

“Turkish World” Strategy of Turkey’s Soft Power in Central Asia: Opportunities and Challenges

 Adhamjon Mamadjonov

PhD researcher Tashkent State Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan

Received: 31 March 2025; **Accepted:** 29 April 2025; **Published:** 31 May 2025

Abstract: This research study examines the foreign policy approaches of the modern Republic of Turkey and analyzes the essence of foreign policy concepts developed by the state. The article also investigates the turning points in foreign policy, focusing on the shift away from solely Western alternatives and the movement towards Eastern orientations. Furthermore, the paper explores the methods of utilizing “soft power” components in Turkey’s foreign policy and discusses its institutional mechanisms.

It is well-known that the Republic of Turkey, beginning in the 1990s, initiated an active movement to establish itself as a central state, which has led to its formation as a true regional power today. Currently, the Republic’s progression from a regional power towards a global power is reflected in the statements of government leaders and politicians. In particular, this is evident in the declarations of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, such as “The world is bigger than five”, “It is possible to build a fair world” and “If theres an opportunity to join the SCO, why should we say no”.

Keywords: Turkic world, soft power, Central Asia, Republic of Uzbekistan, Republic of Turkey, Foreign policy, diplomacy, cultural diplomacy.

Introduction: Turkey’s approach to Central Asia, known as the “Turkic World” strategy, is an effective foundation of soft power that leverages common cultural, linguistic, and historical connections to enhance cooperation and influence in the region. The main objective of developing this strategy is to strengthen Turkey’s relations with Central Asian countries through language and shared cultural heritage, capitalizing on their deep historical and cultural affinities. This creates a solid foundation for Turkey to promote initiatives in education, mass media, and cultural exchange. Moreover, within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States, it aims to develop trade and investment relations, especially infrastructure projects, economic partnerships, and investments, through various cultural and socio-economic assistance and cooperation efforts with the republic.

METHODOLOGY

The scientific research and conclusions of several

scholars who have conducted studies on this subject were consulted. In particular, research by the following scholars was utilized: Turkish scholars Hakan Yavuz (Turkey’s foreign policy strategies, the concept of neo-Ottomanism, and the influence of the Turkic world), Mehmet Özcan (Turkey’s role in Central Asia through the Turkic Council), Yasemin Aydın (Soft power and public diplomacy in Turkey: relations with Central Asia), Mehmet Sümer (Turkey and Central Asia: post-Soviet state relations); Russian scholar V.A. Avatkov (The Turkic world and Turkic organizations); Uzbek scholar R. Ergashev (dynamics of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy with Turkey, economic cooperation and cultural diplomacy); Kazakh scholar O. Khudaibergenov (Central Asian regional cooperation and Turkey’s role in shaping economic and cultural landscapes); Kyrgyz scholar A. Jumangulov (Kyrgyzstan-Turkey relations and the Turkish Maarif Foundation); and other scholars.

In conducting the research, analytical methods such as historical, comparative-political, systematic, event, and content analysis were employed.

MAIN PART

The history of Turkey's active diplomatic relations and effective economic cooperation with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus region can be traced back to the end of the Cold War and the period when these countries gained independence. Ankara's heightened attention to the countries of the region can be explained by a number of objective factors that Turkey faced in the post-bipolar era. From a geopolitical perspective, Turkey strives to position itself as a strategic partner and cultural leader for regional countries within the Turkic world, balancing the influence of other powers such as Russia, China, and Iran through its soft power.

It should be noted that Turkey faces several challenges in implementing this goal. For example, the strong geopolitical influence of Russia and China in Central Asia may relegate Turkey to a secondary position. Additionally, the absence of a fully developed economic platform in the region could limit the republic's ability to make substantial investments in economic infrastructure and other large-scale projects. Furthermore, the existence of ethnic and linguistic differences creates several problems with Tajikistan, an important state in the region, while Turkmenistan's status of neutrality may potentially cast a shadow on the prospects of a unified Turkic unity. Furthermore, the condemnation of any nationalistic, pan-Turkic, or pan-Islamic movements by the regional states in domestic political matters remains an unresolved issue facing the country.

