

# The Turan Army

## Opportunities for a new military cooperation led by Turkey

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**ABSTRACT.** In the decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkish foreign policy took a new direction. During this period, new independent Turkic republics were established in the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). In the 2000s, we saw an increasingly active Turkish foreign policy towards these regions, which was multidimensional. One element of this was the development of strategic defense relations with these countries. One of the culminations of these relations in the future could be the creation of the “Turan Army”, a kind of military alliance of the Central Asians (gathering mainly Turkic countries). In October 2020, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar paid an official visit to several Central Asian countries, which revived the possibility of a new military alliance. The purpose of this study is to briefly outline the difficulties and opportunities, and attempts to illustrate Turkey’s regional leading role in creating a “Turan Army”.

**KEYWORDS:** TURAN ARMY, TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY, CENTRAL ASIA, TURKIC COUNTRIES, STRATEGIC COOPERATION

### *Introduction*

In the last week of October 2020, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar<sup>2</sup> went on an official visit to Central Asia with great significance and results. During this trip, it also affected Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>3</sup> The visit concluded with a number of important strategic questions, such as the promise to further develop bilateral relations, particularly in the field of defense and military cooperation. In connection with strengthening the defense relations, the vision of

1 PhD student – Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest).

2 Hulusi Akar (1952-) Minister of Defense of Turkey since 2018.

3 Sergey MARZHETSKY, Turkey collapses CSTO to create Central Asian NATO, Reporter, October 30 2020 at <https://en.topcor.ru/17148-turcija-razvalivaet-odkb-dlja-sozdanija-sredneaziatskogo-nato.html?fbclid=IwAR12veL3W5JU-3KODsDGOVU-9BigV93RBNvH4qzFctwwTeA8f4Tawrxrabws> [accessed: 17 August 2021].

creating a “Turan Army” that would serve as a kind of NATO function in Central Asia, was raised again. This has only been a vision so far, but the strategic relations between Turkey and the Central Asian region have become increasingly close in recent decades. With this in mind, I would like to outline the relations between Turkey and the Turkic Central Asian countries, as well as Azerbaijan, in the light of the past decades. In the course of this analysis, I would like to highlight the essential, decisive volumes of their cooperation and their results which may show what factors are hindering closer cooperation between Turkey and the Turkic countries.

In the context of Turkey’s foreign policy in Central Asia, four key objectives should be mentioned: 1, contributing to the state-building process of Central Asian states, 2, supporting economic and political reforms, 3, supporting their integration into the global community, and 4, bilateral cooperation based on mutual interests and sovereign equality (and multilateral) relations.<sup>4</sup> Former Foreign Minister İsmail Cem<sup>5</sup> said Turkey must play a key role in Eurasia because it has a central position in the region from Western Europe to Western China. Due to its historical, religious and cultural endowments, it can play a very active and effective role in transforming the central region it occupies. For him, Turkey can be referred to as a global state, which plays a model role with its democracy, secularism and respect for human rights, and can be attractive to other states with its historical significance, cultural richness and humanism.<sup>6</sup> Due to its strategic and geopolitical location, Turkey may become a central state,<sup>7</sup> and thus may affect the distribution of energy sources.<sup>8</sup> In the field of energy, the JDP<sup>9</sup> government is striving to become an influential player on the North-South energy deposits axis from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, along with the East-West Corridor.

In the course of this analysis, I attempt to present Turkey’s regional superpow-

4 Ertan EFEGİL, «Rationality Question of Turkey’s Central Asia Policy», *Bilgi Dergisi*, Vol. 11. 2, 2009, p.76.

5 İsmail Cem (1940–2007), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey (1997–2002).

6 İsmail CEM, «Turkey: Setting Sail to the 21st Century», *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1997, pp. 1–4.

7 Zoltán EGERESI: «A centrum nyomában: geopolitikai gondolkodás és külpolitikai útkeresés Törökországba», *Külgügyi Szemle*, 2017 tél, pp. 64–86.

8 Nadir DEVLET, «Turkey’s Energy Policy in the Next Decade», *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. IX, No. 4, 2004, pp. 71–90.

9 Justice and Development Party - JDP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP).



Orgeneral Hulusi Akar, Turkish Ministry of Defense (facebook)

er aspirations, which are reflected in significant strategic and military cooperation beyond economic relations. All this is important in order to get a clear and unambiguous picture of Turkey's strategic and defense foreign policy objectives for Central Asia and their results. However, the present analysis focuses primarily on strategic-defense relations and the geopolitical interests of the region and does not cover the details of the economic and cultural aspects of multidimensional relations.

### *Turkey's relations with Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union*

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union left an apparent great power vacuum in the Caucasus and Central Asia, which Turkey tried to exploit. The sudden independence of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan enabled a vision of pan-Turkism that foresaw uniting the peoples of these Turkic-speaking nations under Ankara's cultural and political leadership. By 1995, the durability of Russia's sway over the region became apparent. The ubiquity of

the Russian language, the region's centuries-long cultural and historical ties to Russia, and Moscow's ability to provide security to the new governments there all but ended the notion of Turkey as the leader of an imaginary Turkic World.<sup>10</sup>

Turkey settled on its own versions of Eurasianism. The first imagines Eurasia as the Turkic world, and places special importance on Turkey's role in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The second sees Eurasia as an alternative to the West and is most closely aligned with the Dugin-influenced version of Eurasianism prevalent in Russia. The third form of Eurasianism is the one most closely affiliated with Erdogan's JDP; it sees Eurasia as a Muslim geocultural realm that encompasses the territory of the former Ottoman Empire.<sup>11</sup>

In 1987, Turkey applied for full membership of the European Economic Community, but in 1989 the country's application for membership was rejected. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted Turkey to reassess its new strategic position in world politics. Turkey was no longer a strategic or military buffer zone in the Western world that determined its geopolitical significance because of the former Soviet threat. Following the end of the bipolar order, the Western world has given priority to a pro-Western Russian government and to political and economic reforms in Russia.<sup>12</sup> Turkey was afraid that it will lose its strategic importance for Western policy.

