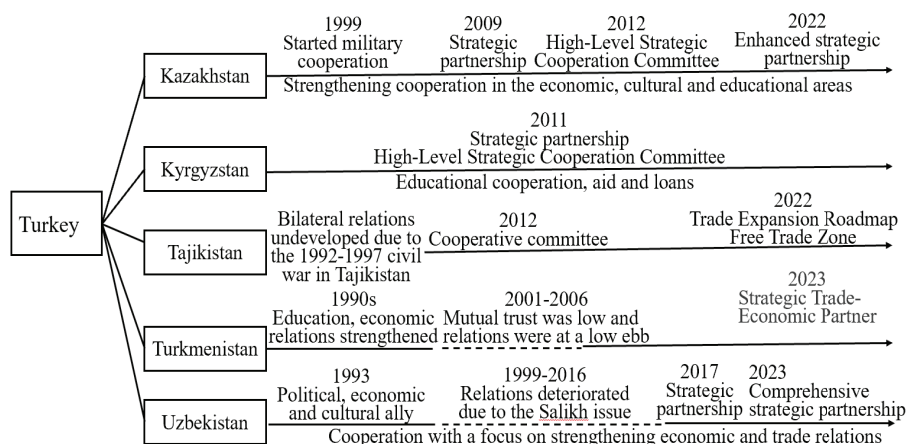
Firstly, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan maintain the most stable relations with Turkey. Notably, Turkey’s relationship with Kazakhstan serves as a ballast stone in maintaining interstate relations, distinct from its friendship with Kyrgyzstan. In the 1990s, Turkey and Kazakhstan signed a series of cooperation agreements in economy, technology, culture, and education. They also focused on cooperation regarding Kazakh oil exports and Kazakhstan’s connection to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. During the period of strained relations with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Turkey regarded Kazakhstan as its primary partner. Turkey and Kazakhstan established a strategic partnership in 2009 and further established a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Committee

in 2012. It is worth noting that the relationship between Turkey and Kazakhstan in the military sphere has evolved from initial cooperation to the establishment of formal agreements. Since 1999, they started to conduct military cooperation largely to train military personnel for Kazakhstan. Since the 2000s, they began to cooperate in the field of weapon production. In September 2018, they formally signed the agreement on military cooperation. During the “January unrest” in 2022, Ankara provided moral support to Kazakhstan and was committed to safeguarding Kazakhstan’s sovereignty if necessary [32]. In May 2022, Kazakhstan became the first country globally, except for Turkey, to build up a production base for the “Anka” military unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Currently, Turkey and Kazakhstan take the cooperation in economic, cultural, and educational areas as the ballast stone and further deepen the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership from all aspects, which cultivates the closest friendship in Central Asia.

Since gaining independence, the relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Turkey has been relatively stable, without significant fluctuations, and their political relations were reinforced during Atambayev’s early presidency. In April 2011, a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Committee was established, elevating the relationship between the two countries from friendly nations to the level of strategic partners. Among the six Turkic states, Kyrgyzstan is geographically the farthest from Turkey and economically shows the least importance to Turkey, while having the highest degree of dependence on Russia in the fields of politics, economy, and security. However, Turkey

regards Kyrgyzstan as an integral component of the “Turkic World,” hoping to improve further cooperation in the political and security fields through cultural education and economic trade cooperation. In 2012, Turkey wrote off \$50 million in debts of Kyrgyzstan. In April 2013, Turkey decided to provide Kyrgyzstan with a loan of \$100 million and a grant of 6 million USD [26]. TICA has implemented more than 30 investment projects in Kyrgyzstan and carried out 324 “soft power” policies [43]. More than 300 companies with Turkish capital are now operating in Kyrgyzstan. In 2022, Turkey’s injections accounted for 30.7% (\$321 million) of the total volume of foreign direct investment in Kyrgyzstan, surpassing even China and Russia [19]. Noteworthy, young individuals from Kyrgyzstan who received their education in Turkey established an organization called the political party “Tartip-Poryadok” in 2008, and they have been promoting the rise of Ankara’s influence on the domestic political process in Kyrgyzstan [30]. At present, there is a significant segment of society in Kyrgyzstan who believe that “Turkey is formulating policies from the standpoint of Pan-Turkism, aiming to establish close relations with the CIS countries that are ethnically and linguistically close” [39], while there are also supporters like the “Tartip-Poryadok” who lean towards Turkey.

