

# Türkiye's Eastern Engagement: Framing and Focusing This Ambition Wisely Matters

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Türkiye is a long-standing NATO ally that also prides itself on being a founding member of many leading European institutions. Yet, by virtue of its history and geography, Türkiye is at the same time an integral part of Asia; hence, its self-depiction as the easternmost European and the westernmost Asian country. As Türkiye prepares to commemorate in 2023 the centennial of the proclamation of the Republic of Türkiye, it is adapting to the realities of a multi-polar world order and exhibiting greater interest in the Global South. In 2019, Türkiye announced an initiative coined 'Asia Anew', designed to strengthen its interaction with the East. This analysis considers Türkiye's goal of deepening its eastern engagement to be on the mark. It argues that this ambition needs to be framed in accordance with Türkiye's western vocation and calls for Türkiye to focus on deepening and widening its cooperation in the South Caucasus and Central Asia in view of the new opportunities that are presenting themselves.

**Keywords:** Türkiye, Russia, South Caucasus, Central Asia, NATO.



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### ***Introduction***

Russia's war in Ukraine has refocused global attention on Euro-Atlantic security and the fact that peace and stability in this region cannot be taken for granted. But it has not changed the overriding truth that the global centre of gravity is gradually shifting to the east.

Türkiye is among those trying to reposition itself according to this geopolitical reality by intensifying its eastward gaze. While this makes sense, Ankara should have two considerations in mind:

Firstly, Türkiye should pursue its ambition to deepen its engagement in the east, including with China and the wider Pacific region, with due regard for its western vocation. Türkiye's inherent uniqueness as a country that is anchored in the West but is also a part of the East adds to its strength and appeal. Therefore, accordingly calibrating the right balance in its policies and actions is in Türkiye's own interest.

Secondly, deepening Türkiye's role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia should be the centrepiece of Türkiye's eastern outlook. In the early 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye had euphorically engaged these regions largely inhabited by its kinsmen. That effort needs to be reinvigorated. There is untapped potential in this vast region in fields such as energy, transportation, and the defence industry, and current geopolitical trends have brought about new and favourable dynamics that Türkiye can act on.

### ***Duality: A source of strength for Türkiye***

A recurrent and somewhat worn-out discussion, both within and beyond Türkiye, is about whether the country is a part of the West or the East. The answer is short and simple: Türkiye is a part of both. It is critically important for Türkiye to believe in and effectively practise this reality. Seeing Türkiye through the wider prism of being a country with a foothold in both the West and the East has always been a core element of the foreign policy of Türkiye. It was an approach that was embraced at the outset by the Republic of Türkiye and, in many ways, constituted a natural continuum of an Ottoman legacy.

Türkiye's founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was cognizant of the value of Türkiye's historical and natural ties to the East and took care

to nurture them, even as he focused on integrating the country into the western world. Far from seeing any contradiction, he utilized this quality of the young nation to offset challenging external dynamics coming from either direction. This duality prevailed even as Türkiye's western orientation became more pronounced during the height of the Cold War to offset the weight of a growing Soviet threat from the north.

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Today, the rise of China and the shift in global geopolitics towards the Asia-Pacific region has amplified the importance of an eastern outlook for Türkiye. And, as Türkiye tries to redirect its energy through initiatives like its Asia Anew policy,<sup>1</sup> it will need to keep the right balance between this ambition and the country's western vocation.

This can be achieved by consistent action and messaging in a manner that precludes doubts over the country's orientation. This, of course, is a wide-ranging effort that encompasses things from adherence to universal standards in democratic practices at home to assuming an international posture that is commensurate to Türkiye's place in the western world. Türkiye's trajectory should not raise doubts on either count.

### ***For starters, what not to do***

This year in February, Türkiye commemorated 70 years in NATO, the preeminent western collective defence alliance.<sup>2</sup> And, just seven months later, within the same calendar year, Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced his vision for Türkiye to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),<sup>3</sup> a platform contemplated at the time by China and Russia, above all, to offset the western-dominated global order.

