



Feature Article
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Friends at Last: The Rapid Rise of Turkey-Uzbekistan Relations

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Turkey and Uzbekistan are the two largest countries in the Turkic world. As a result, the relationship between them is a determining factor for the prospects of Turkic cooperation. For most of three decades, the difficulties in the bilateral relationship was a key impediment to Turkey's influence in Central Asia. Since 2016, however, the arrival of a new leadership in Uzbekistan coincided with Turkey's turn in a nationalist direction to provide a major boost toward a more fruitful and cooperative relationship. While Turkey's relations with Uzbekistan have much ground to make up compared to its ties with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the two states have made it priority to do just that.

A Turkey and Uzbekistan are, by far, the largest of the six Turkic-majority states. With populations of 85 and 35 million, respectively, they constitute 120 of the 165 million of the population of Turkic-majority states. Furthermore, the two also have more varied and balanced economies than resource-dependent Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and have also consistently been the most powerful military powers in the Turkic



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world. They are also custodians of some of the centers of the most illustrious historical empires that emerged in the broader region – the Ottoman and Timurid empires.

Obviously, there are major differences between them. Turkey is much larger and more developed than Uzbekistan, with a GDP of \$3.2 trillion and \$33,000 per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity. Uzbekistan clocks in at \$450 billion and

\$11,000 per capita. Turkey is a NATO member with a long Mediterranean coastline and an established regional power, while Uzbekistan is a landlocked state that is building its status as a middle power.

Humble Beginnings

Turkey's relations with Uzbekistan initially followed a similar trajectory to Ankara's outreach to the other Turkic-majority states of Central Asia. Turkey was the first country to recognize Uzbekistan's independence, and welcomed 10,000 students from Turkic countries into Turkish universities. A considerable proportion of these were Uzbeks. Uzbekistan President, Islam Karimov, was the first regional Head of State to visit Turkey, in December 1991. During this visit, Karimov made statements that indicated an enthusiasm about Turkic cooperation:

Ataturk's Principles are parallel to what we want to do in Uzbekistan. I am an admirer of Ataturk and I hope that the nations of Central Asia will achieve what he achieved in Turkey. I support the idea of unity of the Turkish people. This unity must be realized... we could call it the Turkic Common Market.

In spite of these encouraging words, a clash of sorts ensued as the reality of economic and cultural exchanges diverged from expectations. The core of the problem was related to the relationship between religion and state, and more

broadly to differences in the degree of control over society.

Turkey at the time was a society in the process of opening up following the military rule of the early 1980s, and had a flawed but vibrant electoral democracy. This differed strongly from Karimov's Uzbekistan, where the leadership considered it a matter of national security, even survival, to establish a strong central government to guide the country during the building of an independent state.

More specific was the matter of religion. Among the Turkish businesses and social groups that sought to develop relations with Central Asia, many were connected to religious brotherhoods, primarily of the Naqshbandi or Nur communities. These were met with suspicion in Uzbekistan, which was reeling from the showdown with radical Islamists in the Fergana valley during the transition to independence, and from the civil war in neighboring Tajikistan. But in Turkey, these communities were closely linked to ruling parties of the center-right, not least the Motherland Party of Turgut Özal, whose family was strongly connected to the Naqshbandi order. In other words, Karimov was serious when he expressed his admiration for Ataturk's secularism – but in Turkey, that secularism was slowly being watered down as relations between state and religion shifted.

Conversely, among Turkish nationalists, there was little love for the legacy leadership of most

Turkic republics, which were tainted by their continuity with the Communist regime. Indeed, leaders like Karimov and Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan were long-time leaders of the Communist party. They had nevertheless worked to maintain some autonomy for their republics within the Soviet system. This fact, however, was lost on many Turkish nationalists that felt more commonality with opposition forces in these countries.