Since the 1950s, the predominantly Western orientation of foreign policy has undergone some changes following the end of the Cold War. Turkey, which was once considered the defensive fortress of NATO's southeastern borders, ceased to play as crucial a role as before after the end of the bipolar confrontation. Consequently, Turkey was compelled to contemplate new reasons for maintaining equilibrium with its Western allies. Such sentiments are well reflected in the statement of the then Foreign Minister Ismail Cem about "a geostrategic player located at the center of a vast region stretching from Europe to Central Asia".

It is known from history that Central Asia has been the most important region geographically and geopolitically, serving as a trade and transport corridor, the center of empires, and the cradle of many civilizations. In the context of the formation of a multipolar world, Central Asia, which in the words of H. Mackinder is considered the "The heartland of the Earth," has become an extremely important focal point for Turkey, which is emerging as a new great power. For

Turkey, Central Asia represents the most optimal way to engage with major power centers. Furthermore, the region is exceptionally rich in energy resources, which naturally attracts the attention of numerous global political actors. From this perspective, Turkey's interests and aspirations in this area are not without reason.

Furthermore, the intensification of Turkey's policy initiatives in Central Asia and the South Caucasus regions is also attributed to the republic's unsuccessful attempts to join the European Union. Ankara's application to join the European Union in 1989 was frozen, and a new phase of Eurasian orientation began in the country's foreign policy direction. Ismail Cem, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 2002, significantly expanded the content of the "New Eurasian Project" and put forward the thesis of a: "Eurasian World Order," in which Turkey occupied a central position due to its "dual uniqueness - simultaneous belonging to both Asia and Europe". Accordingly, it was now considered that Turkey could play the role of a connecting bridge between the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus region and Europe.

The abundance of energy resources in these regions, the presence of international transit routes, and other factors align with Turkey's geopolitical interests. Moreover, the West was also interested in Turkey's penetration into this area following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which is why they did not oppose it. Indeed, maintaining balance through Turkey was also convenient for the West in the complex circumstances where claims to the region by major power centers such as Russia and China were growing stronger.

DISCUSSION

Since the 1990s, the pragmatic shift in Turkey's foreign policy, combined with democratic governance and liberal values in domestic politics, as well as the state's historical origins and rich cultural heritage, have made its soft power even more attractive. In this regard, Turkey has endeavored to effectively utilize soft power instruments in its post-Cold War relations with countries it had no contact with or maintained poor relations during the Cold War period.

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, culture and history became crucial instruments in Turkey's opening towards Central Asia. Specifically, the absence of significant linguistic and cultural differences with Turkic countries, as well as the lack of colonial activities in the region's states in the past, facilitated Turkey's engagement in soft power activities in this area.

Turgut Özal, the president of Turkey at that time, is considered the architect of establishing good relations

and building strong ties between Turkey and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus region. His visit to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in March 1991, followed by the establishment of relations with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, intensified mutual cooperation between Turkey and the Turkic republics. In this process, these actions served as a fundamental foundation for Turkic integration.

In 1991, the new Turkic republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia became the top priority on Turkey's foreign policy agenda. The leading Turkish politicians of that era viewed the independence of the republics with Turkic ethnic ties as historical justice, owing to the historical fraternal connections with the peoples of the region. In particular, former President Turgut Özal and Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel emphasized the importance of the idea of a unified Turkic world stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China. They especially highlighted that the emergence of Turkic peoples as independent states in Central Asia was an opportunity that occurs only once in several centuries. Turgut Özal proclaimed that the 21st century would be the “Turkic century”.

The starting phase of Turkey's soft power activities in Central Asian countries was primarily linked to the collapse of the USSR. This event created an ideological vacuum in the socialist system and led to the emergence of Turkic republics in the region, as well as new states bordering Turkey in the Caucasus. The Republic of Turkey not only deeply grasped the significance of this historic moment but also effectively capitalized on it, becoming one of the first countries to establish itself as a regional leader in the Turkic-speaking part of the former Soviet territory. During this period, we can observe several factors contributing to Turkey's development of new interests in this region:

- firstly, Turkey began to be perceived as a strong economic partner for the relatively new and fragile economies of Central Asia and the Caucasus.
- secondly, unlike other regional players such as Iran, Turkey was presented as a secular state that maintained Islamic values, which was appealing to countries with predominantly Sunni Muslim populations.
- Consequently, these factors led to an increased interest from the countries in the region specifically towards Turkey, rather than other nations.

