

# **In the Eye of the Receiver: Determinants of Turkey's Foreign Policy Success in Central Asia**

Colleen Wood (Columbia University) and Gözde Böcü (University of Toronto)<sup>1</sup>  
Draft: April 21 2021, prepared for ASN 2021<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract**

What determines Turkey's new regional policy priorities in Central Asia, and what are the conditions under which domestic elites of targeted states are receptive to them? Turkish foreign policy experienced various shifts and changes in the last century. Its strategic position has been altered by changes in the international environment, largely influenced by the bipolar world order that dominated the Cold War period. Turkey aligned with the West during the Cold War, but the Collapse of the Soviet Union abruptly changed Turkey's security environment and opened access to new partners. Despite no pre-existing ties in Central Asia, Turkey perceived the newly independent Central Asian republics as a chance to advance its regional influence, while also seizing new economic opportunities in the region. In turn, Central Asian leaders welcomed Turkey as a secular, Muslim-majority country that could serve as an intermediary to the region's integration to the international political and economic system. The literature has largely treated Turkey's foreign policy interests in Central Asia as a coherent and natural priority, due to longstanding co-ethnic and co-linguistic ties (Aydin 1996, 2004; Balci and Liles 2018). Indeed, in contrast to hegemonic powers like Russia and China, who achieve influence in Central Asia through economic and military means, Turkey has emphasized soft, ideational spheres of collaboration to advance foreign policy interests in the region. Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), Turkey's efforts to advance foreign policy goals in the region transformed significantly, and have largely relied on educational, cultural and religious developmental aid to expand existing ties with Central Asian states. While Turkey remains invested in the region, and seeks to advance its influence, its ability to do so has varied widely across Central Asian states.

To make sense of Turkey's varying foreign policy success in the region, we examine Turkey's bilateral relationships with three Central Asian states - namely Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan - along with a network of multilateral organizations in the region. Empirically, we analyze policy documents, diplomatic announcements, regional organizations' mission statements, and news coverage from Turkey and our Central Asian cases. In analyzing the success of socialization efforts – including not only political and social efforts, but economic and military projects – we find that local conditions in receiving countries explains variation in Turkey's foreign policy efforts in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, although Turkey has consistently attempted to develop a strong bilateral relationship, local authorities blocked its attempts to influence educational and cultural spheres. In contrast, reception has been favorable in Kazakhstan, where domestic elites largely welcomed Turkey's presence in the education and cultural sector, and have granted Turkey access to material resources. A rather mixed picture emerged in Kyrgyzstan, where Turkey invested in developmental aid which opened up new avenues of cooperation, while Turkey was unable to force the extradition of Gülenists. Our findings contribute to the narrow literature on Turkey's Central Asia priorities, but also speak to broader theory on foreign policy, in which analysis is focused on conditions in the *sending* country.

---

<sup>1</sup> Both authors contributed equally to this article.

<sup>2</sup> This is an early draft, please do not circulate without permission.

## **Introduction**

Regional foreign policy is a strong force in international relations, with major powers articulating policy goals for groups of states that belong to a geographic region. However, the definitional bounds of coherent regional foreign policy are underdeveloped. How should we conceptually balance the sum of bilateral relations – which in some geographic contexts, may range significantly – with the proliferation of multilateral organizations that set agendas for regional governance? How should we judge successful regional foreign policy?

Research on regional foreign policy has tended to focus on powerful sending states: within the U.S. Department of State, six bureaus develop region-specific policy initiatives (US Department of State 2021); China has embraced multilateralism to expand its influence in different regions of the world (Wu 2008) “interregional relations” have been a central pillar of the European Union’s foreign policy (Hardacre and Smith 2009). Part of the challenge in developing theories of regional foreign policy stems from the sticky assumption that regions are coherent units of analysis. This, however, overlooks state-level and sub-national variation within the region. In this paper, we invert the perspective of inquiry to consider political conditions of individual states within a given region. This approach offers analytic leverage in weighing the activities of regional organizations against the sum of bilateral relations to explain the conditions under which regional foreign policy can be successful.

To explore regional dynamics, we focus on Turkey’s diplomatic efforts in Central Asia. Two assumptions have grounded research on Turkey’s Central Asia policy: first, that Turkey should have a coherent regional policy in Central Asia; second, that this regional policy is driven by a shared Turkic, and more recently Muslim identity. Indeed, since 1991 there has been a flurry of regional initiatives – largely in the cultural sphere – and Turkey has emphasized education, language, and religion in its policy efforts in Central Asia. Despite a persistent narrative of the coherence of Turkey’s Central Asia policy, there has been significant variation in the tone of Turkey’s bilateral relations with countries in the region. In order to account for this gap between multilateral initiatives and the sum of bilateral relationships, we trace domestic elites’ eagerness to participate in multilateral initiatives and cooperate with Turkish authorities in three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

We find that traditional paradigmatic explanations for regional policy success do not fully explain the varied topography of Turkey’s diplomatic efforts in Central Asia. Instead, we argue that Turkey’s efforts to expand its influence in the region through soft and ideational foreign policy has varied widely not because of Turkey’s differential efforts or broad identity claims in the region, but because of how such policies were perceived by the local elites and authorities and domestic conditions in the region. This paper contributes to a broader scholarly agenda on regional diplomacy and foreign policy. Our analytical emphasis on domestic conditions of regional success has implications for research in many global contexts.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: first, we discuss Turkey’s Central Asia policy in a historical context, and introduce the dominant narratives used to explain and justify this region-specific policy. Then, we consider how three bodies of international relations scholarship might frame and judge Turkey’s regional diplomacy, including realist, geopolitical explanations; liberal-institutional explanations; and constructivist explanations that emphasize identity. In the next section, we invert the analytical perspective to consider how domestic conditions in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan affect the shape and form of Turkish foreign policy in the region. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of this perspective for future research.

