



Turkish Soft Power in Central Asia

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Abstract:

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Turkey has shown a keen interest in Central Asia where it is planning to federate under its leadership the Turkish-speaking peoples of this region. This approach did not have the expected echo in the new republics, which were primarily anxious to affirm their national identity and wary of a new big brother who was considered too enterprising. Since then, the geopolitical context has changed profoundly and the Central Asian capitals are more receptive to cooperation with Turkey, which wants to rise to the level of China and Russia.

But the circumstances both at the level of the international and internal system offered an opportunity for Turkey to pursue a special relationship with the Turkish peoples.

Keywords: Turkish; Soft power; Geopolitics; Central Asia.

I. INTRODUCTION

As soon as the USSR disintegrated in 1991, Turkey had shown a keen interest in Central Asia where it was planning to federate the Turkish-speaking peoples of that region under its control. This approach did not have the expected echo in the new republics, which were primarily anxious to affirm their national identity and wary of a new big brother who was considered too enterprising.

But the circumstances both at the level of the international and internal system offered an opportunity for Turkey to pursue a special relationship with the Turkish peoples. As a common cultural element of the peoples of Turkish origin, the language was conceived by Ankara as a powerful factor enabling it to establish this link - with strong political significance - with the other Turkish capitals of Eurasia.

With the arrival of the AKP party in 2000 and its new foreign policy based essentially on the soft power method in its economic, cultural and even linguistic vision, even if it has some difficulties to be implemented but it has always been presented as an objective to be achieved in a complicated environment on all in the Central Asia area, and the problem has posed:

How did Turkey develop its soft power in the Turkish-speaking geopolitical space?

2. Turkey's foreign policy:

Traditionally, diplomatic thinking in Turkey is organized around two principles. The first is to ensure its security by backing a strategic alliance with the West and mainly with the US within NATO since 1951 and support for the regional status quo. The idea of status quo for Turkey, as it was for the late Ottoman Empire, is essentially focused on borders. This obsession with the borders drawn during the Treaty of Lausanne is the result of the traumas of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The feeling that was born from it and that is called «paranoia de Sèvres» is at the foundation of the collective Turkish unconscious: «We want to destroy Turkey. They want to cut it into pieces.» The second one is about the assumed westernization of the country, embodied by the desire to join the European Union. The standard of living, the security represented by NATO and the survival of the resentment resulting from the «Arab betrayal» during the First World War, tinged with a certain contempt for the Middle East, are all reasons for the choice of the West. (Özge, 2013), but after the advent of the Justice and Development Party, AKPARTİ or AKP in political power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy has undergone a redesign and a new dynamic.

2.1 Turkish foreign policy after 2002:

Developments in Turkish diplomacy since the AKP came to power (2002), particularly since the appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu (former personal advisor to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan) as Foreign Affairs Minister (1 May 2009) interest in Western countries. The latter, professor of political science and author of a book, which has now become the reference book of Turkish diplomacy, entitled "The strategic depth" (Stratejik Derinlik, published in 2001), embodied a genuine will to transform Turkish foreign policy. Based on simple but ambitious formulas (the best known being that of «zero problems with neighbors») and multiplying political initiatives in the Middle East, the «new» Davutoglu's diplomacy was clearly intended to impose Turkey as a key player in international relations (Tayla, 2011).

Turkey has adopted a new foreign policy doctrine, which has led to a series of initiatives on the regional scene and which observers have quickly described as neo-Ottoman. This policy was formulated by Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister, under the name of «zero problems with neighbours». It was intended to give the country a «strategic depth» aimed at extending Turkish influence through soft power deployed in its immediate surroundings. The development of diplomatic relations with the Arab countries in the region and the distance from the Western chancelleries would then attest to the existence of this neo-ottomanist strategy aimed at recovering the imperial influence lost at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, these various initiatives have largely failed, for complex reasons that are more related to the evolution of the regional context than to failures in Ankara. (Gourisse, 2023, p. 133).