Despite a number of negative impacts during the initial period, positive results have also been achieved. To implement future objectives, Turkey has developed strategic plans such as “Turkic Unity”, “Turkic World” and “Turkic Vision 2040”.

Moreover, during President R. Erdogan's tenure, Turkey managed to significantly increase its influence in Central Asia. The objectives of this policy were clearly reflected in Turkey's new strategy aimed at strengthening relations with the countries of the region. On August 5, 2019, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under the leadership of Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, launched the “New Asia” initiative. It is planned to elevate relations with Central Asian countries to a new level through various directions such as improving interstate relations, expanding the trade potential of the private sector, strengthening academic cooperation and connections, and developing mutual integration between societies. The main essence of this strategy signifies an eastward turn in foreign policy and moving away from exclusively Western-oriented choices. Additionally, strengthening ties with Turkic countries is one of its priority objectives.

Turkey has employed various foreign policy instruments to expand its influence in Central Asia. Economic, cultural, and educational projects were developed and promoted at both state and private levels, with the aim of attracting the political elites and populations of Central Asian countries to Turkey. In 1992, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) was established under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey as one of the main tools of the Republic of Turkey's soft power. The purpose of TİKA was to foster Turkic solidarity among the countries of the region. The most accurate expression that prompted the establishment of the agency can be translated as follows: “Turkey regarded the Central Asian states as different countries of the same nation”. Moreover, TURKSOY is considered an exemplary organization in terms of multilateral cooperation and mutual cultural relations. Turkey, which primarily focused on the field of education in its relations with the region, attracted hundreds of students from Turkic republics to its territory through the “Great Student Project” launched in 1992 within the framework of the organization. Numerous scholarship programs under the name “Turkish Scholarships” are managed by the Ministry of Turks Abroad and Related Communities. Furthermore, the Yunus Emre Institute, which has become an important center for Turkey's cultural relations through its activities aimed at widely promoting the Turkish language, operates its only Central Asian center in Astana. There are four educational centers under the Turkish Ministry of National Education in both Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan each have one such center.

The purpose of TURKSOY is to strengthen brotherhood and friendship among Turkic peoples, promote

common Turkic culture, and preserve it for future generations. Additionally, the organization's activities focus on propagating the concept of the "Turkic world". The most notable project with high integration potential in this direction is the "Cultural Capital of the Turkic World". It instills in the public consciousness information about both the existence of the "Turkic world" and the presence of this world's "capital", while simultaneously creating a certain illusion of international political subjectivity (through the existence of borders and a capital). The most prominent examples of Turkey's comprehensive "soft power" have been active in the fields of education, interfaith dialogue, humanitarian aid, media, finance, and healthcare.

After the Justice and Development Party came to power, Turkey's efforts to actively use the Islamic factor to expand and strengthen its influence in Central Asian countries became evident. With the support of "Diyanet", projects in the field of secondary and higher education are being implemented in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where students are being introduced to the Turkish model of Islam. As a result, "Diyanet" is creating the intellectual and cultural foundations of the Muslim world and shaping the modern Turkish model of Islam.

One of the most significant media initiatives targeting the region is the media platform for Turkic-speaking countries and societies. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the TRT Avaz television channel, which has been operating since March 21, 2009, is one of Turkey's investments directed towards Central Asian countries. The TV channel broadcasts programs not only in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Turkmen languages but also in Azerbaijani and Bosnian.

The Russian-language editions of the Anadolu News Agency also serve as another media outlet delivering news from Turkey to the region. It would be accurate to say that Turkey, which led the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations initiative in 2005, has become a cultural ambassador on a global scale. Moreover, in Turkey, alongside state institutions such as TİKA, the Turkish Red Crescent Society, and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, non-governmental organizations like the Yunus Emre Institute and the Turkish World Research Society are also among the organizations conducting cultural diplomacy.

A state that actively employs various elements of soft power can create appeal for the state or states it wishes to influence and harmonize foreign policy outcomes with its own. From this perspective, Turkey is implementing its cultural policy towards the Central Asian Turkic Republics by utilizing its ability to establish

cooperation and persuade through the institutional structures it has created. In particular, the cultural activities of institutions within the Turkic Council, TİKA, and the Yunus Emre Institute, as instruments of Turkey's soft power, are strengthening Turkey's influence in the region. Consequently, it is evident that Turkey possesses the necessary resources to apply its soft power, given its close geographical proximity, history of hosting various civilizations, established cultural values, and historical roots.