## Revisiting Turkey's Central Asian Policy

Scholarship on Turkey's Central Asia policy has focused on three inflection points to explain Turkey's motivation for and investment in strong ties with the region. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and sudden independence of Turkic-speaking states, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, prompted a rush of diplomatic efforts. Despite no pre-existing ties in Central Asia, which had been largely isolated from global politics under Soviet rule, scholars and practitioners alike expected Turkey to advance its regional influence.

The end of the Cold War significantly altered Turkey's security environment. As a member of NATO since 1951, Turkey was a "distant outpost on the European periphery, a barrier to Soviet ambitions in the Middle East, and a contributor to the security of Europe" (Hale 2012, 322). The "passive and reactive foreign policy" Turkey had maintained throughout the Cold War period (Öniş and Yılmaz 2009, 7), transformed significantly in the 1990s. Newly independent post-Soviet states in the Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus offered new avenues for Turkish influence (Sayari 2000, 169–70).

In the 1990s, Turkey's President, Turgut Özal, tried to build ties with "the Turkic world," emphasizing linguistic and cultural ties with newly independent states in Eurasia. Turkey did not pursue substantial planning or programs, however; when Russia filled the gap, Turkey shifted its foreign policy priorities to avoid confrontation with Russia.<sup>i</sup> In Central Asia, this meant focusing diplomatic efforts on "soft" issue areas like education, language, and religion. Turkish officials pursued these issue areas through aid projects and multilateral cooperation.

Aid projects between Turkey and Central Asia have been administered through the Turkish development agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, hereafter TİKA). TİKA was founded in 1992 in order to help "young Turkish nations" get their footing in the international arena; initially TİKA focused on economic development, but by 1995 the agency shifted to cultural and social development initiatives.

These cultural initiatives were complemented in multilateral organizations. In 1992, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel initiated joint summits of Turkic countries. These summits continued haphazardly throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. In 1993, officials from Turkey and Central Asian states founded the International Organization of Turkic Culture (*Uluslararası Türk Kültürü Teşkilatı*, hereafter TURKSOY). TURKSOY has sought to "strengthen the ties of brotherhood and solidarity among Turkic peoples" and cast a wide net in membership and observer states.<sup>ii</sup> Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all joined TURKSOY in 1993, along with several autonomous regions in the Russian Federation, Moldova, and Cyprus. Among its most prominent activities are Nowruz celebrations held annually in Turkey as well as Turkic Language and Culture Week which includes various culture, language and art initiatives (Ezer 2019).

The second moment that shaped Turkish-Central Asian relations was the 2002 election of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, hereafter AKP) and its subsequent rise to power. Foreign policy priorities during the AKP's first term included Europeanization and democratization (Müftüler-Baç and Gürsoy 2010; Öniş and Yılmaz 2009; Ustun 2010). But Turkey's foreign policy orientation underwent significant changes beginning in the AKP's second term (Başer 2015; Öniş and Yılmaz 2009; Özpek and Yaşar 2018). In line with the AKP's domestic pivot toward Islamic values and autocratic politics, Turkish foreign policy also oriented away from the West. Over time, Turkey built relations with numerous states in the global South including expanding relations with the Middle East and Central Asia, while

establishing new avenues of engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (Çakır and Akdağ 2017). Thus, Turkey gained prominent influence over regions it previously had no or only limited power over by actively pushing and communicating its national reputation globally but also particularly in these regions (Çevik 2018).

During this time, Turkish diplomatic efforts in Central Asia expanded greatly, specifically through the expansion and proliferation of multilateral organizations. Drawing on the experience of joint summits of Turkic countries led by Süleyman Demirel in the 1990s, in 2009 Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey established a new intergovernmental organization called *Türk Keneşi* (the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, widely referred to as the Turkic Council). The Turkic Council was “constructed on four main pillars of common history, common language, common identity and common culture” and aims to encourage political and economic cooperation between member states.<sup>iii</sup> Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey were the founding members of the Turkic Council.

Under the umbrella of the Turkic Council, Turkey and its Central Asian counterparts have established several other multilateral organizations, including the International Turkic Academy, the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, the Turkic Business Council, the Turkic University Union, and the Turkic Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries (*Türk Dili Konuşan Ülkeler Parlamenter Asamblesi*, hereafter TURKPA) was founded in 2008 to foster political development. TURKPA’s emphasis on parliamentary diplomacy is somewhat puzzling given that all members – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey – have centralized executive power under the office of the presidency. TURKPA is an important link between Turkey’s Central Asia policy and its broader regional affiliations, with the Black Sea Economic Cooperation’s observer status and partnerships with international organizations including but not limited to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Parliament, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.<sup>iv</sup>

The third inflection point relevant to Turkey’s regional policy in Central Asia was the coup attempt in July 2016, which resulted in significant changes in Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy-making. In the context of Turkey’s Central Asian policy, Turkish officials capitalized on the coup, which was accredited to the Gülenist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), as Ankara officially refers to the group, to pressure Central Asian countries on cultural and political issues. Following the coup, the Turkish government founded the Maarif Foundation to administer overseas education initiatives and crowd out Gülen-affiliated schools.<sup>v</sup> On the multilateral front, the Turkic Council has expanded its membership and operations since the coup; Hungary joined the Turkic Council as an observer in 2018, and Uzbekistan joined in 2019.