1 Mfa.gov.tr, "Asia Anew Initiative", available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/asia-anew-initiative.en.mfa> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

2 Mfa.gov.tr, "No: 53, Press Release Regarding the 70th Anniversary of Türkiye's Accession to NATO", 18 February 2022, available at: [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-53\\_-turkiye-nin-nato-ya-katiliminin-70-yildonumu-hk.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-53_-turkiye-nin-nato-ya-katiliminin-70-yildonumu-hk.en.mfa) (accessed: September 30, 2022)

3 Reuters, "Turkey's Erdogan targets joining Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, media reports say", September 17, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-targets-joining-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-media-2022-09-17/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

The contradiction between Türkiye's long-standing membership in NATO (not to mention its candidate status to the European Union) and the idea of it joining the SCO did not go unnoticed in many circles. But some in Türkiye saw it differently; the world was changing, and so should Türkiye's approach to it.

Pundits of Türkiye joining the SCO reference the emergence of a multipolar world order, especially with the rise of China and the growing importance of the East in all domains. Even some non-partisan, reputable analysts view the proposition of Türkiye joining the SCO as an opportunity.<sup>4</sup> The conventional wisdom behind this thinking is that Türkiye needs to expand its horizons according to evolving circumstances, that it cannot be constrained by an outdated western-centric outlook on global affairs, and that the obvious direction to turn to for emerging opportunities is the East.<sup>5</sup> The subtext is that the West is in decline.

These are compelling arguments that have also gained traction with the Turkish public at large. According to a recent public survey, whereas in 2016 only 6% of the population believed in the need to increase Türkiye's engagement with China and the far east, today 26% believe that to be the case.<sup>6</sup> This changing sentiment is a function of evolving global realities. It is also nurtured by a sense of estrangement from the West that has partly infused Türkiye and has come to disproportionately dominate the national discourse.

This latter dynamic is something that President Erdoğan is aware of, increasingly exhibits an affiliation to, but more importantly, is apt at stoking for political purposes. His sudden pronouncement of Türkiye's SCO membership fits this pattern and can be read in this light, especially as it comes against the backdrop of rising election fever in the country.

Türkiye is moving towards presidential and parliamentary elections in June 2023. Meanwhile, the economy is in dire straits, burdened, among

4 Yetkin, M. , "Shanghai Summit and Turkey: New Balance of Power", *Yetkin Report*, September 15, 2022, available at: <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2022/09/15/shanghai-summit-and-turkey-new-balance-of-power/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

5 Öney, S. "Turkey's new President and foreign alliances" (translation from Turkish), *PolitikYol*, September 20, 2022, available at: <https://www.politikyol.com/turkiyenin-yenicumhurbaskani-ve-dis-ittifaklar/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

6 Adın, M. "Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perceptions Survey – 2022" (translation from Turkish), Kadir Has University, September 8, 2022, available at: [https://www.khas.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/TDP\\_2022\\_TUR\\_FINAL\\_05.09.2022.pdf](https://www.khas.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/TDP_2022_TUR_FINAL_05.09.2022.pdf) (accessed: September 30, 2022)

other things, by a steep rise in inflation. An overwhelming percentage of the population believe that the economy is being mismanaged.<sup>7</sup> Galvanizing public support through foreign policy stunts becomes a convenient low-hanging fruit under such political circumstances.

While the whirlwind around his statement about Türkiye joining the SCO had not even subsided, President Erdoğan took the stage at another international venue on the other side of the world and this time gave a very different message. In an address to the 77<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly in New York on 29 September, Erdoğan underscored Türkiye's European identity as a NATO ally of 70 years. Only then did he speak of Türkiye's engagement in Asia, with no mention of the SCO.<sup>8</sup>

It did not, however, take long for him to return to the topic of the SCO, albeit in a slightly different tone. Just a few days later, this time at a press conference in Türkiye, Erdoğan cited the combined population and gross national product figures of SCO countries as 3.2 billion people and \$20 trillion respectively, and went on to make the case for Türkiye's enhanced engagement with this part of the world. His comments notably fell short of talking about full membership to the SCO, though it is not clear whether that was a considered omission.

As Türkiye's official rhetoric oscillates in this manner, it is difficult to predict how far the idea of Türkiye becoming a full member of the SCO will be taken. This, by the way, is a topic on which others, such as SCO members Russia and China, will also have to weigh in. In fact, the Russians have already done so by underlining the incompatibility of NATO and SCO membership.<sup>9</sup> Moscow's reaction is a good reminder of two things: firstly, that NATO ally Türkiye joining the SCO as a full member is unrealistic, and secondly, that Türkiye's current status as a dialogue partner in the SCO is the right dose of engagement.