However, this fear did not last long, as Turkey played an active role during the Gulf War in 1990. As a result of this role, Turkey has managed to show the Western world that it is a strategically important ally even in the new geopolitical situation. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, for the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, communism, Iranian-style Islamism, or the so-called idea of a "Turkish model" all emerged as alternatives.<sup>13</sup> Turkish foreign policy, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, raised the idea of a Turkish world that would have

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10 Dimitar BECHEV, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2017, pp. 146-148.

11 Emre ERŞEN, «Geopolitical Traditions in Turkey: Turkish Eurasianism», in Mark Bassin – Gonzalo Pozo (eds.), *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York, 2017, pp. 276.

12 İdris BAL, *Turkey's Relations with the West and the Turkic Republics: Rise and Fall of the Turkish Model*, Aldershot, 2000.

13 Nasuh USLU, «The Russian, Caucasian and Central Asian Aspects of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post Cold War Period», *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 2:3/4, Fall and Winter 2003, pp. 166-168.

represented a great unity stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China.<sup>14</sup> Of course, Turkey wanted to be the leader of this unrealized union, in cultural, ethnic, linguistic, historical, and religious terms. As a model, Turkey would have served as a bridge between the countries of the Western world and the Central Asian region and initiated the integration of these countries. In this way, as a regional leader, Turkey wanted to have an impact on global politics.<sup>15</sup>

Despite initial positive foreign policy developments, Turkey's strategic importance declined in the 1990s. In the end, Turkey was unable to achieve the country's Western integration, namely the full membership of the European Union. This was a great disappointment to Turkish political leaders. In this situation, Turkey and the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus saw a new opportunity. For the countries of these regions, Turkey was an alternative to Russian and Chinese influence, while as a potential leader in this region, Turkey wanted to gain economic and strategic advantages.<sup>16</sup> Within this emerging new theoretical framework, in the early 2000s, Turkish politicians proposed a secular, capitalist system in Turkey as a model for the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.<sup>17</sup>

Turkey's relations with Central Asia are multidimensional. In addition to economic and cultural achievements, strategic and defense relations have also become increasingly important in recent decades. My research analyzes Turkey's Central Asian policy, the question of its rationality, with particular reference to strategic relations that may culminate in the the creation of a "Turan Army", which could function as a kind of Central Asian NATO. In this regard, I seek to answer the question why, despite serious and comprehensive attempts by Turkey, the country has not been able to gain real influence in the region. In order to understand the processes of the current Turkish foreign policy in Central Asia, I would like to as-

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14 Turkish President Turgut Özal (1989-1993) has stated that the 21st century will be the "Turkish century". He made it his motto "from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China" (Adriyatik'ten Çin Seddi'ne), and he marked a new area of interest for Turkey.

15 Ertan EFEGİL, «Turkish AK Party's Central Asia and Caucasus Policies: Critiques and Suggestions», *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2(3) Summer 2008, p. 168.

16 Ismail CEM, «Turkish Foreign Policy: Opening New Horizons for Turkey at the Beginning of a New Millennium», *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1., 2002.

17 Mustafa AYDIN – Erhan ÇAĞRI, *Küresel Politika'da Orta Asya; Avrasya Üçlemesi I*, Nobel Publications, Ankara 2005.; İdris BAL, *Turkey's Relations with the West and the Turkic Republics: Rise and Fall of the Turkish Model*, Aldershot, 2000.; İdris BAL, «Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türk Dış Politikası İçin Türk Cumhuriyetlerinin Önemi», in İdris BAL, *21. Yüzyılın Eşiğinde Türk Dış Politikası*, Alfa Publications İstanbul, 2001, pp. 237-344.

sess the foreign relations of Turkey and the Turkic countries of the past 30 years, and then turn to the strategic and defense relations of the countries concerned. In connection with the issue discussed in this analysis, I would like to briefly present the interests of the other great powers present in the Central Asian region. This brings us to the idea of creating a “Turan Army”, a kind of Central Asian NATO that could fundamentally change the geopolitical nature of the region.

### *Power rivalry in Central Asia – The “crowded market”*

After the Cold War, Turkey’s official position on foreign policy changed significantly as Turkey set aside its isolationist policy and became more active in the region. It is, of course, essential to emphasize that the conduct of Turkish foreign policy depended in part on domestic policy. In this sense, with a strong emphasis on the nature of the Turkish political regime, economic conditions, the structure of foreign policy decision-making, and partly on changes in regional and international structures.<sup>18</sup> Feelings of kinship with Turks living outside the borders of the Turkish state have proven to be a policy based on highly active pan-Turkism and neo-Ottomanism, open to relations between different Turkish communities, an important element of which is the revival of its glorious historical past.

The paradigmatic shift in Turkish foreign policy that we have discussed so far will undoubtedly have repercussions on the policies of regional and international powers. In addition to Turkey, the most significant powers in the region are Russia, China, the USA, and Iran.<sup>19</sup> In the following, I will briefly present the role and interests of these major powers in Central Asia.