Secondly, Turkey’s political relation with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan has distinct stages. The improvement and development of bilateral relations start with the presidential transition. However, Turkish-Uzbek relations develop in all-round aspects, while Turkish-Turkmen relations



The evolution of bilateral relations between Turkey and the Central Asian countries

mainly focus on economy and trade. In the early 1990s, Turkey had the most ideological impact on Uzbekistan in Central Asia. The two states were among the earliest to regard each other as “political, economic, and cultural allies,” signing the Treaty of Eternal Friendship and Cooperation in 1996 [4]. Subsequently, as the leader of the Uzbekistan opposition party ERK (Freedom), Muhammad Salikh, sought refuge in Turkey and received Turkish asylum, bilateral relations began to cool down. Even after the Tashkent bombing in February 1999, the relations between them seriously deteriorated due to the Salikh issue [28; 44, p. 24]. After Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power, the relations between these two states have bolstered. In October 2017, the two countries established a strategic partnership. In 2020, Bishkek set up a branch of the Turkic University of Economics and Technology. In March 2022, these two states elevated their relations to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership and planned to build a Turkic-Uzbek university in Tashkent. In November 2022, the defense secretaries of the two countries signed an intergovernmental framework agreement on military development and technological cooperation, which further reinforced the relations between the two countries. Under the influence of these policies, Uzbekistan’s trade with Turkey demonstrates an incremental trend, with the number of direct flights and tourists still on the rise. Turkish enterprises have also actively participated in large-scale investment projects in Uzbekistan. In just the first 10 months of 2023, Turkish companies have invested over \$500 million and have opened more than 200 new businesses in Uzbekistan [36].

After diplomatic recognition, Turkmenistan began to develop its relations with Turkey, first and foremost, in the field of education. The economic relations had been strengthened after Niyazov’s visit in October 1992, especially benefiting from Turkish investment in gas pipeline projects in Turkmenistan. In 2001, Niyazov accused Turkey’s leaders of pursuing political interests rather than economic interests. Turkey was dissatisfied with Turkmenistan’s pro-Iranian inclination. From 2001 to 2006, the bilateral political and economic relations were at a low ebb. After taking office as president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and his son adopted an active and progressive foreign policy, and Turkey once again became Ashgabat’s

strategic partner, with economic exchanges between the two sides booming again, especially in arms trade. According to SIPRI’s data, of all arms imports to Turkmenistan, 36% come from Turkey, while 27% and 20% come from China and Russia, respectively [11].

Thirdly, relations between Tajikistan and Turkey develop at a slow pace and have the most difficulties. Affected by the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997, the relations between them started later, and the process was relatively lagging; however, Turkey still regarded the relations between the two countries as a component of its relations with other countries in Central Asia. The first visit to Tajikistan of Erdogan ushered in a new stage of relations between the two countries. In December 2012, the two states established a cooperative committee. In November 2022, they signed the “2023–2025 Trade Expansion Roadmap” and the Free Trade Zone Cooperation Memorandum, setting the goal of enlarging the trade volume between the two countries to one billion dollars by 2025 [7]. As high-level exchanges have considerably increased, the two sides’ relations have improved but have not yet established a strategic partnership. In February 2024, Turkey canceled the visa-waiver policy for Tajikistan civilians for the sake of safety, which endangered the bilateral friendship from the Tajikistan side [27]. Besides, the factors limiting two sides’ relations are that Turkey has repeatedly shown its support for Kyrgyzstan on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border issue; Tajikistan maintains close relations with Iran for historical and cultural reasons (e.g., the common Persian language group); Tajikistan’s main trading partners are Russia, China, and Kazakhstan; and Tajikistan cooperates closely with Russia on security issues.