Against this background, bilateral relations were put in a difficult position when the Uzbek authorities suppressed the opposition forces that had stood against Karimov in the presidential election of December 1991. Opposition leader Muhammed Salih, a poet who combined avant-gardism with Sufi Islamic thought, managed to escape to Turkey. The refusal of Turkish authorities to hand Salih over to Uzbekistan triggered a first crisis in relations. In 1994, Tashkent temporarily recalled all Uzbek students in Turkey.

Two years later, the Islamist Necmettin Erbakan came to power as the senior partner in a coalition government, and made no secret about his ambition to reorient Turkey's foreign policy toward the Muslim Middle East. This horrified the leadership in Uzbekistan, as it was exactly the kind of development they sought to avoid. As suspicion grew that Erbakan's movement sought to recruit and infiltrate

the body of Uzbek students in Turkey, Tashkent permanently recalled the 2,000 or so students that were left in Turkey.

Relations temporarily improved under the successor government led by Mesut Yilmaz following the February 1997 military intervention in Turkey. But in 1999, Uzbekistan alleged that Erbakan's movement had lent financial support to the radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which Tashkent blamed for a series of terrorist attacks in Tashkent in February 1999 that nearly took Karimov's life. Tashkent also – with less evidence – accused Salih of being part of the plot. When Turkey again refused to extradite Salih, relations took a serious downturn. Uzbekistan now closed many Turkish businesses and schools, particularly those associated with the Turkish Islamist Fethullah Gülen movement.

The election of the Islamist AKP in 2002 put relations in the freezer for a decade and a half. Prime Minister Erdogan did travel to Tashkent in 2003 in an effort to build relations, but the gambit does not appear to have worked out. Matters were made worse two years later, when Turkey joined with Western powers in condemning Uzbekistan for the crackdown on an Islamist uprising in Andijan in May 2005. And in 2011 – following the Arab Upheavals and Turkey's support for Islamist causes across the Middle East – Uzbek authorities cracked down on Turkish businesses in Uzbekistan that

were blamed for having links to religious radicalism.

The Turning of the Tide

In the early 2010s, thus, Turkish-Uzbek relations were arguably the worst of any pair of Turkic states. This, in turn, prevented Turkic cooperation from blossoming. Turkey was focused on promoting the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East, and Central Asia was a secondary consideration at best. Meanwhile, Tashkent viewed Turkish foreign policy largely as a negative, destabilizing force.

Two key events helped turn the tide in the relationship. The most obvious is the death of Islam Karimov and his replacement by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who proceeded to implement a rapid shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. But the tide had already shifted before that, as domestic developments in Turkey led to a gradual shift away from Islamism as the dominant ideology in the country's domestic and foreign policies – and the rise of nationalism as the organizing principle of Turkish foreign policy.

The rift between Erdogan and the Fethullah Gülen movement was a key factor in this shift, a rift that had emerged in 2011 but blew open in late 2013 as Gulen-affiliated prosecutors exposed far-reaching corruption in Erdogan's inner circle. Erdogan responded by striking an alliance with the far-right nationalists in the Turkish state institutions that had the wherewithal to begin to roll back the Gulenists. This,

incidentally, brought Ankara in line with Tashkent's view of the Gulen movement as a dangerous, subversive force. If earlier Turkish efforts to promote the Gulen movement had led Tashkent to suspect Turkish intentions; now that Ankara actively worked to pressure other countries to suppress Gulen-related organizations, Tashkent's fears and suspicions were allayed.

This development also led to a greater influence of the military and intelligence bureaucracies in Turkish foreign policy. With that came a greater attention to Central Asia – and the rise to influence of forces that had maintained positive relations with Uzbekistan throughout. Indeed, while political relations had been in the freezer for years, Uzbek security institutions maintained positive contacts with their Turkish counterparts, with whom they had developed trust and whom they saw as unaffected by Erdogan's Islamist ideology. It should also be mentioned that Turkey's approach was now more respectful than in the 1990s, when Turkish representatives frequently came off as condescending toward their Central Asian counterparts.