Research on Turkey’s foreign policy in Central Asia has framed the regional approach as natural. Scholarship has emphasized linguistic, cultural, and religious ties that pushed Turkey to reach out to Central Asia (Öniş and Yilmaz 2009). Scholars have argued that this romanticized projection of kinship ties meant that Turkey’s position in the region remained largely symbolic and lacked economic initiatives (Balci and Liles 2018, 13). Yet, as this analysis of Turkey’s regional diplomacy reveals, multilateral cooperation in Central Asia does not include participation from all states in that geographic region. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have largely opted out of multinational cooperation, while regional organizations include observer states from Central Europe and Siberia. Moreover, Turkey toggles between bilateral agreements and multinational organizations to direct aid. So what is in a region, after all? The case of Turkey’s regional diplomacy in Central Asia prompts several questions with theoretical significance for international relations scholarship. Therefore, we ask; what is a conceptually

appropriate way to judge successful regional diplomacy? Should we measure regional diplomacy at the multilateral level, or as the sum of bilateral relations? In the next section, we develop a theoretical framework to answer these questions.

### **A Theoretical Framework for judging Regional Foreign Policy**

Regional foreign policy of states has been largely explored through the lens of great power competition (Mearsheimer 2001). Major powers compete for regional hegemony in the Global South (Drezner 2009; Jervis and Snyder 1991; Lake 2018). It can be expensive to project coercive influence over a region, but it also offers great powers a way to preserve their military and economic security. Research on Central Asia in particular is often framed in language of great power competition; this is true even in local politicians' rhetoric, which discusses the importance of multisector diplomacy to balance hegemonic players like Russia, China, and the United States (MacFarlane 2004; Peyrouse 2016; Swanström 2005). Russia has maintained strong influence in Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Cummings 2001; Laruelle 2010), including economic dominance through the labor migrant market and transport of natural resources. China's One Belt One Road project (Clarke 2017; Gong 2019; Indeo 2018), founded in Kazakhstan in 2014, and its initiative to collaborate on military training reflect China's power in the region. The United States has treated Central Asia as a coherent region since 2001, when the country invaded Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks and needed logistical support across borders to transport goods and soldiers.

Other accounts reject the material bias in the study of power, focusing instead on states' ability to project "soft power" (Nye 1990). By focusing on noncoercive means available to shape a state's perceived image (Gallarotti 2011), middle powers that would otherwise be unable to compete with regional hegemony become a necessary focus of analysis (Chatin 2016; Pocha 2003; Purushothaman 2010). This perspective offers an important fix to accounts that center great power competition, which "often discount by omission the role of middle powers and instead categorize all nongreat power actors as secondary states" (Gilley and O'Neil 2014, 4). Accounts of Turkish soft power efforts (Kalin 2011; Öztürk 2021; Öztürk and Gözaydın 2018) get us closer to an explanation of its regional policy in Central Asia. Turkish authorities have drawn from a range of symbols – including the country's history with secular democracy; its Ottoman past; and pan-Turkism – to build influence abroad.

The literature on institutionalized cooperation speaks to one mechanism that Turkey and other aspiring middle powers can use to build and project soft power. States act through multilateral organizations because they centralize activities in a way that reduces costs, while still leaving room for autonomy (Abbott and Snidal 1998). Cooperation is not easy, but repeated interaction makes it easier over time. This is because multilateral institutions serve to promote norms of cooperation. The proliferation of multilateral organizations at the regional level has been interpreted as a concerning trend by some scholars (Benvenisti and Downs 2007) and a way for rising powers to assert authority and challenge the international order by others (Clarke 2017; Yuan 2019).

One distinctive feature of multilateralism between Turkey and Central Asian governments is that these states do not come together to solve coordination problems, as Turkey does with neighboring Black Sea states in agreements on environmental degradation, or Kazakhstan did on the UN Security Council from 2017-2018. Rather, institutions like the Turkic Council and TURKSOY serve to build constitutive norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891) of a shared Turkic and increasingly Muslim identity that legitimate domestic elites' national legitimization efforts (Brubaker 1995).

This institutional perspective does not fully account for the ability of middle powers to gain influence and does not tell us enough about the conditions that shape foreign policy success or failure in the region. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan both share historical, linguistic, and religious ties emphasized by pan-Turkism, but they have largely stayed out of Turkish multilateral cooperation efforts. To that end, we draw on formative scholarship about the domestic determinants of foreign policy to explain variation among states in a region. Gourevitch (1978) reverses the traditional analysis of the second image, or state-level factors, by considering how domestic conditions affect the international system. Putnam (1988) describes state behavior as a two-level game, in which domestic elites seek power by developing foreign policy that pleases local coalitions. As with the literature on great power competition, analysis that considers domestic conditions often centers strong states. Our analytical framework considers regional policies not solely through Turkey's domestic political situation, but rather by tracing domestic conditions in receiving states. In the next section, we conduct case studies of three Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan – to demonstrate the explanatory power of this framework.