#### *I. Russia*

Russia is one of the dominant powers in the region following the legacy of the Soviet Union. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has increasingly sought to strengthen its regional political role by relying primarily on pro-Russian leaders in the region. In the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia is trying to create a zone of influence that usually coincides with the territory of Tsarist Russia and the former

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<sup>18</sup> Kursat ÇINAR, «Turkey and Turkic Nations: A Post-Cold War Analysis of Relations», *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2. June 2013, p. 259.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 260.

Soviet Union. Andrei Kozirev, Russia's former Foreign Minister said in 1992 that Russia still wanted to remain a major power in the area.<sup>20</sup> Russia's ambitions for the region have found their strongest ties at the leadership level in each country in the region. In these countries, the ruling elite is closely linked to Russia and sought to redefine the semi-peripheral dependency, but in fact none of the republics planned a formal break with Moscow. This shows that Russia has significant political influence, especially over the Turkic states.<sup>21</sup> It should be added, however, that in the post-Soviet era, a Turkish-friendly Muslim leading elite emerged that could redefine the region's national identity on a national basis and try to approach Turkey with a common Turkish/Turkic origin. This way they have the opportunity to break free from the grip of Moscow.

Turkey's secular market economy model could be a credible alternative to Islamic fundamentalism for Russia as well, in predominantly Muslim Central Asia. Both countries can find ways of cooperating on the transfer of natural resources from the Turkic states, which would undoubtedly facilitate bilateral relations. Despite the opportunities for cooperation, we see that competition continues between Turkey and Russia, as they think along different principles about the opportunities offered by the region, be it political, economic or cultural. Russia remains a key player in the region, and Russian politicians would not allow Turkey to enforce its policy in the region, as it could conflict with their Russian priorities. Similarly, Turkish foreign policy makers do not want to experience a resurgence of Russian dominance in the region.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, increasing Turkish hegemony, especially at the strategic, defense level, could lead to further clashes between Turkey and Russia.

## *II. USA*

The U.S. has viewed positively the active Turkish policy in the region as Americans fear that radical Islam could fill the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, the application of the Turkish model in the region was the lesser of two evils along American interests. No mat-

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 260.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*. p. 260.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*. p. 261.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p. 261.

ter what the change of power by authoritarian regimes in Central Asia brought about, American interests continue to focus on maintaining balance and stability. Nonetheless, an important consideration for the U.S. was the ability to promote democratic reforms, despite the danger that they would result in political instability in the region that could contribute to the advancement of Russian interests or the activity of Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>24</sup>

As a secularized Muslim state, and last but not least as a NATO ally, Turkey can help bringing American policy to the region. The U.S. supports Turkey's local energy policy, the East-West Corridor, the energy transmission network from Azerbaijan through Turkey to Europe in order to strengthen Azerbaijan's economic development and independence from Russia's sphere of influence. This energy network will certainly increase the importance of Turkey in the region, which is to be welcomed by the United States to offset Russia.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to emphasize that the American presence in Central Asia does not, of course, depend on the role of Turkey. The United States has soon opened embassies in the new republics after the independence of the Central Asian countries. In addition, agreements with credit institutions such as Overseas Private Investment Corporation and U.S. Eximbank aim to develop the economies of these countries.<sup>26</sup> The presence of the USA can also be found in the media of the Turkic states. For example, the service of Radio Liberty,<sup>27</sup> a U.S.-sponsored radio station that broadcasts in the region in Turkish, is very popular and the U.S. relies heavily on its reports. As an ally of the United States in the region, Turkey does not want Turkic states to drift in the direction of Iranian or Russian influence. It can be said that the politics of both countries went hand in hand most of the time, so the Turkish-American relations with the Turkic states were cooperative and forward-looking.<sup>28</sup>

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24 Todd LANDMAN and Edzia CARVALHO, «State of Democracy in Central Asia. A Comparative Study», *Human Rights Centre University of Essex Wivenhoe Park*, Colchester, February, 2006, pp. 1–66.

25 ÇINAR, p. 261.

26 *ibid*, 262.

27 <https://pressroom.rferl.org/about-us> [accessed 17 August 2021].

28 United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FINAL-CEN-Strategy-Glossy-2-10-2020-508.pdf> [accessed 17 August 2021].



### *III. China*

Looking at China's Western strategy, we can see that with its vast territory and growing political and economic power, China wants to be a dominant player not only in the Pacific but also in the heart of Eurasia. Recent developments have brought Europe and Asia geographically closer than ever through economic and technological integration, and all geographical barriers have been overcome. China has an interest in promoting relations between Europe, Russia and China on the Eurasian continent because the eastward trend of Europe's geographical center and the inward movement of the geographical center of the entire Eurasian continent has shortened the distance between China and the EU.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could be a tool for China to enhance regional cooperation, especially in transport corridors, and to pursue oil diplomacy in the Middle East, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia. Xinjiang could be at the heart of the Westward Silk Road strategy, especially in the construction of transport corridors across Eurasia.<sup>29</sup> China is building significant rail links, highways and power lines west of Eurasia. China trades with railway technology,<sup>30</sup> while the Chinese technology company Huawei trades in telecommunications technology, vehicles, and in return purchases shares in various infrastructure projects such as seaports, airports, railways, roads, oil and gas fields, strategic minerals, and mines.<sup>31</sup>

But the issue in the Uyghur regions makes it very difficult to work closely with Turkic countries. Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang who want to create an independent "East Turkestan" are a direct threat to China's energy security, and Beijing is trying to gain the support of the Muslim world for a "One China Policy."<sup>32</sup> The idea of pan-Turkism reinforces the supportive feelings for Uyghurs both in Turkey and among the Turkic peoples. These thoughts appear in Ankara's foreign policy and sometimes make it difficult, hindering the effectiveness of Turkish-Chinese relations.