In summary over the last decade, the main motivation of Turkish foreign policy has been to create a sphere of strategic autonomy. In foreign policy, the concept of strategic autonomy refers to a country's ability to determine its own international policy independently, without outside influence or constraint. The ability, therefore, to safeguard its national interests, to make independent decisions and to maintain freedom of action in matters of defence, diplomacy and economic policy, since Turkey's foreign policy is based on several pillars: the diversification of allies and partners, to protect Ankara's interests while creating a balanced network of relations, and the affirmation of a "soft power", which takes shape through the exploitation of economic, cultural and diplomatic resources. (Ülgen, 2023)

It is for this reason that Turkey has established closer relations with regional powers such as Russia, while strengthening its commitment beyond the Middle East to Africa, Central Asia or Latin America.

2.2 Soft power in Turkey:

The concept of “soft power” at Joseph Nye, He defined it as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion.... It manifests itself in the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies.” (Nye, 1991) The sources of soft power according to Joseph Nye are in three main categories: «culture», «political values» and «public policies». Culture includes elite culture and popular culture. Both have powerful effects, but the attraction of American popular culture around the world probably puts it in a separate category. The United States also enjoys important advantages in terms of political values, as the world's oldest constitutional democracy and because it is an impressive example, albeit far from perfect, of good governance and the rule of law. Finally, policies implemented by governments, both at home and abroad, are a clear source of soft power. Religious tolerance, for example, an old American principle, was a powerful factor in attracting potential immigrants. Similarly, U.S. assistance in rebuilding Europe after the Second World War promoted both the prosperity and generosity of the people of the United States. (Lord, 2005)

Since the coming to power in 2002 of the Justice and Development Party AKP political movement close to the Muslim Brotherhood - the army has had to renounce (not without resistance) any intervention in the political arena. The AKP government has also given a new orientation to foreign policy: Turkey is tending to assert itself as an emerging power that is

gradually freeing itself from exclusive ties with the euro-alliance Atlantic by building a network of relations with all its neighbors, especially the Eastern ones. It seems to rediscover its Eastern, Islamic and Asian dimension once repressed.

Indeed, the modern Turkey heir of the Ottoman Empire retains the assets of the past greatness: a border with the Middle East through Iraq and Syria which allows it to project itself in the heart of the Arab world, a cultural proximity with the Turkic central Asia, the neighborhood of Iran and an opening to Russia across the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Ankara is now seeking to “capitalize” on this pivotal role at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the Christian West and the Muslim world. by breaking with the traditional policy of exclusive and privileged links with Europe, whose results seem to him at least disappointing. This emerging power does not lack assets. With a stable democratic regime, a dynamic economy, a modern army, a certain cultural appeal inherited from a glorious past, Turkey is establishing itself as a particularly enterprising soft power in its Eurasian neighborhood. From its status as a “pivotal state” between Western Europe, the Arab world and Central Asia, the country has become an asset in organizing its diplomatic alliances and economic presence. (Biad, 2014)

These diplomatic efforts are also reinforced by the creation of cultural institutes, Turkish language courses and Turkish-language schools run by private bodies. The Yunus Emre¹⁷ Turkish Cultural Institute is one example among others. Founded by Prime Minister R. T. Erdoğan, these cultural centers are created as bodies of political and cultural influence outside the state framework; they aim to promote Turkish language, literature, history and arts and music abroad. (Tutal-Cheviron, 2017)

Turkey with its foreign policy which consists of the zero-problem principle with these neighbors has adopted a policy which consists of using its soft power assets on all cultural and economic to expand its regional and international influence.

3. The geopolitics of the Turkic world:

Russian Turkestan was the name given by Imperial Russia to its conquests in Central Asia. Organized in military government, its headquarters was in Tashkent. From there he controlled the khanates of Khiva, Bukhara and Samarkand, to name only the best known. These khanates existed before the empire of Timur Lang and survived it. Today, the former Russian Turkestan is formed by the former Soviet Republics (Lindley, 2009) which are: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, who gained independence when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.