Fourthly, as shown in Table, Turkey’s economic and trade relations with the Central Asian countries are still at a low level, and their bilateral trade volume and trade share are severely mismatched. In 2019, none of the Central Asian countries has been ranked within the top 20 among all its main foreign trade partners. While, in the foreign trade partners of Central Asian countries, Turkey’s trade volume and ranking are not at the forefront, far less than the bilateral trade volume between China and Central Asian countries. After the outbreak

of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, trade volume between Kazakhstan and Turkey rapidly surged to \$6 billion in 2023, allowing Turkey to jump to third place in the total volume of Kazakhstan's foreign trade (\$139.8 billion); however, it is still far lower than China (\$31.4 billion) and Russia (\$25.88 billion). In the trade composition of 2023 or 2022, Central Asian countries accounted for a total of 1.96% of Turkey's total foreign trade volume (617.551 billion), with the highest being Kazakhstan at 0.97%, followed by Uzbekistan at 0.50%. In terms of Turkey's share in the total foreign trade volume of Central Asian countries, the highest is Turkmenistan at 10.34%, followed by Uzbekistan at 5.38%, Tajikistan at 4.67%, Kazakhstan at 4.29%, and Kyrgyzstan at 3.83%. Under the seriously mismatched circumstance between trade volume and trade share, Turkmenistan attaches more importance to the economic-trade relations with Turkey, while Turkey places more emphasis on expanding trade with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in turn.

3. *Multilateral cooperative institution: the new trend of area relations between Turkey and Central Asia.* Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, multilateral cooperative institutions have also been pivotal for Turkey in improving relations with the Central Asian countries, whose significant feature is based on a "common Turkic national-cultural" identity. Over the past 30 years, they have already established more than a dozen multilateral institutions mainly focusing on political, economic, and cultural areas, while cooperation in the regional security and military fields is less frequent. Especially, what draws

striking attention among all these cooperative institutions is the Organization of Turkic States, which was upgraded from the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in November 2021. At present, this organization is constituted of 5 member states (Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan) and 3 observers (Hungary, Turkmenistan, and the Economic Cooperation Organization), also establishing cooperative partnerships with 12 international organizations. Certainly, the organization can be described as the highest-level, most influential, most ambitious in development goals, and most active multilateral cooperation mechanism in the Turkic World. Here is a brief analysis of the four multilateral cooperation agendas that the organization is most concerned about.

Firstly, one of the important agendas in the Organization of Turkic States is how to coordinate relations with third states such as Russia and China and with international organizations like the EAEU, APEC, and BRICS. The summit of heads of state held in November 2022 set the goal of establishing partnerships. The Organization of Turkic States regarded the Economic Cooperation Organization as a breakthrough for the agenda and established a partnership with it soon. The 10th summit decided to admit it as an observer [8]. As the most representative organization of Islamic states in Eurasia, the Economic Cooperation Organization has become an observer in the Organization of Turkic States, which has not only opened a new paradigm in the relations between the Organization of Turkic States and other international organizations but

The GDP and bilateral trade volumes between Turkey and Central Asian countries in 2019 and 2022/2023

		GDP, billion dollars	Total foreign trade volume, billion dollars	Trade volume with Turkey, billion dollars
Turkey	2019	754.411	391.178	—
	2023	1118.593	617.551	—
Kazakhstan	2019	180.162	96.08	2.304
	2023	261.418	139.8	6.0
Uzbekistan	2019	57.921	36.2	2.372
	2023	86.393	57.768	3.11
Kyrgyzstan	2019	8.455	6.869	0.814
	2023	13.795	15.66	0.599
Turkmenistan	2019	45.23	17.998	1.090
	2022	56.54	20.0	2.067
Tajikistan	2019	7.9	4.524	0.355
	2022	10.5	7.5129	0.351

has also resulted in a new way of interaction between the Organization of Turkic States and non-Turkic states, such as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.