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29 Christina LIN, *A New Eurasian Embrace. Turkey Pivots East While China Marches West*, *Transatlantic Academy Paper Series*, No. 3., May 2014, p. 8.

30 Anton BENDARZSEVSZKIJ, *Az „új nagy játszma” Közép-Ázsiában*, January 22 2019 at <http://www.geopolitika.hu/hu/2019/01/22/az-uj-nagy-jatszma-kozep-azsiaban/> [accessed 15 August 2021].

31 LIN, 2014, p. 9.

32 *ibid*, pp. 9-10.

#### IV. Iran

In the context of the Turkic states, relations with Iran are complex in nature, i.e. they are cooperative in some respects, in other cases they are competitors. The independence of the predominantly Turkic, Muslim-populated states of Central Asia and the Caucasus provided an opportunity for Iran and Turkey to renew cultural and religious ties with the peoples of the region, and to establish political and economic relations with the newly formed governments. Turkey's location on the eastern periphery of Europe and Iran's direct access to the Persian Gulf, taking into consideration the southern territories of the former Soviet Union, also allowed for a possible enhanced economic role for the two countries. Thus, Central Asia and the Caucasus also emerged as cases of Iranian cooperation and competition in the geopolitical and economic fields.<sup>33</sup> The most memorable example of cooperation was the Organization for Economic Cooperation (ECO), a group that originally included Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, and in 1992 invited the six Muslim Republics: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

The JDP government's "zero problem with neighbors policy" has recently brought a milder political climate and rapprochement between Turkey and Iran.<sup>34</sup> In the future, these developments may undoubtedly affect bilateral relations with the Turkic republics. There are still potential disputes between Turkey and Iran. For example, the relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan could be such a case. In addition, Turkey and Iran could face economic clashes, especially with regard to the energy resources of the Turkic states.<sup>35</sup> The transfer of these resources to other parts of the world could create a competitive environment between the two countries, so Turkish-Iranian relations are also intricately linked to Central Europe. It is clear that Turkish foreign policy towards the region is not free from other major powers, namely Russia, China, the U.S., and Iran. The vast resources and opportunities of Central Asia and the Caucasus also provide grounds for cooperation and competition.

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33 ÇINAR, p. 262.

34 *ibid*, pp. 262–263.

35 Omid RAHIMI – Ali HEYDARI, How Iran and Turkey Compete in Central Asian Trade February 25, 2020 at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/how-iran-and-turkey-complete-in-central-asian-trade/> [accessed 16 August 2021].

*THE POSSIBILITY OF BUILDING THE TURAN ARMY  
IN THE LIGHT OF STRATEGIC COLLABORATIONS*

*I. The initial steps: the TAKM*<sup>36</sup>

Headquarters of the Turkish Gendarmerie<sup>37</sup>, which reports to the Turkish Ministry of the Interior,– played a key role in the creation of the “Organization of Eurasian Law Enforcement Agencies with Military Status”. TAKM was set up in 2013 by Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia with the aim of strengthening cooperation between law enforcement agencies in the countries concerned, but no significant results have been achieved during this period.

The symbol of the organization is a figure of a horse, which has an important meaning in the culture of these countries. There are also four stars at the top of the organization’s emblem, representing the four founding countries.<sup>38</sup> Turkey is represented by the Gendarmerie’s General Command in the force, which officially became operational in 2018. The staff of the Turkish gendarmerie undertakes the training of law enforcement units of other countries.

A Turkish news site, *Stratejik Ortak* notes that TAKM wants to play an active role in the fight against organized crime and law enforcement and other crimes such as terrorism and smuggling. An organization is not directed against a particular enemy, country or organization.<sup>39</sup> The charter of the organization allows all Eurasian countries where gendarmerie law enforcement units are present to apply for membership, and accordingly, Kazakhstan has expressed its firm intention to join. Russia is also said to be closely following the efforts around reactivation. The Turkish gendarmerie is considered a rather unique corps compared to many others because it has significant combat experience. It was active in Turkey’s 2016 operation in Syria. The emerging organization is actively involved in the

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36 TAKM - Avrasya Askerî Statülü Kolluk Kuvvetleri Teşkilatı.

37 Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı at <https://www.jandarma.gov.tr/tarihce> [accessed 16 August 2021].

38 Türk dünyası ortak ordusunu kuruyor (The Turkic world is establishing its joint army) at [www.milliyet.com.tr/turk-dunyasi-ortak-ordusunu-kuruyorgundem-2571475/](http://www.milliyet.com.tr/turk-dunyasi-ortak-ordusunu-kuruyorgundem-2571475/) [accessed 16 August 2021].

39 Ortak Türk Ordusu Kuruldu (TAKM) at <https://www.stratejikortak.com/2017/12/ortak-turk-ordusu-kuruldu.html> [accessed 16 August 2021].

fight against terrorism and border security. Its attack helicopters, heavy armored vehicles, combat drones, and special operations teams help the organization's work, making it look like an army with traditional military capabilities like a kind of gendarmerie. It seems that it may be an important goal for the organization to expand its coordination toward foreign forces. In addition, the gendarmerie headquarters is already working closely with Italy and France on training and joint exercises. It also runs training programs in northern Macedonia, The Gambia, and Somalia.<sup>40</sup>

In fact, TAKM was modeled on the FIEP<sup>41</sup> – an alliance of Euro-Mediterranean gendarmerie and law enforcement forces with military status – to which Turkey joined in 1998. The leading power of the TAKM could clearly be Turkey, which plays an important role in the military structure of both the Member States and the aspirant countries. Post-Soviet countries wishing to join the TAKM received preferential offers for Turkish-made military products, weapons, communications, military vehicles, and optical systems.<sup>42</sup> Turkey is currently conducting joint programs and military exercises with Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Many of these countries are also members of the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP), so Turkey as a NATO member can apply the NATO standard of interoperability.<sup>43</sup>

## *II. Can the Turan Army be formed?*

One of the results of the close strategic cooperation between Turkey and the countries of Central Asia and Azerbaijan could be the establishment of an organization with principles and objectives similar to those of NATO. This has been going on for many years, along with the elaboration of possible common positions and membership. This initiative would be the so-called “Turan Army”.