In summary, the main factors contributing to Turkey's reliance on "soft power" in the Central Asian region are education, language, culture, and religion, as well as traditions and customs rooted in ethnic unity. These factors play a crucial role in the republic's implementation of soft power strategies. Furthermore, charitable projects, cultural diplomacy, and media outlets have been yielding positive results in Turkey's efforts to establish a presence in Central Asia.

In general, Turkey's political activities in Central Asia can be described as soft geopolitics. To implement this approach, the republic primarily relies on education, public diplomacy, and investment tools. Along with these, Turkey is currently achieving its goals through effective media and information channels (cinema, TV series, show business, fashion, and others) that are proving to be successful.

While it may seem that all efforts of Turkey's soft power policy are directed solely towards the cultural and educational spheres, it is also an effective tool for implementing "soft power" in the economic domain. Special bodies have also been established to oversee the enhancement of mutual cooperation to the highest degree among the countries in the region.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can emphasize that strong connections and extensive networks exist between Turkey and the countries of the region, primarily in the economic, trade, and energy sectors. In this context, culture and education serve as soft power tools employed in Turkey's relations with Central Asian countries. Also, Turkey acted as an intermediary for Western countries' interests in the region on one hand, while on the other hand, it strived to fulfill its neo-imperial ambitions of creating a "Turkic world". During the first decade of independence for the region's countries, Turkey was able to significantly expand its regional influence due to its active diplomatic efforts, as well as linguistic and religious similarities with most Central Asian states. At the beginning of the 21st century, Turkey demonstrated pragmatic economic interests in its foreign policy towards Central Asia. In its Central Asian policy, Turkey relied on both bilateral and

multilateral cooperation formats. Turkey positioned itself as an attractive economic and investment partner for the countries of the region. With the establishment of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the institutionalization of cooperation between Turkey and Central Asian countries opened up broad opportunities for expanding regional geopolitical influence.

Turkey's investment in the Organization of Turkic States is swiftly positioning it as a cultural and economic leader among Turkic-speaking countries. In particular, this initiative offers Uzbekistan new avenues for trade and educational exchanges, enabling it to reduce its economic dependence on China and Russia.

In addition, Turkey appropriately implemented the "soft power" policy as a means of significantly implementing its interests in the region. Specifically, organizations such as TİKA, TURKSOY, and Turkish lycées actively participated in promoting ideas of Turkic unity in the region. TİKA substantially expanded its cultural diplomacy activities by establishing Turkish language and culture centers throughout Central Asia.

The influence of Turkish media is developing the common narrative of the "Turkish world", which is balancing potential Russian media influence in Central Asia. Uzbekistan's state media can utilize Turkish cooperation to enhance cultural promotion and visibility among Turkic-speaking peoples, as well as to reinforce national narratives. The strengthening of media collaboration among Turkic-speaking peoples, led by Turkish state channels, is creating a shared Turkic media space. Uzbekistan's participation in this media network strengthens its international cultural presence and can achieve widespread showcasing of Uzbek culture, art, and history throughout the Turkic-speaking world.

Turkey's economic infrastructure and trade investments are being established in the region have the potential to transform interregional relationships by connecting Central Asia more closely with European markets. The "Middle Corridor" initiative provides Uzbekistan with an opportunity to improve its logistics and transit routes, strengthen economic ties with Turkey, and diversify its export markets.

REFERENCES

Аватков В. А. Неоосманизм. Базовая идеология и геостратегия Турции // Свободная мысль. 2014. № 3. С. 71-78.

Аватков В. А. Тюркский мир и тюркские организации [Электронный ресурс]. URL:https://nbpublish.com/library_read_article.php?id=26047

Шарапов А. Неоосманизм во внешней политике

Турции [Электронный ресурс] // Беларуская думка – русская версия. 2017. № 4. С. 53-57. URL:http://beldumka.belta.by/isfiles/000167_87053.pdf (дата обращения: 12.08.2019).

Davutoğlu A. Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu (Seksendokuzuncu basım). İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2013. 584 s.

Gökalp Z. Türkçülüğün Esasları (Yedinci basılış). İstanbul: VARLIK YAYINEVİ, Ekin Basımevi'nde basılmıştır, 1968. 176 s.