As a result, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu paid a visit to Tashkent in 2014, indicating a slow thawing of relations. Events in the summer of 2016 that would precipitate a rapid improvement. First, the failed July coup against Erdogan cemented the nationalist forces as key powerbrokers in the Turkish state

and, once the dust had settled, solidified a growing focus on Turkic states in Turkish foreign policy. Second, the death of Islam Karimov in August removed a major impediment to cooperation with Turkey: Karimov had personally harbored the strongest suspicions of Erdogan and his government.

Erdogan was now transforming himself into the leader of a nationalist coalition that had little intention of exporting Islamism into Central Asia. He jumped on the opportunity to visit the new leader of Uzbekistan. He was warmly welcomed in Samarkand in November 2016, and President Mirziyoyev reciprocated by visiting Turkey in October 2017. Visa restrictions between the two states were rapidly curtailed, and the two began to develop cooperation in the economic field as well as in security affairs.

Bilateral and Multilateral Relations

The rapprochement between Turkey and Uzbekistan progressed rapidly, with a flurry of high-level visits over the ensuing years. President Mirziyoyev's October 2017 visit to Turkey, the first by an Uzbek President in 19 years, was a key point – a "historical visit," in the words of Uzbek foreign minister Abdulaziz

Kamilov. During this visit, the relationship between the two states was raised to the level of a strategic partnership.¹ The next year, a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was created between the two countries.² It has been meeting on a yearly basis since 2020, chaired by the two presidents and including a number of cabinet members from both governments. In 2022, the relationship was further elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

This does not make Uzbekistan unique in Turkish foreign policy. In fact, such mechanisms are a trademark institution in Turkish foreign policy, having been created with 25 countries.³ Still, the intensity with which Turkey and Uzbekistan have used this mechanism to institutionalize cooperation in a vast array of areas, comprising up to 50 different interstate agreements, stands out compared to most other countries with which Turkey has high-level cooperation councils.

This bilateral cooperation has also had a significant effect on Turkic cooperation writ large. Uzbekistan announced its intention to join the Turkic Council in 2018, and President Mirziyoyev attended the Council's September 2018 summit in Bishkek. It was accepted as a formal

¹ Bahtiyar Abdukerimov, "Özbekistan-Türkiye ilişkileri stratejik ortaklık düzeyine çıkarıldı," *Anadolu Ajansı*, October 30, 2017. (<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/ozbekistan-turkiye-iliskileri-stratejik-ortaklik-duzeyine-cikarildi/951687>)

² Dinara Taldybaeva, "Türkiye-Özbekistan İlişkilerinin Yeni Dönemi," *Eurasian Research Institute*, July

2020. (<https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/turkiye-ozbekistan-iliskilerinin-yeni-donemi/?lang=tr>)

³ Kenan Aslanli and Birol Akgun, "Institutional Mechanisms of the Turkish Foreign Policy: The Case of Russia-Turkey High-Level Cooperation Council," *Vestnik RUDN International Relations*, December 2020.

member at the September 2019 summit in Baku. This in turn paved the way for the decision taken at the next summit, in Istanbul in November 2021, to further institutionalize Turkic cooperation by creating the Organization of Turkic States. Uzbekistan was particularly supportive of the creation of a Turkic Investment Fund, which the Uzbek legislature rapidly ratified. Uzbekistan itself played host to the next summit of the OTS, in Samarkand in November 2022.

In fact, it is unlikely that the creation of the OTS would have been possible without the participation of Uzbekistan. Because Turkmenistan did not participate in the Turkic Council either, it was for a long time a mechanism bringing together only four states – Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As such its potential was limited, with only two Central Asian states participating. The active engagement of Uzbekistan also med Turkmenistan the only remaining Turkic state to stay out, and contributed to Ashgabat’s decision to seek and receive observer status in 2021.

Economic Relations

Since the renaissance of Turkish-Uzbek relations in 2016, economic and trade relations have been a major focus of the relationship.

Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan has put a strong emphasis on attracting foreign direct investment, and while it has found it difficult to attract large-scale Western FDI, Turkey has appeared as a promising partner alongside other Middle Eastern and Asian powers.