We have seen a significant increase in military cooperation between Turkey

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40 Metin GÜRÇAN, Turkey's 'war machine' goes global, 22 December 2017, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/12/turkey- Eurasianism-is-rising-among-gendarmerie-ranks.html> [accessed 15 August 2021].

41 <http://www.fiep.org/about-fiep/> [accessed 16 August 2021].

42 New states to join TAKM, 20 February 2013 at [https://apa.az/en/azerbaijan-army-azerbaijani-armed-forces/news\\_new\\_states\\_to\\_join\\_takm\\_-188227](https://apa.az/en/azerbaijan-army-azerbaijani-armed-forces/news_new_states_to_join_takm_-188227) [accessed 16 August 2021].

43 LIN, 2014, p. 6.

and the Turkic countries in recent decades. It is noticeable that Turkey is the initiator of the cooperations and at the same time an advocate and a leading figure in the strategic dimension as well as in the economic dimension.

As a result of the resurgence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the autumn of 2020, the idea of a higher level military cooperation was once again on the agenda. This military alliance is expected to be formed under the leadership of Turkey and, as the leading military power in the region, could become a determining factor in all regional and global issues.<sup>44</sup> Even in the

wake of the conflict, there was a clear trend for Turkey to significantly increase its military presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar's visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was not a coincidence, and it resulted in signing a military and technological cooperation agreement between Turkey and Uzbekistan with Uzbek President Savkat Mirzijoyev. Turkey's strategic partnership could be beneficial for Uzbekistan, as the country has recently begun to pursue a more open foreign policy.<sup>45</sup>

The recurrent conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has highlighted the viability of building a strategic, security and military alliance with the peoples of Turkish origin, and the Turkish Defense Minister's trip to Central Asia was another step in that direction. However, it is questionable which countries would



*Emblem of TAKM (Avrasya Askeri Statüli Kolluk Kuvvetleri Teşkilatı), Organization of the Eurasian Law Enforcement Agencies with Military Status, i. e. Gendarmeries (Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and formerly, Mongolia).*

<sup>44</sup> Çare Turan Ordusu at <https://m.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/gundem/741999.aspx> [accessed 16 August 2021].

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.turkkon.org/en/turk-konseyi-hakkinda> [accessed 16 August 2021].

join the so-called “Turan Army”. It is most likely that Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan could form the core of a military alliance alongside Turkey. This process began with the Organization of Military Law Enforcement Agencies, established in 2013 which I presented earlier.

However, the above ideas have several deterrents. As outlined earlier, in addition to Turkey, several major powers intend to play a dominant role in the region. In the Caucasus, we can talk about a significant Russian interest and, in addition to Russia, China is a key player in Central Asia, as well as the USA and Iran. It is questionable how these great powers would react to the creation of a strong military alliance led by Turkey. Hulusi Akar’s visit was, of course, also a hot topic in the Russian press, as Russia in the past, in addition to building economic ties, had an interest to gain political influence in the region, and from a Russian perspective the creation of a strong military alliance could lead to further conflicts.

On the other hand, the creation of another military alliance could have a negative impact on existing strategic collaborations, as military alliances are fundamentally exclusive to each other. Turkey is a member of NATO, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, in which Russia plays a key role. With all this in mind, the creation of a new strategic partnership would mean terminating their previous agreements. At the moment, it is difficult to imagine Turkey leaving NATO, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a kind of safeguard for the country against Russia, for example, and is also an important ally for NATO, having the second largest army in the organization after the U.S.

Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan in Karabakh also resonated here, and the issue of other Turkic republics supporting Azerbaijan, like Turkey, was raised. It is said in the region that the motto of Azerbaijan and Turkey, “one nation two states” should now flow in the form of “one nation six states”. This is a significant development for the future of the Turkic world. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu recently visited Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. During these visits, many cooperation agreements were signed. Again, Turkey’s Minister of National Defense Hulusi Akar visited Kazakhstan as part of military cooperation. Then later Kazakhstan’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi also visited Turkey.<sup>46</sup>

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46 Cengiz TOMAR, Turkish Council: From one nation to six states, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan,

### *Some examples of recent strategic cooperation*

Within the new direction of Turkish foreign policy, Turkey aims to maintain peace and stability in neighboring regions.<sup>47</sup> Davutoğlu described the objectives and orientation of the new foreign policy of the JDP government in accordance with the principles mentioned above.<sup>48</sup> Ankara has focused on Turkey's neighboring regions and building good relations with them, encompassing various economic and political collaborations. In this sense (not assessing now the relations between the countries of the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans), Turkey has shown great activity towards the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and Central Asia, where energy supply and energy transmission are key issues to counter Turkey's energy hunger. Russia is Turkey's biggest rival in these regions, often expressing displeasure at the expansion of NATO membership.