## **Turkey's Varying Success in the Region**

### ***Kazakhstan***

Since 1990s, Turkey and Kazakhstan have been in a rather close partnership, and this relationship has been improving ever since. Throughout the 2000s, Turkey has fostered a very strong bilateral ties with Kazakhstan. Among all countries that received developmental aid from Turkey, Kazakhstan has received 31,3% of all projects that were implemented abroad by TIKA between 1992-2003.<sup>vi</sup> After the AKP came to power, this trend of close cooperation continued further. In fact, TIKA maintained its support through numerous projects supporting sectors ranging from health, education, culture, trade and infrastructure throughout the 2000s. This close cooperation resulted in the establishment of an official strategic partnership between the countries in 2009.<sup>vii</sup>

In the 2010s, Turkey's efforts to increase cooperation have become even more systematic; spanning over dozens of issue areas which has been largely received positively by domestic elites in Kazakhstan. In 2012, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Turkish-Kazakh relations, the countries announced that they would boost trade ties and establish a joint industrial zone, signaling growing bilateral economic cooperation.<sup>viii</sup> In this regard, Turkish businessmen association in Kazakhstan (*Kazakistan Türk İşadamları Derneği*, KATIAD) further announced that they would increase their activities in Kazakhstan,<sup>ix</sup> while Turkey's economic ministry encouraged investment from Kazakh business circles to Turkey.<sup>x</sup> Furthermore, Turkey's leading defense organization ASELSAN opened a production plant in Kazakhstan in 2013 worth 44 Million Dollars to boost intelligence and security resource-sharing.<sup>xi</sup> In 2015, Turkey started discussing the launch a military education program for Kazakh forces.<sup>xii</sup> This trend of economic and defense cooperation continued over the years, and yielded in a 800 million dollar cooperation deal between the countries in 2015. Besides economic cooperation, Turkey further engaged in cultural engagement through various developmental projects focusing on education and shared culture, which have been largely well received by Kazakh counterparts. For instance, Turkey has been engaged in a prestigious mosque building project costing around 10 Million US Dollars, and completed the *Khoja Akhmet Yassawi* mosque in 2015.<sup>xiii</sup>

Bilateral relations, however, underwent a difficult phase in the aftermath of the coup attempt in Turkey. Initially, Kazakh President Nazarbayev was the first Central Asian leader to visit and

express his solidarity with Turkey.<sup>xiv</sup> During his visit, he ensured his support in the fight against terrorism by stating that “we will not support those who work against Turkey”.<sup>xv</sup> However, in the aftermath of his visit, Kazakh elites were slow and hesitant to help Turkey in the fight against the Gülen movement. While Turkey’s ambassador to Kazakhstan demanded that Kazakhstan shut down Gülen-linked educational institutions, local authorities rejected to follow through. In fact, the Kazakh education ministry published a statement that these institutions “will be working as they used to” and that “students and parents should not fear that they could close down”.<sup>xvi</sup> The reluctance of Kazakh authorities to cooperate on the matter, led to a number of proactive persuasion attempts by Turkish government. In October 2016, Turkey’s foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that he “is sure that Kazakhstan will help Turkey in the fight against FETÖ” and further announced that Turkey will step up relations “especially in the area of education” – which can be understood as an attempt to replace Gülen structures in Kazakhstan.<sup>xvii</sup> Despite attempts to press Kazakhstan on the matter, however, Kazakh authorities continued to be reluctant.<sup>xviii</sup>

In 2018, the stance of the Kazakh government changed slightly, signaling openness for talks on the issue. In 2019, Turkey further announced that it wants to take over the educational institutions of the GM, and govern them through the Ministry of National Education (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı*) or the newly founded Maarif foundation.<sup>xix</sup>

In March 2019, Kazakhstan’s first president and “Father of the Nation” Nursultan Nazarbayev announced he was stepping down from his post. Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev assumed the interim presidency and took office after winning an election in June 2019. Tokayev’s early career was as a diplomat, and he has embraced the work of maintaining the political trajectory endorsed by Nazarbayev, which entails pragmatic balancing of world powers’ interests in the region.

### ***Kyrgyzstan***

Turkey was the first country to recognize Kyrgyzstan’s independence. The two countries established diplomatic relations quickly. On December 23, 1991 the two countries signed an agreement on “friendship and cooperation,” and the next day leaders signed a document to formally establish relations. In April 1992 Turkey opened an embassy in Bishkek; in October 1992, Kyrgyzstan opened its first diplomatic mission with an embassy in Ankara, then in April 1994 opened a consulate in Istanbul. Kyrgyzstan’s MFA describes bilateral relations between Kyrgyzstan and Turkey as “developing in the spirit of common history, culture, language, religion, mutual respect, and striving to expand close cooperation in spheres of politics, trade, economics, and cultural humanitarianism.” The order here is relevant, as is the lack of military engagement. Kyrgyz-Turkish relations are not about traditional security, per se, but rather have been defined by financial support for educational and religious initiatives, business investments, and participation in multilateral organizations dedicated to the protection and promotion of Turkic cultures. Askar Akayev, Kyrgyzstan’s first president, called Turkey a “morning star that shows the true path to other Turks” (Fedorenko 2016, 4).