In 2017, Turkish investments amounted only to \$20 million, but by 2020 the number had already reached half a billion dollars.⁴ Nearly 1900 corporations with Turkish capital were operating in Uzbekistan in 2022, with the large majority of them having been established in the past five years.⁵

In the past several years, Turkey has emerged as Uzbekistan’s fourth largest trade partner, the volume of trade tripling from \$1.2 billion in 2016 to \$3.6 billion in 2021. The countries’ leaders have set the goal of expanding trade volumes first to \$5 billion in the immediate future and to \$10 billion down the road. This would make Turkey surpass Russia as Uzbekistan’s second largest trading partner after China.

Economic cooperation has included the critical field of energy, with Turkey helping Uzbekistan develop initiatives to mitigate the country’s periodic energy shortages. In 2022, the two Presidents commissioned a \$150 million, 240 MW thermal power plant built by Turkey’s

⁴ Tal dybaeva, “Türkiye-Özbekistan İlişkilerinin Yeni Dönemi.”

⁵ Niginakhon Saida, “To Deepen Relations With Uzbekistan, Turkey Leans on Cultural Appeal,” *Diplo-*

mat, October 21, 2022. (<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/to-deepen-relations-with-uzbekistan-turkey-leans-on-cultural-appeal/>)

Cengiz Enerji, and the same company began construction of a \$140 million 220MW power plant in Uzbekistan's Syrdarya region.⁶

Security

Security and military matters were included from the outset in the rejuvenated relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan. In July 2017, Turkish Defense Minister Nurettin Çanıklı visited Uzbekistan, and signed a protocol on cooperation in military education. This expanded the education of Uzbek officers in Turkish military academies. The Uzbek Defense Minister Abdusalom Azizov followed up with a visit to Turkey in October 2017.⁷

Joint military exercises soon followed. In this context, it is important to note that Turkey did not view Uzbekistan only through the Central Asian or Turkic prism, but also in connection with the Turkish presence in Afghanistan. Erdogan's 2016 visit to Uzbekistan followed directly on his visit to Pakistan, and in 2019, tri-

lateral joint exercises were held bringing together Turkish, Uzbek and Pakistani forces in Uzbekistan's Jizzakh province.⁸ This followed on quadrilateral joint exercises involving the three states and Azerbaijan earlier the same year.⁹ In March 2021, the two countries held joint tactical exercises for special forces in southern Uzbekistan, near the Afghan border.

In 2020, Turkey and Uzbekistan signed a cooperation protocol on military education and the same year, the first Turkey-Uzbekistan Defense Industry Cooperation Meeting was held. By 2022, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar took part in the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council meeting in Tashkent, and signed a broad framework agreement on military cooperation with his Uzbek counterpart that included joint military intelligence activity concerning "countries considered to damage the mutual interests of the Parties."¹⁰

This suggests that the development of military and intelligence cooperation between Turkey

⁶ Michaël Thanchum, "New Turkey-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Accelerates Turkey's Rise as a Eurasian Agenda-Setter," *Turkey Analyst*, June 8, 2022. (<https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/688>)

⁷ Mehmet S. Erol, "Türkiye-Özbekistan İlişkilerinde Stratejik Ortaklık Dönemi," ANKASAM, October 27, 2018. (<https://www.ankasam.org/turkiye-ozbekistan-iliskilerinde-stratejik-ortaklik-donemi/>)

⁸ Thanchum, "New Turkey-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Accelerates Turkey's Rise as a Eurasian Agenda-Setter."