During official meetings at various levels, the Turkish leadership took every opportunity to emphasize the important role of their country in the new geopolitical environment. According to Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, the strategic role of Turkey as a stable member of NATO in this unstable region is becoming increasingly important in the post-Cold War system of regional relations; the collapse of the Soviet Union reaffirmed Turkey as a dominant regional economic power.<sup>49</sup> Turkey's active policy towards Turkish-speaking Central Asian countries was first supported in the West, especially in the United States, because Turkey provided a good alternative in the region as a Western ally opposite Iran, China, and the Russian Federation, all of which sought to increase their influence in the Central Asian region.<sup>50</sup>

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Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, as well as Hungary to participate in informal Turkish Council summit, 01 April 2021 at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-turkish-council-from-one-nation-to-six-states/2195343> [accessed 16 August 2021].

47 Seçkin KÖSTEM, *The Power of the Quiet? Turkey's Central Asia Strategy*, 03 October 2019 at <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/power-quiet-turkeys-central-asia-strategy-24069> [accessed 16 August 2021].

48 Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, *Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2010 at [https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/?fbclid=IwAR3NI9YI1zNSK8naXjxaxIZ5OkTW44g5RJ9sI8nE3VwEZN\\_kp\\_z9hErMgjc](https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/?fbclid=IwAR3NI9YI1zNSK8naXjxaxIZ5OkTW44g5RJ9sI8nE3VwEZN_kp_z9hErMgjc) [accessed 16 August 2021].

49 Süleyman DEMIREL, «Newly Emerging Centre», *Turkish Review*, Vol. 6, No. 30, Winter 1992, p. 9.

50 Zakir CHOTOEV, «The Turkish Factor in the Evolution of the Central Asian Republics», *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003, p. 73.

Turkey soon recognized the need for a military presence in the region to achieve its political goals and expand its influence. In the late 1990s, military modernization programs began in relation to Turkic countries. It should be noted that Turkey is also involved in military cooperation in the region under the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Relations between military leaders in Turkey and Central Asian countries have intensified since the early 1990s.

In March 1993, the Chief of Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces visited Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. In response, a month later, the Kyrgyz president paid a visit to Turkey. These meetings resulted in the signing of agreements on future military training, joint military exercises, and education. Since early 1992, officers from Central Asian countries have been taking training courses at Turkish military facilities.

As for the Caucasus States, there are further concerns about Azerbaijani relations, the war in Georgia, and relations with Russia. In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan and Armenia fought a bloody war for Nagorno-Karabakh, a region that belonged de jure to Azerbaijan but was inhabited by ethnic Armenians. The conflict resulted in the deaths of 6,500 Armenians and 20,000 to 25,000 Azeris, as well as 300,000 Armenians leaving Azerbaijan and 186,000 Azeri-Turks fleeing Armenia.<sup>51</sup> Ankara assured Baku of Turkey's support and closed its border with Armenia.

An initiative, the so called "football diplomacy" became known, during which the Turkish head of State Gül received an invite from his Armenian counterpart, Serzh Sarkisian, to attend a World Cup qualifier between the two countries.<sup>52</sup> Improving relations between Turkey and Armenia are also compatible with the new line of Turkish foreign policy. This potential easing in relations between Turkey and Armenia is important for two reasons. Firstly, it allowed Ankara to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Secondly, as a result of this significant foreign policy success, Turkey has been able to increase Ankara's regional importance.<sup>53</sup>

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51 Arif YUNUSOV, «Demographic disaster», *Sage Journal*, Volume 26 Issue 4, July 1997, p. 70.

52 Mehmet Efe ÇAMAN – Mehmet Ali AKYURT, «Caucasus and Central Asia in Turkish Foreign Policy: The Time Has Come for a New Regional Policy», *Alternatives Journal*, November 2011, p. 57.

53 ÇAMAN – AKYURT, 2011, p. 57.



Ankara and Baku set the goal of ever closer cooperation in the defense sector. According to the Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Ankara, the two most important areas for enhancing strategic cooperation are the defense industry and trade in non-energy products.<sup>54</sup> In addition to the military personnel exchange agreement, in force since 1992, Turkish and Azerbaijani military forces jointly conducted a military exercise in Nakhchivan in May 2017, followed by a joint military exercise by TurAz Eagle, involving thirty fighters, 150 armored vehicles and more than 15,000 ground forces from Turkey and from Azerbaijan.<sup>55</sup>

The first intergovernmental agreement between Turkey and Kazakhstan was signed in Alma-Ata on 23 February 1993 on military cooperation, which was extremely beneficial for the Kazakh side, as the Turks took upon themselves all the financial implications of the program. In August 1994, Turkish Defense Minister Mehmet Gölhan paid an official visit to Kazakhstan. The signing of the Agreement on Military Development, Military Training and Education has provided significant support and development to the Kazakh side,<sup>56</sup> but education and training programs did not begin until the late 1990s. In September 1996, a protocol on Turkish-Kazakh military cooperation was signed. This document called for cooperation with NATO's PFP program, a joint participation in the UK and OSCE peacekeeping missions, the formation of a corps, and the training of non-commissioned officers and the establishment of a Kazakh Coast Guard. In the same year, an agreement was signed on mutual assistance and military-technical cooperation in the military-industrial sector.

In March 2001, a protocol was signed on the implementation of measures to further coordinate and intensify cooperation between the two countries in the military-technical sphere. With the aim of assisting the Kazakh armed forces in Astana, a special representation of the Turkish General Staff was established and Turkey announced its willingness to assist in the modernization of the country's army and navy. According to the Turkish-Kazakh military-technical cooperation program, Kazakhstan was to receive approximately \$10 million before 2010 for the purchase and modernization of military vehicles and naval equipment.<sup>57</sup>

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54 KÖSTEM, 2019, p. 122.

55 *ibid*, pp. 122–123.

56 *ibid*, p. 83.

57 *ibid*, p. 85.