Nye J. Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. N. Y.: Public Affairs Group, 2004. 208 p.

Vuving A. L. How soft power works [Электронный ресурс]: Paper presented at the panel "Soft Power and Smart Power", American Political Science Association annual meeting. Toronto, 2009, September 3. URL: <http://apcss.flywheelsites.com/Publications/VuvingHowsoftpowerworksAPSA2009.doc> (дата обращения: 12.08.2019).

Урманов Д.Р. Динамика развития политики «Мягкой силы» в Турецкой Республике в XXI Веке. Диссертация на соискание ученой степени кандидата исторических наук. Казань 2018. – С. 101

Зиганшина Г. Турция: марафон на пути в Европу // Азия и Африка сегодня. 2005. № 5. С. 33–40.

Перинчек М. Итоги – 2017: «Турция ищет будущее на горизонтах Евразии», Кавказский Геополитический клуб. URL:<https://kavkazgeoclub.ru/content/itogi-2017-turciyaishchet-budushchee-na-gorizontah-evrazii>

Cem I. Turkey in the New Century: Speeches and Texts (1995–2001). Rustem, 2001. P. 60.

Аватков В. А. Тюркский мир и тюркские организации [Internet manbasi]. URL:https://nbpublish.com/library_read_article.php?id=26047

Ali Balici. Türk Dış Politikası: İlkeler, Aktörler ve Uygulamalar ALFA Basım Yayın Dağıtım San. 2017. S. 247.

Mustafa Durmuş ve Harun Yılmaz, "Son Yirmi Yılda Türkiye'nin Orta Asya'ya Yönelik Dış Politikası ve Bölgedeki Faaliyetleri", Bağımsızlıklarının Yirminci Yılında Orta Asya Cumhuriyetleri: Türk Dilli Halklar-Türkiye ile İlişkileri, ed. Ayşegül Aydingün ve Çiğdem Balım, (Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, Ankara: 2012), s. 487-488.

Аватков В.А. Внешнеполитическая идеология Турецкой Республики при правлении Партии справедливости и развития: дис.канд. полит. наук.// – М., 2013. – С. 137

Усенов А. Турция в Центральной Азии: влияние и

лимиты. Эксперт Института стратегического анализа и прогноза / Бишкек [URL://https://www.caa-network.org/archives/21989/turcziya-v-czentralnoj-azii-vliyanie-i-limity](https://www.caa-network.org/archives/21989/turcziya-v-czentralnoj-azii-vliyanie-i-limity)

Kadir Sancak, Nihat Yılmaz. Vision Change and Foreign Supports in Türkiye's Foreign Policy., The Journal of International Scientific Researches., 2018, 3(2)., <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/464841>

Mustafa Serdar Palabıyık, “Uluslararası Sistemde Türkiye”, (der. Şaban Kardaş; Ali Balcı, Uluslararası İlişkilere Giriş, Küre Yayınları, İstanbul 2014, s. 68). 2014. S.68.

Nevzat Tekneci., Türk dış politikasında tarafsızlık., https://www.academia.edu/25123790/T%C3%9CRK_D%C5%9E_POL%C4%B0T%C4%B0KASINDA_TARAFSIZLIK

Mamadjonov A.B. ANALYSIS OF THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF" SOFT POWER"., Oriental Journal of History, Politics and Law 3 (03), 272-279. [URL://https://supportscience.uz/index.php/ojhpl/article/view/577/507](https://supportscience.uz/index.php/ojhpl/article/view/577/507)

Mamadjonov A.B. THE DIRECTION AND PROSPECTS OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKISH STATES IN UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY., ISLOM TAFAKKURI 2 (ISSN 2181-9572), 72-76

Mamadjonov A.B. Turkiya tashqi siyosatida “yumshoq kuch” konsepsiyasining qoʻllanilish mexanizmlari va institutsional asoslari. UzMU xabarlari 1 (1.2. 1), 136-139

Mamadjonov A. THE TURNING POINT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKIYE: TURNING EAST. THE USA JOURNALS THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE LAW AND CRIMINOLOGY (ISSN-2693-0803). VOLUME 06 ISSUE10. PAGE NO.: - 23-29. <https://www.theamericanjournals.com/index.php/tajpslc/article/view/5529/5118>