Between 1992 and 2003, Kyrgyzstan has received 10,9% of aid from TIKA projects, being the largest receiver after Kazakhstan.<sup>xx</sup> This trend has continued under the AKP government, which has continued to invest in building social infrastructure and improving cultural relations in Kyrgyzstan throughout the early 2000s.<sup>xxi</sup> Between 2009 and 2014, TIKA invested consistently in Kyrgyzstan, mainly focusing on providing aid in education, health and economic infrastructure, while also investing in cultural and educational projects.<sup>xxii</sup> Such projects included various forms of material support for Kyrgyz-Turkish educational institutions and

educational training for different sectors ranging from law, security to diplomacy or the supply of health equipment to different health institutions across the country.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In 2005, a revolution ousted Kyrgyzstan's first president. Kurmanbek Bakiyev rose to power in the wake of this revolution. Under Bakiyev, Turkish-Kyrgyz relations strengthened; unlike other periods, Turkey made advances in economic and military cooperation during this time. In May 2009, the presidents of both countries signed a declaration on military cooperation to fight terrorism. In 2010, Kyrgyzstan's government fell again in another revolution. The months following the revolution were a time of political chaos and violence; interethnic violence saw several hundred dead and many thousands displaced, with ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan the most severely affected, but several Turkish villages outside Bishkek also experienced violence. Despite attacks on Turkish villages, Kyrgyz-Turkish relations did not suffer significantly during this period.

In October 2010, Kyrgyzstan adopted a new constitution that emphasized parliamentarism and elected Almazbek Atambayev as president. Atambayev made his first diplomatic visit to Turkey in April 2011, immediately after his inauguration. It was at this meeting that the two countries established a Supreme Council for Strategic Cooperation (*Stratejik Düzeyli Yüksek Kurulu*). In September 2011, cooperation between the two governments extended to the legislative branch; a delegation from Kyrgyzstan's parliament visited Ankara to sign a memorandum on Deepening of Comprehensive Cooperation.”

A major crisis in bilateral relations emerged in the aftermath of the coup attempt in Turkey. Although Kyrgyzstan asserts itself as “one of the first to express support for the authorities of the Republic of Turkey after the attempted coup on July 16, 2016” on its current MFA website,<sup>xxiv</sup> bilateral relations initially suffered when then-president Almazbek Atambayev criticized repression following the coup.<sup>xxv</sup>

Following the coup, Turkey pressed Kyrgyz authorities to close down Gülen schools which had been established in the country over decades.<sup>xxvi</sup> Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu even suggested that “FETÖ may attempt a coup in Kyrgyzstan” trying to persuade Kyrgyz counterparts to take the threat seriously.<sup>xxvii</sup> Kyrgyzstan's President Atambayev labelled Turkey's claims as “absurd” and stressed that “Kyrgyzstan is a sovereign country that those not need take advice from other countries”.<sup>xxviii</sup> He further stressed that “countries should help each other without requirements, but that does not mean that we will say *yes* to everything”.<sup>xxix</sup> Kyrgyz authorities dug their heels in, refusing to shut down the Sapat schools; instead, the schools were renamed “Sapat” in March 2017 and then-president Atambayev accused Erdogan of interfering in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs.<sup>xxx</sup> Turkish authorities tried to extradite several citizens associated with the schools, but Kyrgyzstani courts found that the extradition was “unlawful and unfounded”.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Although this disagreement about the negatively impacted diplomatic relations,<sup>xxxii</sup> other spheres of cooperation were not deeply affected. Major developmental projects such as the construction of the biggest mosque in Central Asia by the Turkish Religious Foundation (*Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı*, TDV) which had started in 2012 was completed in 2017 despite ongoing political disputes.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Only after the Kyrgyz Presidential Elections in 2017 which led to the election of Sooronbay Jeenbekov as the country's new president, did bilateral relations between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan normalize slowly. Indeed, Kyrgyzstan's MFA describes 2018 as an “impetus” year in Turkish-Kyrgyz relations. In July 2018, for instance, Kyrgyz Minister of Economy called



upon Turkey to continue to invest and support development projects in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This request was welcomed by Turkish counterparts. In August 2018, President Erdogan visited Kyrgyzstan for a meeting of the Supreme Council for Strategic Cooperation, the sixth Turkic Council summit, and the opening ceremony of the third International Nomad Games. In September 2018, Ambassador Cengiz Kamil Firat announced that Turkey's government-run Maarif Foundation would be taking over the Sapat schools, which he argued had been built with "the money of Turkish taxpayers".<sup>xxxv</sup> In December 2018, Turkey's ambassador to Bishkek announced that "relationships between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan will grow steadily", and he further stressed that the "two people are friends and brothers".<sup>xxxvi</sup> Yet, Turkey continued to press Kyrgyzstan with regards to its fight against the Gülen movement. Upon his return from Kyrgyzstan, President Erdogan once more claimed that FETÖ constitutes a threat for the Kyrgyz government, and suggested that "FETÖ had infiltrated the army and judiciary in Kyrgyzstan".<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### *Uzbekistan*

Despite a very warm start to diplomatic relations, Turkish-Uzbek relations have been defined by political tension for most of the past 30 years.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Turkey was the first country to recognize Uzbekistan's independence, and in a visit to Ankara not long after in December 1991, Uzbekistan's first president Islam Karimov announced, "My country will go forward by the Turkish route" (Fedorenko 2016, 4). This commitment was reflected in a rush of agreements signed to expand economic aid and cooperation in the early 1990s.