⁹ "Turkish military to hold joint drills with Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan," *Daily Sabah*, April 23, 2019. (<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2019/04/23/turkish-military-to-hold-joint-drills-with-azerbaijan-uzbekistan-pakistan>)

¹⁰ A leaked copy of the agreement is available at: "Turkey, Uzbekistan set for intelligence sharing, joint military drills, defense cooperation," *Nordic Monitor*, July 4, 2022. (<https://nordicmonitor.com/2022/07/turkey-uzbekistan-set-for-intelligence-sharing-joint-military-drills-defense-cooperation/>)

and Uzbekistan has expanded rapidly following the Turkish involvement in the Second Karabakh war. Turkey has also begun exporting military materiel to Uzbekistan. In 2017, Turkey and Uzbekistan agreed to co-produce a thousand Armored Combat Vehicles developed by Nurol Makina with Uzauto, some of which would be exported from Uzbekistan.¹¹ Uzbekistan has also acquired Turkey's trademark Bayraktar drones.¹²

Turkey is thus developing its military cooperation with Uzbekistan, including assisting in the development of Uzbekistan's domestic military industry. Turkey is also expanding its intelligence cooperation with Uzbekistan, targeting common threats – likely targeting both state actors the two consider a threat, as well as non-state actors, particularly radical Islamist groups. On this issue, Uzbekistan continues to see a danger of Uzbek citizens radicalizing in Turkey. During the height of the war in Syria, several thousand Uzbeks, most of which had been part of the civil war in Afghanistan, moved to Syria, and many went through Turkey, as did Uzbek guest workers in Russia that

were radicalized during their stay in Russia.¹³ The new cooperative environment has allowed Tashkent to pressure Turkey to close down religious schools where Uzbeks in Turkey were being radicalized.¹⁴ Further, following the signing of an extradition treaty in 2019, Uzbekistan has improved its ability to seek the return from Turkey of radical extremists that had earlier seen Turkey as a sanctuary of sorts. In addition, Uzbekistan has obtained larger influence over Uzbek religious students studying in Turkish religious institutions.

Conclusions

The booming relationship between Turkey and Uzbekistan has been a game-changer for Turkey's relationship with Central Asia and the broader Turkic world as a whole. The decades-long rift between the two largest countries in the Turkic world prevented Turkic cooperation from reaching its full potential. The rapid rapprochement between them since 2016 has, conversely, allowed Turkic cooperation to bloom. Alongside the expanding Turkish-Uzbek relationship, Uzbekistan has similarly emphasized

¹¹ Joshua Kucera, "Uzbekistan to Relaunch Defense Industry with Turkish Joint Venture," *Eurasianet*, October 27, 2017. (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-to-relaunch-defense-industry-with-turkish-joint-venture>)

¹² Gareth Jennings, "Uzbekistan fielding Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs," *Jane's Defence News*, November 23, 2023. (<https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/uzbekistan-fielding-bayraktar-tb2-ucavs>)

¹³ Thomas Sanderson, "From the Ferghana Valley to Syria and Beyond: A Brief History of Central Asian

Foreign Fighters," *CTC Sentinel*, January 5, 2018. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/ferghana-valley-syria-and-beyond-brief-history-central-asian-foreign-fighters>)

¹⁴ "Uzbek Religious Students Recalled From Egypt, Turkey In New Crackdown," *RFERL*, June 20, 2021. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-religious-students-crackdown/31317289.html>)

its ties with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, leading to a flurry of bilateral as well as multilateral initiatives among the key Turkic countries.

It is also, furthermore, likely that this trend will continue to intensify, while the risk of considerable setbacks is limited. The geopolitical situation surrounding the region provides a strong incentive for the further intensification of cooperation between Turkey and Uzbekistan. Irritants that existed in the past have been alleviated, even though there remain differences in the approaches Ankara and Tashkent take to a variety of matters, not least in the religious area. But Turkey's stronger nationalist profile, and the strengthened role of more secular-minded forces within Turkish state institutions, has led to broader convergence, while

Uzbekistan has taken a more moderate approach in its relationship with religious matters.

The depth of the relationship between Turkey and Uzbekistan has yet to catch up with the extent and width of Turkey's ties to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. But the two countries are working rapidly to make up for lost time. This has been an important boon for Uzbekistan's foreign policy, providing the country with a trustworthy partner that is willing and able to assist Tashkent's efforts to build itself into a stronger and more independent middle power in Central Asia.

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