

TURKEY'S SECURITY STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA: GEOPOLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract

This article systematically and scientifically analyzes the role, significance, and limitations of the Central Asian factor in Turkey's regional security policy. Within the framework of the study, the main directions of security cooperation between Turkey and the Central Asian states, institutional mechanisms, the geopolitical competitive environment, and transnational threats were examined from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. In addition, the cultural-diplomatic, geoeconomic, and military instruments employed by Turkey to strengthen its strategic influence in the region were analyzed. The findings demonstrate that Turkey's security strategy in the region is being shaped within a competitive environment involving the Central Asian states pursuing multi-vector foreign policies, as well as major geopolitical actors such as Russia and China.

Keywords: Turkey, Central Asia, geopolitics, regional security, transnational threats, military cooperation, soft power, geoeconomics.

Introduction

The Central Asian region is located in the heart of Eurasia and is considered one of the most important geostrategic areas in the contemporary system of international relations. The strategic significance of the region is explained by its rich energy resources, transit-logistics potential, and transportation and communication corridors connecting East and West. Consequently, Central Asia has historically evolved into a region where the interests of major geopolitical powers intersect.

In the nineteenth century, the region became an arena of geopolitical confrontation between the Russian Empire and the British Empire, a process commonly described in the history of international relations as the "Great Game." At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Central Asia emerged as a new arena of geopolitical competition. Russia's integration policy in the post-Soviet space, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the security and energy diversification policies of the United States and the European Union further increased the region's international strategic importance.

For Turkey, Central Asia is not only a geopolitical but also a civilizational and cultural strategic region. The existence of linguistic, historical, cultural, and ethnic affinities with the states of the



region laid the foundation for the formation of the “Turkic World” concept in Turkey’s foreign policy. This concept is aimed at deepening political, economic, cultural, and security integration among Turkic states.

At the same time, after gaining independence, the Central Asian states adopted a multi-vector foreign policy model. This strategy enabled them to maintain balanced cooperation simultaneously with Russia, China, the United States, Turkey, and other global actors. As a result, Turkey’s policy in the region is being formed within a complex geopolitical and institutional environment.

The main objective of this article is to scientifically analyze Turkey’s regional security policy in Central Asia and to identify its strategic instruments, geopolitical opportunities, and institutional constraints.

Literature Review and Methodology

Geopolitical competition and security issues in Central Asia constitute one of the extensively studied areas within international relations theory. In the works of Allison Cooley and Marlene Laruelle, the strategic significance of Central Asia and the mechanisms of competition among Russia, China, and Western states in the region are analyzed. These studies provide an important theoretical foundation for understanding the region’s place in the global security system.

The theory of soft power serves as one of the key methodological foundations for studying Turkey’s foreign policy in Central Asia. According to this concept developed by Joseph Nye, states exert influence not only through military or economic resources but also through cultural and ideological attractiveness. Turkey seeks to expand its strategic influence in Central Asia precisely through factors such as language, culture, historical memory, and religious affinity.

Halford Mackinder’s Heartland Theory interprets Central Asia as the center of global geopolitical control. This theory serves as a theoretical basis for explaining Turkey’s geopolitical interests in the region. Likewise, Alfred Thayer Mahan’s Sea Power Theory helps explain Turkey’s geoeconomic initiatives by emphasizing the strategic importance of transportation, communication, and logistical corridors.

Empirical studies indicate that Turkey’s lack of direct integration into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as well as the multi-vector foreign policies pursued by the Central Asian states, constitute limiting factors on Turkey’s strategic potential in the region. Therefore, Turkey functions not as a dominant security actor but rather as an alternative and complementary strategic partner. From this perspective, Turkey operates in the region not as a leading actor but as an additional strategic partner. This research was conducted on the basis of international relations theories, geopolitical concepts, and regional security analyses. The principal aim of the study is to scientifically examine the strategic opportunities and constraints of Turkey’s security policy in Central Asia.

Methodology and Literature Review

This study is aimed at analyzing the role of the Central Asian factor in Turkey’s regional security policy and its impact on geopolitical processes. The research methodology is based on geopolitical analysis, institutional analysis, comparative analysis, conceptual theoretical analysis, international experience, and practical statistical and analytical data.



Geopolitical analysis was used to examine Central Asia's strategic location, resource potential, and the influence of transportation corridors on global political processes.

Institutional analysis was employed to analyze the impact of regional security institutions such as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the SCO, and the CSTO on Turkey's strategic potential.