However, when Turkey offered safe haven to a Mohammed Salih, a former presidential candidate and opposition politician, in 1993, relations soured. After a terrorist attack in Tashkent in 1999, Turkish authorities' refusal to extradite two suspects prompted Uzbek authorities to suspend cooperation with TIKA.<sup>xxxix</sup> Uzbekistan cut off relations entirely in 2005, when Turkish authorities condemned police violence against civilians in Andijan and Ankara formally gave asylum to Salih.

Turkey has consistently attempted to increase cooperation with Uzbekistan since the 1990s. Limited changes in the relationship can be detected from the 2000s onward, after Turkey's TIKA signed a cooperation agreement with Uzbekistan in November 2004.<sup>xl</sup> Generally, cooperation has been limited to developmental help from Turkey in increasing knowledge transfer and training in issue areas such as health, culture, education or trade which started in the 2000s, and became more intensified over the next years. In the early 2000s, cooperation with Uzbekistan was largely focused on economic cooperation with the majority of TIKA projects focused on agricultural development and building infrastructure.<sup>xli</sup> This focus changed in 2008, when projects increasingly turned towards cooperation in areas such as education, health and social projects, and projects focusing on agriculture decreased significantly.<sup>xlii</sup> In 2010, Uzbekistan received the highest share of aid by TIKA projects that it had ever received until then.<sup>xliii</sup> Over the next years, TIKA contributed to development of the relations through health projects ranging from professional and educational seminars for health personnel as well as various health services by Turkish health associations were implemented, alongside other educational projects targeting civil society and public services in Uzbekistan.<sup>xliiv</sup> Furthermore, Turkey's YTB also extended educational offerings to students in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, through various kinship programs, and Turkey Scholarships aimed to foster close relations with future generations.<sup>xliv</sup>

2012 saw a small breakthrough in relations, when the countries' ministers of foreign affairs met at the United Nations to adopt a plan for collaboration for 2013-2015. Bilateral relations

continued to redevelop slowly, when president Erdogan met Karimov in Sochi for the 2014 Olympics and Turkey re-appointed its ambassador to Uzbekistan. However, it was not until news of president Islam Karimov's death emerged in September 2016 that there was an opening for meaningful diplomatic improvements. Karimov's death set in motion a slow but steady transition of power to Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who had served as Prime Minister from 2003 to 2016. Mirziyoyev officially became president in December 2016 and quickly adopted an approach to foreign relations and domestic reform that was much different and outward-oriented than his predecessor.

Major improvements began during the symbolic visit of President Erdogan to Uzbekistan, the first visit of the Turkish leader in over 16 years. In 2017, the two countries reached 22 agreements and announced the establishment of a "strategic partnership". During Turkey's yearly held ambassador conference in 2018, Turkey's Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Ahmet Basar Sen, noted that bilateral economic cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkey increased significantly in 2018.<sup>xlvi</sup> He further noted that Turkey will boost cultural relations with Uzbekistan through the establishment of Yunus Emre Cultural Centres (*Yunus Emre Enstitüleri*, YEE).<sup>xlvii</sup> In 2019, Uzbekistan finally joined the Turkic Council, further signaling the new closeness between the two countries.<sup>xlviii</sup> In light of these new developments, YTB's President Abdullah Eren further announced that Turkey will work towards "bringing more students from Uzbekistan to Turkey for educational purposes", which was welcomed by Uzbekistan's education minister Inam Mecedov.<sup>xlix</sup> The prospering of bilateral relations became further evident in ongoing successful cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkey in the extradition of terrorism suspects from the Gülen movement.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Turkish authorities have praised Uzbekistan's critical stance towards Gülenist schools. Furthermore, Turkey made substantive efforts to support Uzbekistan throughout the pandemic, in fact it was the number one receiver of pandemic related aid from Turkey.<sup>li</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have focused on Turkey's diplomatic efforts to shape politics in Central Asia by focusing on the contextual and domestic conditions in targeted states in the region. After reviewing the dominant narrative about Turkey's regional foreign policy – namely, that Turkey's efforts in Central Asia are natural and driven by historically shared ties, and should therefore succeed – we presented a theoretical framework that accounts for domestic conditions in states across a region which explains Turkey's varying success in Central Asia. To illustrate this theoretical framework, we traced domestic elites' eagerness to participate in multilateral initiatives and cooperate with Turkish authorities in three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Our preliminary analysis of the three case studies indicates that relations between Turkey and Central Asian states vary due to different perception of Turkey's country specific policies and practices. Our findings have implications on how the concept of regional foreign policy should be understood in international relations, both in theory and practice.