7 Twitter (@ozersencar1), "The change over time in the answers to the question of whether the economy is managed well or badly." (translation from Turkish), February 17, 2022, available at: <https://twitter.com/ozersencar1/status/1494253482576121860> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

8 Tccb.gov.tr, "Speech at the 77th General Assembly of the United Nations" (translation from Turkish), September 20, 2022, available at: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/139774/birlesmis-milletler-77-genel-kurulu-nda-yaptiklari-konusma> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

9 Euronews, "According to Russia, Turkey cannot join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization while it is a NATO member (translation from Turkish), September 20, 2022, available at: <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/09/20/rusyaya-gore-turkiye-nato-uyesi-ken-sangay-isbirligi-orgutune-katilamaz> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

*Changing dynamics in the South Caucasus and Central Asia*

Türkiye’s post-Cold War outreach to the South Caucasus and Central Asia in the early 1990s had come in the wake of a global geopolitical transformation that was driven by the sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although the forces of change are different today, we once again find ourselves at a transformative juncture in international relations.

The greatest shock this time has come from the unexpected re-emergence of war in Europe, compounded by the forceful annexation of territory under the threat of nuclear sabre rattling.

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As the perpetrator of this aggression, Russia faces enormous sanctions, and its stature as an energy supplier for Europe – that was dubious to start with – has irrevocably been shattered. Russia’s overreach in Ukraine has been self-defeating in many ways, including by consequently depriving Russia of its greatest leverage over Germany and Europe as the continent moves to wean itself off energy dependency on Russia.

A similar image in terms of Russia’s waning influence is emerging in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia’s shadow has always loomed large over this region, particularly in relation to emerging cooperation mechanisms it is not involved in. At times, this has caused its former vassals to tread lightly and be over cautious when engaging in new ideas. Nowadays, though, that hesitation seems to be evaporating. Putin’s dismissive narrative on Ukrainian nationhood and Russia’s indiscriminate use of force have led to widespread unease. It has eliminated any semblance of altruism in cooperation with Russia and, instead, sowed the seeds for a recalibration among countries of the region in their approach to this ever-fraught relationship.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Kazakhstan, where President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev defied expectations by refusing to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> He is now busy transforming the country’s political system and building an image of himself as a truly

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10 Umarov, T. “Kazakhstan’s Snap Presidential Election: A Shot at Democratization?”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 15, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87922> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

independent leader. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation at the beginning of the year when he called for Russian-led support through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to quell domestic unrest.<sup>11</sup>

Another example is Azerbaijan which, for its part, raised its profile as a reliable alternative source of energy for Europe by agreeing to increase its gas exports to 20 billion cubic meters a year by 2027.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, after having liberated its occupied territories in 2020 as Russia looked on, Azerbaijan made further advances against Armenia this September when confronted with challenges on its state border.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, Russia's inaction in the face of Azerbaijan's military gains became a source of resentment among Armenians who had already been taken aback in 2020, when their appeal for intervention by the CSTO had fallen on deaf ears in Moscow. The Russian-led CSTO had a good pretext: the conflict was not taking place on Armenian territory and the CSTO did not have any obligation for extra-territorial intervention.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two Central Asian countries that host Russian military bases, engaged in renewed fighting this year over a long-standing border dispute, revealing Russia's inability to, or deliberate choice not to, weigh in on the conflict.

These developments have inevitably raised questions over the degree to which Russia retains the ability to exert influence in its 'back yard.'<sup>14</sup> Clearly, neither Russia's nor, for that matter, China's influence in this region can be dismissed. Nor should it be underestimated. Both Russia and China can be assumed to have their own reasoning in their

11 Daily Sabah, "State of emergency in Kazakhstan as Tokayev asks CSTO's help, January 5, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/state-of-emergency-in-kazakhstan-as-tokayev-asks-cstos-help> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

12 Reuters, "EU signs deal with Azerbaijan to double gas imports by 2027", July 18, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/eu-signs-deal-with-azerbaijan-double-gas-imports-by-2027-2022-07-18/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