Secondly, the Organization of Turkic States has adopted documents such as the “Turkic World Vision-2040,” the “2022–2026 Strategy for the Development of the Organization of Turkic States,” and the “2023–2027 Transportation Connectivity Plan (Roadmap) Implementation Action Plan,” providing institutional guarantees for the implementation of the Middle Corridor [24; 35; 41]. In particular, the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022 significantly altered the routine of energy channels in Eurasia, with Central Asian countries enhancing their participation in the Trans-Caspian energy route. It is likely that the Organization of Turkic States will discuss and approve joint issues connecting the Middle Corridor with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The third agenda is about the enlargement of the Organization of Turkic States. First of all, Ankara places great importance on the accession of “Northern Cyprus” to the Organization of Turkic States; however, it has not made substantial progress so far. The crux of the matter is the recognition of statehood for “Northern Cyprus.” In the Western world, “Northern Cyprus” is deemed a separatist regime or a non-state actor that is not universally recognized by the international community [31; 47]. While other Turkic states, including Kazakhstan, are unwilling to approve formal recognition of “Northern Cyprus” for the sake of safety, let alone admit it into the Organization of Turkic States. Besides, Turkmenistan has refused to become a formal member of the organization, with the negotiation terms still unclear. At last, Mongolia and Tajikistan are noncommittal about whether to join the Organization of Turkic States; however, Tajikistan maintains contact with the Organization of Turkic States in ECO.

The fourth agenda item concerns the common alphabet used across the Turkic world. The Turkic World Common Alphabet Commission, established by the Organization of Turkic States in October 2022, is specifically responsible for creating a unified Latin-based alphabet. In September 2024, the unified alphabet was adopted, based on 34 Latin letters [9]. Kyrgyzstan is the only state among the five member states

that uses Cyrillic, and the Latinization reform in Kazakhstan is still not complete [21]. Therefore, the Commission remarkably attaches great importance to promoting the Latinization reform in Kyrgyzstan and expects to hold the first meeting in Bishkek. However, Kyrgyzstan has not responded positively, with great controversy over the domestic alphabet Latinization reform. Under this circumstance, the committee prioritizes accelerating the Latinization of the Kazakh alphabet reform, which is the same goal of the first meeting held in Astana in June 2023 and the second and third meetings held in Baku in May and September 2024, respectively.

Conclusion. From the vantage point of Turkey’s relations with Central Asia, both multilaterally and bilaterally, cultural cooperation not only serves as a cornerstone for fostering friendship across various domains but also stands at the heart of the comprehensive development of their relationship. The strong historical and cultural ties, rooted in the shared Turkic heritage, have been instrumental in shaping the centuries-long relationship between Turkey and Central Asia. This Turkic factor serves not only as a distinctive heritage for Turkey to foster multilateral engagements with the region but also as the easiest and simplest grip strength for the bilateral relations between Turkey and the Central Asian states. Based on such a foundation, Turkey and the Central Asian states in the bilateral dimension enhance political connection, improve cultural education cooperation, and expand economic-trade communication, and in the multilateral dimension, they forge the Organization of Turkic States, build up a common cultural space, and expand the depth and breadth of regional cooperation. Nonetheless, from a neutral standpoint, numerous factors restrict Turkey’s pervasive influence across Central Asia, such as the country characteristics between Turkey and the Central Asian states, the problems of enlargement of the OTS, and the controversy over the Latinization reforms of the alphabet.

In a nutshell, when it comes to developing the relations with the Central Asian states, Turkey has its own unique edges and bottleneck difficulties. Turkey’s greatest strength lies in its close cultural ties with Central Asian countries; especially as these countries re-evaluate some significant events of the early 20th century, they

have given positive assessments back to Turkey. Its greatest weakness lies in the economic and trade relations, which are difficult to significantly improve due to the influence of economic size, geopolitical situation, and the foreign trade patterns that Central Asian countries have developed over a long period of time.

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