## References

- Abbott, Kenneth W., and Duncan Snidal. 1998. "Why States Act through Formal International Organizations." *Journal of conflict resolution* 42(1): 3–32.
- Balci, Bayram, and Thomas Liles. 2018. "Turkey's Comeback to Central Asia." *Insight Turkey* 20(4): 11–26.
- Başer, Ekrem T. 2015. "Shift-of-Axis in Turkish Foreign Policy: Turkish National Role Conceptions before and during AKP Rule." *Turkish Studies* 16(3): 291–309.
- Benvenisti, Eyal, and George W. Downs. 2007. "The Empire's New Clothes: Political Economy and the Fragmentation of International Law." *Stan. L. Rev.* 60: 595.
- Brubaker, Rogers. 1995. "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe." *Daedalus* 124(2): 107–32.
- Çakır, Aylin Aydın, and Gül Arıkan Akdağ. 2017. "An Empirical Analysis of the Change in Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP Government." *Turkish Studies* 18(2): 334–57.
- Çevik, Senem B. 2018. "Narrating Turkey's Story: Communicating Its Nation Brand Through Public Diplomacy." In *Middle Powers in Global Governance*, Springer, 213–30.
- Chatin, Mathilde. 2016. "Brazil: Analysis of a Rising Soft Power." *Journal of Political Power* 9(3): 369–93.
- Clarke, Michael. 2017. "The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Grand Strategy?" *Asia Policy* (24): 71–79.
- Cummings, Sally. 2001. "Happier Bedfellows? Russia and Central Asia under Putin." *Asian Affairs* 32(2): 142–52.
- Drezner, Daniel W. 2009. "Bad Debts: Assessing China's Financial Influence in Great Power Politics." *International Security* 34(2): 7–45.
- Ezer, Salim. 2019. "Cultural Diplomacy as a Foreign Policy Tool of Turkey: The Case of Turksoy." Middle East Technical University.
- Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." *International organization*: 887–917.
- Gallarotti, Giulio M. 2011. "Soft Power: What It Is, Why It's Important, and the Conditions for Its Effective Use." *Journal of Political Power* 4(1): 25–47.
- Gilley, Bruce, and Andrew O'Neil. 2014. *Middle Powers and the Rise of China*. Georgetown University Press.
- Gong, Xue. 2019. "The Belt & Road Initiative and China's Influence in Southeast Asia." *The Pacific Review* 32(4): 635–65.

- Gourevitch, Peter. 1978. "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics." *International organization* 32(4): 881–912.
- Hale, William. 2012. *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*. Routledge.
- Hardacre, Alan, and Michael Smith. 2009. "The EU and the Diplomacy of Complex Interregionalism." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 4(2): 167–88.
- Indeo, Fabio. 2018. "The Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New Relations in a Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario." In *China's Belt and Road Initiative*, Springer, 135–53.
- Jervis, Robert, and Jack Snyder. 1991. *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland*. Oxford University Press.
- Kalin, Ibrahim. 2011. "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey." *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 16(3): 5–23.
- Lake, David A. 2018. "Economic Openness and Great Power Competition: Lessons for China and the United States." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11(3): 237–70.
- Laruelle, Marlene. 2010. "Russia and Central Asia." In *The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors*, , 149–75.
- MacFarlane, S. Neil. 2004. "The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia." *International Affairs* 80(3): 447–61.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. WW Norton & Company.
- Müftüler-Baç, Meltem, and Yaprak Gürsoy. 2010. "Is There a Europeanization of Turkish Foreign Policy? An Addendum to the Literature on EU Candidates." *Turkish Studies* 11(3): 405–27.
- Nye, Joseph S. 1990. "Soft Power." *Foreign policy* (80): 153–71.
- Öniş, Ziya, and Şuhnaz Yılmaz. 2009. "Between Europeanization and Euro-asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era." *Turkish Studies* 10(1): 7–24.
- Özpek, Burak Bilgehan, and Nebahat Tanriverdi Yaşar. 2018. "Populism and Foreign Policy in Turkey under the AKP Rule." *Turkish Studies* 19(2): 198–216.
- Ozturk, Ahmet Erdi. 2021. *Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Öztürk, Ahmet Erdi, and İftar Gözaydın. 2018. "A Frame for Turkey's Foreign Policy via the Diyanet in the Balkans." *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 7(3): 331–50.
- Peyrouse, Sébastien. 2016. "Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7(1): 14–23.
- Pocha, Jehangir. 2003. "The Rising 'soft Power' of India and China." *New Perspectives Quarterly* 20(1): 4–4.

- Purushothaman, Uma. 2010. "Shifting Perceptions of Power: Soft Power and India's Foreign Policy." *Journal of Peace Studies* 17(2 & 3): 1–16.
- Putnam, Robert D. 1988. "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games." *International organization*: 427–60.
- Sayari, Sabri. 2000. "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Challenges of Multi-Regionalism." *Journal of International Affairs* 54(1): 169–82.
- Swanström, Niklas. 2005. "China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?" *Journal of contemporary China* 14(45): 569–84.
- Ustun, Cigdem. 2010. "Europeanization of Foreign Policy: The Case of Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Black Sea Region." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 10(2): 225–42.
- Wu, Guoguang. 2008. "Multiple Levels of Multilateralism: The Rising China in the Turbulent World." *China Turns to Multilateralism: Foreign Policy and Regional Security*: 267–89.
- Yuan, Feng. 2019. "The One Belt One Road Initiative and China's Multilayered Multilateralism." In *Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' Initiative*, Springer, 91–116.

<sup>i</sup> [https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-reconnecting-eurasia\\_pg\\_3](https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-reconnecting-eurasia_pg_3)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.turksoy.org/en>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.turkkon.org/en/turk-konseyi-hakkinda>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.turk-pa.org/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-to-open-first-maarif-school-in-central-asia-in-kyrgyzstan>

<sup>vi</sup> TİKA Faaliyet Raporu 2004, 26.