The Ottoman history also evokes the Turkic-speaking space of Central Asia, the extension of a language translating into this representation the power of yesteryear – even if it is not the same language but rather a set of different languages with common roots. It is true that the hopes of being able to exert economic influence there, cultural and political illusory – the populations of these newly independent states and their leaders are particularly concerned with preserving the full sovereignty of their state: Turkic and Muslim, yes, but independent. (Giblin, 2013)

The Turkish language has approximately 125 million speakers. It is located in the vast Eurasian area. Thus, an examination of the geopolitical aspects of the Turkic world would

require further analysis. Belonging to the Altaic family, Turkish was subject to a constant evolution subject to the social and political developments of the Turkish people originally from Central Asia. The Turks being a nomadic and warrior people, divided into about twenty tribes (boy), their language was not perfectly homogeneous. Each of these tribes used its own dialect. From the 8th century AD, the Turks experienced migration. It occurred en masse to the west – following a route north or south of the Caspian Sea – or east towards China. (Raptopoulos, 2007)

The implosion of the USSR and the emergence of independent Turkish-speaking republics in central Asia gave Turkey the illusion that a new eldorado would open up before it. Ankara, under the leadership of Turgut Özal and then Süleyman Demirel, relied on the relative language community and the existence, induced, of an illusory common culture to position itself as a privileged actor in the economic development of the new Turkish-speaking states. (Anciaux, 2017)

3. Turkey's growing influence in Central Asia:

During the Soviet period, the Turkish presence in Central Asia was totally nil. This geographical area is the preserve of the Russian-Soviet influence and is therefore one of the most closed areas on the planet. Only the allies of the Soviet power can assert a presence there. This is particularly true in the case of sister countries such as India and Algeria, which send many students and a few technical and entrepreneur cooperators (Ruffier, 2001). , As Turkey, an ally of the United States, is then persona non grata throughout the region.

With the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, Turkey had shown a keen interest in Central Asia where it was planning to federate under its control the Turkish-speaking peoples of this region. This approach did not have the expected echo in the new republics, which were primarily anxious to affirm their national identity and wary of a new big brother who was considered too enterprising. Since then, the geopolitical context has changed profoundly and the Central Asian capitals are more receptive to cooperation with Turkey which wants to rise to the level of China and Russia.

Turkish diplomacy in Central Asia is very dynamic. In 2022 alone, President Erdogan visited Uzbekistan in March before receiving his Kazakh counterpart in May. He then flew to Samarkand in September for the annual Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. He returned there on 11 November to attend the annual summit of the Organization of Turkish-speaking Countries (created in 2009) where he will meet his five Central Asian counterparts plus the Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliiev. At the same time, its foreign and defence ministers took their pilgrim's baton: the former went to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the latter to Uzbekistan. This intense diplomatic activity pursues four main objectives.

Finding alternatives to the often-strained relations with the West. It is in this context that the recent request of President Erdogan to join the SCO, Eurasian political, economic and intergovernmental security organization led by China, should be placed. Currently, Turkey is only a partner member for the discussion.

Meet energy needs and become a hydrocarbon hub. Despite the discovery of gas deposits in

the Black Sea in 2020, Turkey remains highly dependent on external supplies (Azerbaijan). It wishes to diversify its sources by importing Kazakh and Turkmen gas through the trans-Caspian pipeline project linking Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan, including a connection with the Kazakh Tengiz gas field. Thus, Turkey would secure its energy supplies while becoming “a Eurasian energy hub, transporting gas to Europe from Russia, Central Asia, Azerbaijan and the eastern Mediterranean.”

Positioning itself as an alternative route to Russia, between Asia and Europe through the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, sometimes called the Turkish version of the new silk roads.

Develop military cooperation, initially on a bilateral basis. In recent months, the Turkish Minister of Defense, Hulusi Akar, has visited the capitals of Central Asia to intensify military cooperation. The latter is based on political agreements (signature of a strengthened strategic partnership with Kazakhstan), arms sales (Bayraktar drones in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, VBC Ejder Yalcin for Uzbekistan, FAC 33 fast attack ships for the Turkmen fleet) and joint land or maritime exercises (EFES-2022 with Kazakh and Kyrgyz participation). In a second stage, Ankara’s ambition is to create a politico-military bloc designated as the “Army of the Turan” grouping together the Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan, which some already call “a Turkish NATO”.

President Erdogan has also used soft power, the three main pillars of which are the Organization of Turkic States, the Yunus Emre Foundation and the Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA), to exert greater influence on regional geopolitics. These bodies are intended to promote political dialogue between states, strengthen cultural and religious ties, promote the Turkish education system, and provide development assistance.