During his visit to Turkey in October 2003, Kazakh Defense Minister Mukhtar Altynbaev signed a new agreement to provide military assistance to the Republic, totaling \$1.5 million, and in June 2005 Turkey sent additional military equipment to Kazakhstan, totaling \$1.3 million.<sup>58</sup>

Turkey's cooperation with Kyrgyzstan began with the signing of an agreement in 1993, under which the country received military-technical and financial assistance from Turkey. However, it was not until 1999 that Turkey began to provide more active assistance to the Kyrgyz armed forces. Subsidies for military equipment and communications for the armed forces total nearly \$1 million. Although the intergovernmental agreement signed in October 2000 provided \$1.5 million in subsidies. An agreement signed in March 2002 between the Turkish Armed Forces Headquarters and the Kyrgyz Ministry of Defense would have provided \$1.1 million in military and financial assistance to the Turkish side, but by 2003 that amount had reached \$3.5 million.<sup>59</sup>

In October 2005, an intergovernmental agreement was signed in Ankara on free military assistance to the Kyrgyz armed forces. In November of the same year, an agreement was signed in Bishkek under which the Turkish side provided \$800,000 in military-technical assistance to the republic, and in May 2007 the Kyrgyz army was provided with additional military-technical equipment totaling about \$650,000. In 2007, Kyrgyzstan received a total of \$2 million in military-technical and financial assistance from Turkey. Military cooperation between the two countries was further strengthened, and in June 2008 another agreement was signed, according to which Turkey has allocated a total of \$1 million to further modernize the Kyrgyz army.<sup>60</sup> In January 2009, another protocol was signed between the Ministry of Defense of Kyrgyzstan and the Turkish General Staff. Accordingly, military-technical assistance was provided to the Kyrgyz armed forces.<sup>61</sup> Asanbek Alymkozhoev, former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Kyrgyz Republic, reached an agreement with Turkey in 2015. According to this, from 2016, Turkey will provide more quotas for military training to Kyrgyzstan,

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58 LEVON HOVSEPYAN, «Military-Political Aspects of Cooperation Between Turkey and the Central Asian countries. Overall Dynamics of Development», *Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Volume 11 Issue 2 2010, p 85.

59 HOVSEPYAN, p. 84.

60 *ibid*, p. 86.

61 *ibid*, p. 86.

in addition to which Kyrgyz military representatives will start working in Izmir at NATO Headquarters.<sup>62</sup>

Uzbekistan is also an important strategic player in Turkey's Central Asian policy. In October 2000, the Turkish and Uzbek Ministries of Defense signed a military agreement on military developments and on cooperation on security issues, in particular the fight against terrorism. Accordingly, Turkey has undertaken to provide the necessary military-technical assistance.

The above-mentioned agreements have significantly contributed to strengthening coop-

eration between the two countries in the military-technical and security fields. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the agreement on cooperation on military education, signed in 1992, although this has not been ratified for a long time.<sup>63</sup> Under the agreement signed in October 2000, the parties agreed to continue the fight against terrorism and various types of crime. The supply of Turkish weapons and military equipment to Uzbekistan was discussed. Financial assistance was also provided to Kyrgyzstan, and in the autumn of 2000 the presidents of both countries decided to set up a joint group to work together on international terrorism.<sup>64</sup>

During his visit to Uzbekistan in March 2002, the Chief of Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu, signed an agreement with the Uzbek side



*TurAz Qartalı (TurAz Eagle) 2015*

62 Arestakes SIMAVORYAN, 'Turkey's Military-Technical Cooperation With the Turkic Nations', 18 November 2019 at [https://orbeli.am/en/post/316/2019-11-18/Turkey%E2%80%99s+Military-Technical+Cooperation+With+the+Turkic+Nations?\\_\\_cf\\_chl\\_jschl\\_tk\\_\\_=pmd\\_IU15ZYObgJHO8Mq0YnLchSOVdQ2sc8wN6ASxmAyqDAE-1630438763-0-gqNtZGzNAIcjcNBSzQh9](https://orbeli.am/en/post/316/2019-11-18/Turkey%E2%80%99s+Military-Technical+Cooperation+With+the+Turkic+Nations?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_IU15ZYObgJHO8Mq0YnLchSOVdQ2sc8wN6ASxmAyqDAE-1630438763-0-gqNtZGzNAIcjcNBSzQh9) [accessed 29 August 2021].

63 HOVSEPYAN, p. 84.

64 *ibid.*, p. 86–87.

that provided a total of \$1.2 million worth of military equipment to Uzbekistan.<sup>65</sup> Importantly, \$1.5 million was earmarked for the fight against terrorism in 2003, with a total of \$610,000 worth of military equipment and education/training equipment delivered. Overall, Turkey provided a total of about \$3,300,000 in military-technical assistance to Uzbekistan between 2002 and 2004. During his visit to Uzbekistan in 2003, Erdoğan signed another agreement on military cooperation during his trip, which provided for the training of Uzbek soldiers, in the spirit of the counter-terrorism campaign, and for Uzbek air force officers to receive training in Turkey.<sup>66</sup> Unlike its cooperation with other Central Asian republics, Turkey's political relations with Uzbekistan have been very unstable. All this prevented the intensification of further bilateral agreements in the field of strategic cooperation. After the death of Uzbek President Karimov in 2016, the parties began to move appreciably closer together. President Mirziyoyev met with Erdoğan in Turkey in October 2017 and the meeting provided an opportunity for leaders of the two countries to initiate a new strategic partnership.<sup>67</sup>

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated in an interview in 2012 that Turkey's primary objectives towards Central Asian countries were focused on supporting efforts for democracy and a free market economy; political and economic reform process; political and economic stability and prosperity in the region; to contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to regional cooperation; to support their vocation towards Euro-Atlantic institutions and to help them benefit from their own energy resources.<sup>68</sup>

Its growing economic and domestic policy achievements towards the JDP have paved the way for Turkey to pursue a more proactive foreign policy over the past decade. Turkish aid to 121 countries increased from \$85 million to \$3.4 billion over the same period.<sup>69</sup> The victory of the JDP also brought a practical

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65 *ibid*, p. 84.