13 Ilyushina, M. "Azerbaijan and Armenia exchange fire in Nagorno-Karabakh border zone", *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/13/armenia-azerbaijan-karabakh-border-conflict/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

14 Weir, F. "Is war in Ukraine costing Russia control of its own backyard?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2022/0928/Is-war-in-Ukraine-costing-Russia-control-of-its-own-backyard> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

approaches to emerging contingencies in the region, including when they choose not to act.<sup>15</sup>

But be that as it may, in Russia’s case, regional dynamics have been affected by its act of war against Ukraine, coming at the expense of Russia’s general standing. This, in turn, has hastened some existing trends and unleashed others, in turn presenting new opportunities for Türkiye.

***The momentum is increasing***

Azerbaijan has historically been Türkiye’s linchpin in its connection to the east. The same can be said for Türkiye’s role as Azerbaijan’s western gateway. Since Azerbaijan’s independence was restored in 1991, the two countries have systematically deepened and expanded their cooperation.

The two brotherly nations also used the synergy among them to advocate regional cooperation schemes, resulting in grand projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, as well as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP)

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natural gas conduit, both of which extend into Europe. Just recently, Türkiye and Azerbaijan agreed to double the annual capacity of TANAP to 32 billion cubic meters a year, marking a significant development in the wake of rising energy prices and supply shortages that have come with resounding effects in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

The trajectory of the Turkic Council that was established in 2009 between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye is a good example of this changing dynamic. After years of reluctance to do so, Uzbekistan acceded in 2019 and Turkmenistan, which, together with Hungary, is currently an observer, is also expected to join.<sup>17</sup>

15 Doolotkeldieva, A. and Marat, E. “Why Russia and China Aren’t Intervening in Central Asia”, *Foreign Policy*, October 4, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/04/tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-russia-china-intervention-central-asia/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

16 TRT Haber, “TANAP’s capacity will be doubled” (translation from Turkish), October 6, 2022, available at: <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/ekonomi/tanapin-kapasitesi-iki-katina-kadar-artirilacak-713926.html> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

17 Business Türkmenistan, “Turkmenistan will become a full member of the Organization of Turkic States” (translation from Turkish), September 30, 2022, available at: <https://>



The Turkic Council rebranded itself in 2021 as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), thereby raising its political stature, and adopted a landmark document called Turkic World Vision 2040, laying out an ambitious agenda for cooperation.<sup>18</sup> Among the stated goals are political and security cooperation; economic and sectoral cooperation; enhancing people-to-people contacts; and expanding ties with external parties. This is the strongest manifestation ever by these countries of their desire to leverage the OTS to strengthen their collective resilience through intensified cooperation.

The momentum behind the OTS can also be seen in motion in different formats among the countries of the region, with energy and transportation projects taking the lead in terms of their output.

Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, for example, finally resolved a long-standing dispute over gas fields in the Caspian Sea in 2021, opening prospects for joint exploitation and enhanced export capacity to the west.<sup>19</sup> Kazakhstan, meanwhile, quickly learned from Russia's recent temporary blockage of its oil exports through the Caspian Sea and moved to diversify its energy trade routes, including through cooperation with Azerbaijan.<sup>20</sup>

On the transportation front, the foreign and transport ministers of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye met in a newly established joint format in June 2022 in Baku, with the aim of boosting their cooperation and strengthening the potential of the transcaspian pathway, also known as the Middle Corridor.<sup>21</sup>

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business.com.tr/post/9226/turkmenistan-turk-devletleri-teshkiyat%C4%B1na-tam-uye-olacak (accessed: October 6, 2022)

18 Turkkon.org, "Turkic World Vision – 2040", available at: <https://www.turkkon.org/assets/pdf/haberler/turkic-world-vision-2040-2396-97.pdf> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

19 Daily Sabah, "Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan to resolve disputes on Caspian oil field", January 22, 2021, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/azerbaijan-turkmenistan-to-resolve-disputes-on-caspian-oil-field> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

20 Reuters, "After Russian move on pipeline, Kazakhstan says it needs other routes", July 7, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/kazakhstan-needs-diversify-oil-supply-routes-tokayev-says-2022-07-07/> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