Turkey is now a full-fledged player in Central Asia, but it does not yet play the leading roles. Thus, economically, it is not among the top five contributors to foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Central Asian republics, with the exception of Uzbekistan . During the serious disturbances in Kazakhstan in January 2022, it was to the CSTO that President Tokaev turned to save his regime and not to Ankara. As for the ambitious projects of the Organization of Turkish-speaking States, described in the document "Turkic World Vision 2040," they seem all the more «unrealistic in the long term» that they encompass Chinese and Russian territories, which can only accentuate the mistrust of Beijing and Moscow towards the Sublime Porte. (Pasquier, 2023)

The opening to Central Asia is another strong vector of diplomatic diversification aimed at strengthening the country’s strategic autonomy. Turkey’s relations with the countries of Central Asia, established in enthusiasm after the collapse of the USSR, have since been the subject of several initiatives, drawing on cultural, linguistic and historical ties. Since the 1990s, Turkey has been working to deepen its commitment through scholarships and exchange programs for students, with the establishment of Turkish universities in these countries (Manas University in Kyrgyzstan, Ahmet Yesevi University in Kazakhstan) and training their political elites in Turkey.

Ankara's economic engagement in the region has translated into a gradual increase in trade: Turkey's exports to Central Asia increased from \$573 million in 2003 to \$4.26 billion in 2021. But at the same time, China's exports to the region increased from \$847 million to \$15.7 billion, and those of the EU from \$3.1 billion to \$10.4 billion. Turkey's economic engagement in Central Asia is therefore rather limited. (Ülgen, Turkey in search of strategic autonomy, 2023)

In addition to the moral competition and the diplomatic wrongs, some countries of the region fear a kind of "cultural invasion" in the bud. Far from trying to stick to the «Turkish model», the countries of the Turkish world such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan fear that the massive influx of Turkish cultural productions is a sign of a cultural imperialism. These republics, with which the Republic of Turkey had distanced itself in the time of Atatürk and which were subsequently absorbed by the Soviet Union, enjoy an independence that is still recent. The identity construction of these countries remains a key element of their sovereignty, and their rapprochement with Turkey is recent and relatively limited. It is mainly the result of economic opportunities related to industry or energy, or the fruit of political strategies (combat the influence of Iran in the region). Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, two former Soviet republics, are thus the first to embark on a path of cultural protectionism with openly political or economic motives. (Julien Paris, 2013)

In September 2020, it is by joining Azerbaijan in the war in Nagorno-Karabagh that Turkey intends to develop its interests in the region. By providing military advisers, precision drones and engaging Syrian mercenaries in the conflict, Ankara is allowing Azerbaijan to regain control of territories occupied by Armenia for nearly three decades. This investment in the North Caucasus therefore helps to redefine the balance of power in the region and allows Turkey to appear as a key player in the negotiations. But if this regional theatre is seen by Ankara as a means of increasing its influence on the international scene (and the Erdoğan regime to appear internally as the defender of Turkish nationalism in the face of Armenian claims), Turkey is not mentioned in the peace agreement signed on November 9, 2020 between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents, as well as by the Russian president Vladimir Putin. The country is therefore struggling to diplomatically convert this victory on military grounds. (Gourisse, 2023, pp. 136-137)

4. International Power Competition for Power in the Central Asian Region:

The creation of a "Turkish Commonwealth" on a vast territory stretching from the shores of the Adriatic Sea to China, encompassing all Turkish countries, autonomous regions and communities of origin, There is still a goal to be achieved for Ankara today, but it should be noted that there are other international and regional powers whose objective is to maintain their influence on the region, its powers are as follows:

4.1. Russia:

In the 1990s, many observers noted the fading of Russia into the post-Soviet space, particularly in the five Central Asian states, which were then seeking to develop new bilateral relations with other countries, including those in the Middle East. However, this situation quickly changed in the early 2000s with the strong return of Russia to the Central Asian

scene, both geopolitically and economically, but also through the development of a new type of interaction, hitherto little studied, that of migration. Indeed, at the turn of the 2000s, the emigration of “ethnic” Russians seeking to leave the Central Asian republics lost some of its relevance in the face of the rapid development of migratory flows of incumbent nationalities from the new states. These migrations play an increasingly important economic role both in the host country, Russia, and in the Central Asian republics. They underlie fundamental domestic policy issues and have a strong potential for social destabilization. The issue of migration allows us to rethink relations between the old metropolis and its periphery in a new way, in a “post-colonial” situation. (Laruelle, 2006)

