Erdogan Pursues a Broad Coalition in Asia

Against the background of the frank failure of US policy, not only in Afghanistan but also in Iraq and Syria, as well as the decline in activity and authority of the European Union in the region, the course taken by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to create a broad coalition of pro-Turkish forces in Asia has become increasingly apparent in recent years.

The Turkish geopolitical project is rooted in the historical past of Turkey, which was once one of the world’s empires, and today has as its goal the involvement of Asian states in the area of its civilization, with a particular emphasis on the Central Asia region (CA). In accomplishing these objectives, Ankara only has to reckon with Russia, China at this stage, and, to a lesser extent, Iran and the Saudis in the region.

This policy of Ankara has crystallized in Turkey’s new strategy aimed at strengthening ties with Asia. Ankara’s 2009 format of annual summits of heads of Turkic-speaking states played an essential role in this, which was expanded by establishing the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States (CCTS), also called the Turkic Council in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan. At the stage of establishment, the Turkic Council included Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Turkey’s growing multilateral influence in the region since 2010 has been made possible by the growing interest of the countries in the region themselves in Ankara, especially in humanitarian cooperation and investment. As a result, several business projects have been implemented between Turkey and the Central Asian region over the years: Turkey began holding bilateral business forums annually, invested in constructing an international airport in Ashgabat and restoring the Port of Turkmenbashi in the Caspian Sea, and opened new flights with the Central Asian
region (CA). Investment projects have contributed to a closer intertwining of Central Asian economies with Turkey, resulting in a steady growth of Turkey’s trade turnover with the Central Asian region (CA).

With Erdogan’s rise to power, Ankara’s policy has clearly sought to use the Islamic factor to mobilize support both inside and outside the state.

On August 5, 2019, Turkey’s Foreign Ministry proclaimed the New Asia Initiative. Subsequently, thanks to close ties and free cooperation at the level of small and medium-sized businesses, Turkey has become one of the leading trading partners of the Central Asian region (CA). Given Turkey’s lack of government funding for such needs, business connections are mostly made through the private sector. However, Turkey’s economic problems, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, led to an increase in unemployment in Turkey to 26%, and the country’s budget in 2020 came out with a deficit of $24.7 billion. This has forced Ankara to take a differentiated approach to develop relations with Central Asian countries in the recent period.

As a result, Ankara’s relations with Turkmenistan have developed significantly; trade turnover with Turkey reached $2 billion in 2020, which is three times more than in 2018, and the total volume of Turkish investments exceeds $47 billion.

Significant emphasis was also placed on developing relations with Kyrgyzstan, where the main areas of Turkish investment were the construction of infrastructure facilities, trade, transport, and energy. Public-private companies mainly represent investments here. Ankara has emphasized soft power in its cooperation with the Central Asian republic. Turkish language centers opened at Kyrgyz universities and the TTEOMER Turkish language center at the Turkish Embassy in Bishkek. They not only help students learn the language but also invite Kyrgyz students to study in Turkey. In 2018, with the participation of the heads of Turkey and Kyrgyzstan, the central mosque of Bishkek, built at the cost of $35 million by the Republic of Turkey, was opened, and pro-Turkish organizations were actively involved in sponsoring and supporting the Third World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan the same year. After the recent conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, Turkey began to actively build houses in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov paid an official visit to Ankara in early June, demonstrating a close rapprochement between the two countries. However, this demonstration did not work, primarily because the primary purpose of this visit was the Kyrgyz leader’s hope to get money from Turkey, which was never given to him. And Ankara had several reasons for this. First, Turkey does not have many free resources and has not even written off Kyrgyzstan’s debt. However, it is negligible compared to Bishkek’s debts to Russia, which Moscow has written off, and what Kyrgyzstan owes Beijing. In addition, Central Asia in general and Kyrgyzstan are not a priority for Turkish foreign policy due to the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Caucasus, and, in particular, Azerbaijan.

Today, the attitudes of the population of Kyrgyzstan and many Central Asian countries toward Ankara’s policies and actions are changing significantly. And this is especially evident in the relations between Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. On the one hand, we see the first person smiling hypocritically, talking about friendship and good neighborliness. And on the other hand, there is an apparent hope of the same Kyrgyzstan to receive from Ankara those or other material benefits, for which Turkey begins to take over someone else’s home openly. This, in particular, is confirmed by the events with the unhindered kidnapping by Turkish security services in Kyrgyzstan of Orhan Inanda, the founder of a network of Turkish educational institutions, which should certainly have a fatal effect on the bilateral relations between Bishkek and Ankara. After all, the circumstances of Orhan Inanda’s kidnapping and the failure of Kyrgyz unique structures to conduct an effective investigation into the disappearance of the Kyrgyz citizen have an impact on the image and reputation of the Central Asian country. The Turkish media, taking advantage of this circumstance, publish articles about the alleged involvement of the Kyrgyz special services in delivering Inanda to Turkey.

This incident also shows that fighting the followers of Gulen has become Erdogan’s “fix” idea, and he is pursuing it despite geopolitical considerations. And Bishkek’s complicated financial situation makes it quite “accommodating,” even on such a delicate issue of bilateral relations. Without a doubt, such unceremonious actions of the Turkish secret services on the territory of a third country reflect the personal view of the Turkish leader on building international relations: the polite nods, bows, and handshakes that are accepted between heads of state in protocol relations, and the dismissive behavior towards those who fall under Erdogan’s thumb.

Under these conditions, Turkey’s level of influence in the region remains lower than that of Russia and China, respectively. Erdogan himself has fewer chances to gain support on many political issues. The Central Asian countries are closely tied to the military-political and integration alliances involving the above-mentioned states.