Comparative analysis was conducted by comparing Turkey's policy with the regional strategies of Russia, China, and the United States, including their geopolitical approaches and instruments.

Conceptual theoretical analysis applied the Heartland Theory, Sea Power Theory, and the Soft Power Concept to explain Turkey's strategic position. This methodology made it possible to systematically and scientifically assess Turkey's strategic potential in the region, as well as its opportunities and limitations.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that Turkey's security policy in Central Asia is a dynamic process shaped within a complex, multi-level, and multi-actor geopolitical environment. This process is directly related to the multipolar nature of the international system, competition among regional security institutions, and the balanced foreign policy strategies pursued by the Central Asian states.

Today, Central Asia represents a strategic geopolitical space where the interests of global and regional powers intersect. The Russian Federation remains a firmly established actor in the region due to its historical, political, and military presence, strengthening its influence through institutional mechanisms such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian economic integration structures. Simultaneously, the People's Republic of China has become a leading economic actor in the region through geoeconomic expansion focused on infrastructure, energy, transportation, and logistics within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Within this geopolitical environment, Turkey does not pursue a model of direct military competition; rather, it employs a strategy based on the combination of cultural diplomacy, institutional cooperation, and geoeconomic instruments. This approach is explained through the concept of soft power in international relations theory and constitutes the primary mechanism of Turkey's relative influence in the region.

Turkey's institutional policy in Central Asia is becoming increasingly systematic within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States. This organization serves as an important platform for deepening regional integration and cooperation by strengthening political coordination among member states and promoting integration in education, science, and culture. Institutional cooperation within the OTS enhances Turkey's regional legitimacy and contributes to its formation as a normative and geoeconomic actor. Consequently, Turkey's influence in the region extends beyond bilateral relations to a broader multilateral institutional level.

Turkey relies heavily on soft power instruments to expand its foreign policy influence in Central Asia. This strategy includes:

- Turkic-language higher education institutions and academic cooperation programs;
- Cultural centers and humanitarian diplomacy institutions;
- Scholarship and academic exchange programs;
- Historical memory and religious-cultural diplomacy mechanisms.



These instruments enable Turkey to strengthen its political influence not through direct pressure or military force but through normative attractiveness and cultural legitimacy. As a result, Turkey has acquired a positive image as an “acceptable actor” in the region.

Turkey’s military cooperation in Central Asia is primarily technical, educational, and advisory in nature and is implemented through the following areas:

- Military education and personnel training programs;
- Joint military exercises and training activities;
- Defense industry products and technology transfer;
- Military consultation and expert assistance.

Nevertheless, the absence of permanent Turkish military bases in the region constitutes a major limitation on Turkey’s capacity for strategic military expansion. This situation can be explained by several systemic factors.

First, the dominant role of regional security institutions such as the SCO and CSTO shapes the military-political balance in Central Asia and limits the independent entry of external military actors.

Second, the multi-vector foreign policy strategies of the Central Asian states prevent any external power from acquiring exclusive military influence.

Third, Turkey’s membership in NATO compels it to conduct its regional military policy according to principles of caution and balance.

As a result, Turkey does not emerge as a leading military actor in Central Asia but rather as a complementary, supportive, and cooperation-oriented strategic actor in the field of security. This allows its overall regional policy to be characterized as a “limited influence model” based on soft power and institutional diplomacy.

Conclusion

The findings of the study demonstrate that Turkey’s security policy in Central Asia represents a complex and multi-layered strategic model that is evolving within the context of a multipolar international system. Unlike classical military expansionism, this model is based on the integration of soft power, institutional diplomacy, and geoeconomic instruments. Turkey acts not as a dominant actor in the region but as an adaptable middle power, exercising its influence primarily through cultural, political, and economic means.

At the same time, Turkey’s strategic opportunities are shaped by certain institutional and geopolitical constraints. Russia’s historical security architecture, China’s expanding geoeconomic presence, and the predominant role of regional security institutions such as the SCO and CSTO limit Turkey’s capacity for independent military-political influence. Furthermore, the multi-vector foreign policies of the Central Asian states maintain a balanced competitive environment in the region, making it difficult for any external actor to achieve a dominant position.

Overall, Turkey’s security policy in Central Asia is developing as a long-term strategic approach based on the combination of “**soft power + institutional cooperation + geoeconomic integration.**” This approach enables Turkey to maintain stable political and economic influence in the region without directly seeking military leadership, while simultaneously strengthening its position as an important middle-level strategic actor in both regional and global politics.



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