21 Fatih, C.M. "The Modern Silk Road in the 21st Century: Where Are We in the Middle Corridor?" (translation from Turkish), Ankara Politikalar Merkezi, January 21, 2021, available at: [https://apm.org.tr/2021/01/21/21-yuzyilda-modern-ipek-yolu-orta-koridorun-neresindeyiz/?utm\\_source=pocket\\_mylist](https://apm.org.tr/2021/01/21/21-yuzyilda-modern-ipek-yolu-orta-koridorun-neresindeyiz/?utm_source=pocket_mylist) (accessed: October 6, 2022)

### The Middle Corridor



Source: <https://middlecorridor.com/en/route>

This is a particularly important development, given the potential contributions of this route to sustaining east–west trade flows. The middle corridor brings considerable advantages compared to its alternatives, such as the northern route through Russia or sea-based traffic that carries an overwhelming percentage of western-bound goods, in metrics such as distance, days of unfettered access within a calendar year, and connections to air and seaports.<sup>22</sup> These attributes of the middle corridor have appreciated exponentially after the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, as a result of the war in Ukraine, which has led to a realization of the importance of resilient supply chains.

A new and flourishing area of engagement that Türkiye is spearheading in the region is related to the defence industry. As the success of Türkiye’s unmanned aerial vehicles, and most notably that of the Baykar-produced Bayraktar TB2, continues to capture global headlines, including in the context of the war in Ukraine, Türkiye is making a name for itself as a source country for arms supplies.<sup>23</sup> Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan have all purchased the already legendary TB2, while Kazakhstan recently signed a deal to produce Turkish Aerospace’s ANKA model.<sup>24</sup>

22 Mfa.gov.tr, “Turkey’s Multilateral Transportation Policy”, available at: [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa) (accessed: October 6, 2022)

23 Carlin, M. “How the Turkish-made TB2 drone gave Ukraine an edge against Russia”, *Business Insider*, September 18, 2022, available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-turkish-baykar-tb2-drone-gave-ukraine-edge-against-russia-2022-9> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

24 Kumenov, A. “Kazakhstan seals deal to produce Turkish drones under license”,

With Baykar looking to build a drone factory in Ukraine and Turkish Aerospace deciding to co-produce in Kazakhstan,<sup>25</sup> Türkiye is upending Russia's traditional hold over defence industry sales in the region and challenging China, thanks to the success of its cost-efficient and battle-tested technologies. Moreover, Türkiye's success is not only limited to drone sales, as interest in different types of Turkish automated weapons systems and other items such as attack helicopters, patrol vessels, corvettes, and frigates is on the rise, both in the region and beyond.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of new opportunities, it is also important to bear in mind the potential impetus that can come if Armenia and Azerbaijan are able to sign an official peace agreement, and there could be progress in the normalization of relations between Armenia and Türkiye. Despite many existing challenges, this is a time of hope in that regard.<sup>27</sup> Both Azerbaijan and Türkiye have repeatedly said that, should there be concrete progress, Armenia's isolation would come to an end and regional cooperation would prosper. Together with its political implications, such a development would undoubtedly inject additional energy to cooperation efforts in the region.

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## **Conclusion**

While the global balance tilts towards the east, power dynamics are shifting in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia's grip over the region is dwindling and this is opening the road for greater change. Countries of the region have embraced this reality and are adapting

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*Eurasianet*, May 13, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

25 Daily Sabah, "Zelenskyy honors Turkish drone maker, discusses its Ukraine plant", September 11, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/zelenskyy-honors-turkish-drone-maker-discusses-its-ukraine-plant> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

26 Tavsan, S. "Turkish defense contractors enjoy sales bonanza in Asia", *Nikkei Asia*, May 3, 2022, available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkish-defense-contractors-enjoy-sales-bonanza-in-Asia> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

27 Coşkun, A. and Heffern, J. "Bottom-Up Change in the South Caucasus Is Possible", *The National Interest*, February 5, 2022, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/bottom-change-south-caucasus-possible-200316> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

accordingly, further strengthening the winds of change. By virtue of its history and geography, Türkiye is well placed to benefit from these developments. A well-framed policy that embraces Türkiye's strengths and aims to build on its ties in the South Caucasus and Central Asia can empower Türkiye to make the best of this moment. That, in turn, would be the natural centrepiece of Türkiye's eastern engagement.