<sup>vii</sup> [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-kazakistan-siyasi-iliskileri\\_tr.mfa#:~:text=Kazakistan%20Siyasi%20C4%B0li%C5%9Fkileri-.T%C3%BCrkiye%20D%20Kazakistan%20Siyasi%20C4%B0li%C5%9Fkileri,la%20diplomatik%20ili%C5%9Fki%20tesis%20edilmi%C5%9Ftir.&text=T%C3%BCrkiye'nin%20Kazakistan%20ili%C5%9Fkileri%20C3%A7ok%20boyutlu%20ve%20stratejik%20d%C3%BCzeydedir.](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-kazakistan-siyasi-iliskileri_tr.mfa#:~:text=Kazakistan%20Siyasi%20C4%B0li%C5%9Fkileri-.T%C3%BCrkiye%20D%20Kazakistan%20Siyasi%20C4%B0li%C5%9Fkileri,la%20diplomatik%20ili%C5%9Fki%20tesis%20edilmi%C5%9Ftir.&text=T%C3%BCrkiye'nin%20Kazakistan%20ili%C5%9Fkileri%20C3%A7ok%20boyutlu%20ve%20stratejik%20d%C3%BCzeydedir.)

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.haberler.com/turkiye-kazakistan-iliskilerinin-20-yili-3409430-haberi/>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.haberler.com/kazakistan-daki-turk-isadamlari-yeni-baskanini-5348855-haberi/>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.haberler.com/kazak-isadamlarina-turkiye-ye-yatirim-cagrisi-6535607-haberi/>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/ekonomi/aselsan-kazakistanda-fabrika-acti-111741.html>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/kara-kuvvetleri-komutani-orgeneral-akar-kazakistanda-177405.html>

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/religion/2015/04/17/kazakhturkish-brotherhood-crowned-with-new-mosque>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/kazakhstan-nazarbayev-first-world-leader-to-visit-post-coup-turkey/>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1277207-kazakistandaki-feto-okullari-icin-kritik-aciklamalar>

<sup>xvi</sup> <https://web2.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/kazakistan-feto-okullarini-kapatin-talebini-reddetti-143224h.htm>

<sup>xvii</sup> <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201610201025387872-cavusoglu-kazakistan-feto/>

<sup>xviii</sup> <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/aydin-unal/kazakistanda-feto-tehdidi-2038773>

<sup>xix</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/tbmm-baskani-sentop-kazakistandaki-feto-okullarini-maarif-vakfina-devralmaya-talibiz/1591725>

<sup>xx</sup> TİKA Faaliyet Raporu 2004, 26.

<sup>xxi</sup> TİKA Faaliyet Raporu 2005, 75; TİKA Faaliyet Raporu 2007, 35; TİKA Faaliyet Raporu 2008, 33.

<sup>xxii</sup> TİKA Faaliyet Raporu 2014, 45.

xxiii

xxiv <https://mfa.gov.kg/ru/dm/posolstvo-kyrgyzskoy-respubliki-v-tureckoy-respublike/-5e9045cea4e5a>

xxv <https://www.rferl.org/a/erdogan-kyrgyzstan-visit-calls-stronger-turkish-kyrgyz-ties/29465590.html>

xxvi <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/15-temmuz-darbe-girisimi/kyrgyzistan-fetonun-en-iyi-organize-oldugu-ulkelerden-biri/615879>

xxvii <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-36913355>

xxviii <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-36940327>

xxix Idem.

xxx <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28634732.html>

xxxi <https://24.kg/english/139482-Employees-of-Sapat-lyceum-ask-Kyrgyzstans-authorities-for-political-asylum/>

xxxii Tika Faaliyet Raporu 2014, 46-48.

xxxiii <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/orta-asya-nin-en-buyuk-camisi-kyrgyzistan-da-tamamlandi-/848739>

xxxiv <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/kyrgyzistan-turkiyeyi-yatirima-cagirdi/1195721>

xxxv <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1469139>

xxxvi <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/turkiye-ile-kyrgyzistan-arasindaki-iliskiler-giderek-artacak/1352166>

xxxvii <https://www.cnnturk.com/video/dunya/erdogandan-biskeke-feto-uyarisi>

xxxviii <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2019/06/21/from-hostility-to-fraternity-turkish-uzbek-relations>

xxxix <https://yde.neu.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/142/2020/09/YDE-Orta-Asya-29.09.2020.pdf>

xl Tika Faaliyet Raporu, 2016, 14.

xli Tika Faaliyet Raporu, 2005, 53.

xlii Tika Faaliyet Raporu 2008, 41.

xliii Tika Faaliyet Raporu 2014, 53.

xliv Tika Faaliyet Raporu 2014, 55-56; Tika Faaliyet Raporu 2015, 39-41.

xlv <https://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/>

xlvi <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/2018-turkiye-ozbekistan-iliskileri-acisindan-cok-basarili-gecti/1352762>

xlvii <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/10-buyukelciler-konferansi-turkiye-ile-ozbekistan-arasindaki-ticaret-hacmi-rekor-kirdi/1234108>

xlviii <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-offically-accepted-as-turkic-council-s-fifth-member/30217777.html>

xliv <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/ozbekistandan-daha-fazla-ogrenci-turkiyede-egitim-almali/1642881>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/war-on-terror/2-feto-members-linked-with-pkk-brought-from-uzbekistan-to-turkey>

<sup>li</sup> <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/ekonomi/salgin-surecinde-turkiyenin-yurt-disina-yardimlari-100-milyon-lirayi-asti-6182293/>