66 Roger N. McDERMOTT – Farkhad TOLIPOV, Military Reform in Uzbekistan: Defending the Priorities at <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/8318-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2003-8-27-art-8318.html> [accessed 17 August 2021].

67 Eşref YALINKILIÇLI, «Uzbekistan as a Gateway for Turkey's Return to Central Asia», *Insight Turkey*, Vol.20, No. 4., 2018, p. 31.

68 Interview by Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu published in AUC Cairo Review (Egypt) 12 March 2012 at [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-by-mr\\_-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flu-published-in-auc-cairo-review-\\_egypt\\_-on-12-march-2012.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-by-mr_-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flu-published-in-auc-cairo-review-_egypt_-on-12-march-2012.en.mfa) [accessed 18 August 2021].

69 Turkish aid to 121 countries reached \$3.5 billion in 2012 at <https://www.hurriyetdailynews>.



Türkiye Azerbaycan *TurAz Kartalı Tatbikatı 2020* (“*TurAz Eagle Exercise*”: Turkish and Azeri joint military exercises established in 2015; youtube).

reassessment of Ankara’s strategy in Central Asia. In 2009, Turkey was a strong force behind the Turkic Council. The organization was primarily aimed at promoting trade and investment between Member States. Turkish businesses have increasingly used this model of cooperation to make Turkey more attractive to foreign investors as a gateway to energy-rich Central Asian republics.

On the security front, hundreds of soldiers from Central Asian republics have been trained in Turkey through bilateral defense programs. The importance of Central Asia’s geopolitics to Ankara’s policymakers is a top priority and has encouraged their decision to support security issues within both the police and the military, including cooperation on military modernization with Kazakhstan,

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[com/turkish-aid-to-121-countries-reached-35-billion-in-2012--56940](https://www.turkishaid.com/turkish-aid-to-121-countries-reached-35-billion-in-2012--56940) [accessed 17 August 2021].

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and funding universities in those countries. Between the leading Turkish defense company (ASELSAN) and its Kazakh partner (Kazakhstan Engineering) in 2012,<sup>70</sup> and a \$44 million military agreement resulted in the launch of joint Turkish-Kazakh defense production.<sup>71</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Turkey has long been consciously building its relations with Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan. The failures of European integration and the collapse of the Soviet Union paved the way for more active foreign relations. The initial, more aggressive and less successful foreign policy of Central Asia in the 1990s was replaced by a series of value-based, economic, and trade-based cooperation. The JDP, which has been in power since 2002, wanted to bring a series of innovative, open collaborations to its neighbors. One could argue that along the foreign policy guidelines, the ideology of neo-Ottomanism and pan-Turkism and its application in the 21st century, which is reflected in the building of relations between Turkey and the Turkish peoples, is dominant. In addition to the integration processes, since the 2000s, military, strategic and defense cooperation has also become increasingly important. Turkey's NATO membership and military industry have allowed it to play an active part in strategic cooperation. Trainings and military exercises were organized, during which Turkish officers provided an opportunity for the friendly countries to get acquainted with newer and more advanced military techniques. In addition, the image of a military alliance, in which Turkey also wanted to play a decisive role, gradually began to emerge.

In my analysis, I have sought to outline the key points of strategic cooperation and Turkey's regional superpower aspirations. Turkey wants to become a dominant power in the region, but in this position it has to compete with rivals like Russia or China. Turkish-Russian relations have experienced several ups and

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70 Aselsan 2012 Annual Report – [https://www.aselsan.com.tr/2012\\_ASELSAN\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2633.pdf](https://www.aselsan.com.tr/2012_ASELSAN_Annual_Report_2633.pdf) [accessed 17 August 2021].

71 Ryskeldi SATKE –Casey MICHEL – Sertaç KORKMAZ, Turkey in Central Asia: Turkic Togetherness? Ankara has been noticeably reticent developing ties in the former Soviet sphere at <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/turkey-in-central-asia-turkic-togetherness/> [accessed 17 August 2021].



“Map of Iran and Turan” by Stieler, 1843. According to the legend (bottom right of the map), Turan encompasses regions including modern Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Northern parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

downs in recent years (see events in Syria in 2015), but partly as a result of Central Asian economic relations, Turkey's energy dependence on Russia has gradually declined, making the Turks more comfortable in this area. The fight for Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 has also highlighted the fact that Turkey may have an increasing say in regional issues, but in the light of all this, we must be careful about the Russian passivity in the above conflict. Russia remains a key player in both Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is questionable, for example, whether Turkey would risk their NATO membership for a new military alliance ("Turan Army"). In my opinion, maintaining a NATO alliance remains an important and decisive aspect for Turkey and the country would not currently jeopardize it, nor would it jeopardize the possibility of a future EU membership. The geopolitical situation in Central Asia is extremely diverse, with each state pursuing different strategies in order to balance the major powers present in the region. It is doubtful whether they would undertake such a military alliance.

All in all, the increasingly solid foundations for the creation of the "Turan Army" are beginning to emerge before us, but due to the heterogeneity of the Turkish countries and further interests of the major powers, we have to say that this cooperation is just a vision for the time being.

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