Russia’s political re-engagement in the Afghan issue also involves its increased involvement in Central Asia. Since the region’s security landscape is largely determined by the domestic situation of the “kingdom of insolence,” Russia seeks to establish itself as a security provider.

However, the Central Asian states have been trying for several years to balance Russia’s presence in the region by pursuing a so-called “multi-sector” policy and thus opening up to other external actors. At present, they are seeking to assert their independence further and distance themselves from a neighbor perceived as more “toxic”.

Also, the strategy that Russia has adopted vis-à-vis the Taliban regime is not the subject of a consensus among all Central Asian states which have reacted differently to the Taliban’s seizure of power. Although the positioning of Tajikistan has shown a certain mistrust towards the Taliban, there is political pragmatism in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, who see this as a way to further open up Central Asia and weaken their economic dependence on powerful political actors, including Russia.

4.2. China:

The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization reflected for the first time Beijing’s ambition to consider Central Asia as a whole. Indeed, while the Shanghai group included only countries bordering on China, the ocs was open to the entire region: if Turkmenistan, because of its policy of neutrality, and especially isolation, promoted by its president, then Saparmurat Niyazov, said the Turkmenbashi, declined the invitation, it was not the case of Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia (23 million inhabitants), which then joined the ocs. The Treaty of Shanghai signed on 15 June 2001 took as a priority objective the fight against the three «isms» displayed from 1998.

On 11 September, the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the long-term presence of US and NATO forces in that country and in Central Asia changed the game and was an unexpected test for the ocs. The US deployment in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was viewed with great suspicion by the Chinese military, who saw it as an attempt to encircle their country. Nevertheless, the political leaders of Beijing were able to adapt the ocs to a new strategic context that helped serve the anti-terrorist objectives of this organization. In addition, they took advantage of September 11 to weaken the Western pressure on the Xinjiang issue and even convince the United States to list the etim (East Turkestan Islamic Movement), an unrepresentative group of armed Uyghur opponents, mainly based in northern Pakistan, on the UN list of terrorist organizations. (Cabestan, 2011)

4.3. The United States of America:

Just a few months after the withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan and the debacle in Kabul, the Americans are trying to return to Central Asia, which is logical given that this region borders on three of the State Department's sworn enemies: China, Iran and Russia. In May 2022, Donald Lu, head of the State Department's Central and South Asia office, toured all regional capitals except Ashkhabad. In June, General Michael Kurilla, head of the Central Command, followed suit. At the same time, the Peace Corps, one of the pillars of US soft power, has returned to Kyrgyzstan where the military mission was recently reopened, as the US administration is developing a new strategy for the years 2019-2025 and defining six objectives: (Pasquier, 2023, pp. 112-113)

Support and strengthen the sovereignty and independence of states.

- ✓ Reduce the terrorist threat.
- ✓ Maintain and expand support for stability in Afghanistan.
- ✓ Encourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan.
- ✓ Promote the reform of the rule of law and respect for human rights.
- ✓ Promote US investment and contribute to the development of Central Asia.

This demonstrates that the United States of America and the Central Asia area still remain one of the major areas of influence of US foreign policy.

5. CONCLUSION:

Central Asia after the end of the cold war has become one of the most coveted areas in Asia for its natural wealth and on all oil and gas, Turkey to adopt since the year 2000 a new policy based on soft power on with the coming to power of the AKP with its zero problem principle with its neighbors, it is found that Turkey has used the Turkish language as an essential element in developing its foreign policy vis-à-vis the countries of Central Asia with a view to extending its cultural influence over the area, but with recent states we find a reluctance on their part for fear of influence their identity and social security, but it must also be said that Turkey does have a direct competition with international powers which considered it as a key area of their essential foreign policy China and Russia.

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