

CENTRAL ASIA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF IRAN AND TURKEY

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Adilbek Yermekbayev¹,
Ph.D., Associate Professor, Al-Farabi Kazakh National
University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Gabit Zhumatay²,
Ph.D., Associate Professor, Narxoz University,
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Aigerim Altynbek³,
Ph.D. student, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University,
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Abstract. This article examines the issue of the Iranian-Turkish geopolitical rivalry in Central Asia. The intensifying anti-Russian sanctions are putting the Central Asian countries in front of a difficult choice. Iran and Turkey are also actively interested in Central Asia, using various tools to promote their own interests. The analysis of Turkish and Iranian policies in the region allows us to draw certain conclusions and model their prospects.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, geopolitics, competition.*

ИРАН МЕН ТҮРКИЯНЫҢ СЫРТҚЫ САЯСАТЫНДАҒЫ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ

Әділбек Ермекбаев, Ғабит Жұматай, Әйгерім Алтынбек

Андатпа. Бұл мақалада Орталық Азиядағы иран-түрік геосаяси бәсекелестігі туралы мәселе қарастырылады. Ресейге қарсы санкциялардың күшеюі Орталық Азия елдерін күрделі таңдау алдына қойып отыр. Иран мен Түркия да өз мүдделерін алға жылжыту үшін әртүрлі құралдарды қолдана отырып, Орталық Азияға белсенді қызығушылық танытуда. Аймақтағы Түркия мен Иран

¹ adilbekea@gmail.com

² gzhumatay@gmail.com

³ a.altynbek@turanaedu.kz

саясатына жүргізілген талдау белгілі бір тұжырымдар жасауға және олардың перспективаларын модельдеуге мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Иран, Түркия, геосаясат, бәсекелестік.

ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ ВО ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ ИРАНА И ТУРЦИИ

Адилбек Ермекбаев, Ғабит Жұматай, Айгерим Алтынбек

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается вопрос об ирано-турецком геополитическом соперничестве в Центральной Азии. Усиливающиеся антироссийские санкции ставят страны Центральной Азии перед сложным выбором. Иран и Турция также активно интересуются Центральной Азией, используя различные инструменты для продвижения своих собственных интересов. Проведенный анализ турецкой и иранской политики в регионе, позволяют сделать определенные выводы и смоделировать их перспективы.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Иран, Турция, геополитика, конкуренция.

Introduction

Analyzing the geopolitics of modern conflicts, Russian expert Truevtsev [1] identifies the competition between Iran and Turkey in Central Asia as part of the broader Afro-Asian zone of political instability. Central Asia, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has historically been a region of confrontation between civilizations and empires.

The "Big Game" between England and Russia for dominance in the region holds particular significance. However, the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 temporarily halted the geopolitical struggle for Central Asia. During the Soviet era, the region was isolated and cut off from external influence, with Moscow severing ties with Turkey and Iran. The Soviet authorities implemented policies to widen the gap between the peoples of Central Asia and these neighboring countries, including introducing the Cyrillic alphabet, forcing Russification, and promoting atheism.

Turkey's foreign policy preferences also shifted under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, further contributing to the regional balance of power. The stability of the region was maintained by differences in religious views, which suited the major powers and ensured stability.

However, with the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of newly independent states in Central Asia, along with the conflict in Afghanistan, the idea of regional instability and the resurgence of the "Big Game" for dominance in the region emerged. In addition to Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan became involved in geopolitical rivalries in Central Asia, with China also emerging as a significant player in the region.

Iran considers itself an important player in Central Asia, emphasizing its geostrategic advantages, such as control over transit routes that could provide Central Asian countries with alternative options for exporting their natural resources bypassing Russia [2]. Iran

also highlights its relative stability and increasing international role.

For Turkey, especially since the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Central Asia has become a crucial region for expanding and strengthening its influence.

Methodology

The methodological basis of the study is the fundamental principles and paradigms of classical realism and neo-realism in international relations theory. The end of the Cold War was the turning point in the history of the Central Asian newly independent nations and this landlocked area was drawn into geopolitical competition among regional and world powers. These great-power rivalries in Central Asia were conceptualized by some Western pundits as a new “Great Game” [3], and the region was widely seen as the “Eurasian Balkans” [4] in a pure classical perspective of realism and neorealism. Such rigid and static worldviews and discourses emerged during the Cold War that emanated from the principles of the realist school of thought in international relations. One of the key tenets of classical realism, according to Hans Morgenthau [5], is that international relations are always dominated by rivalry and struggle among state actors for power and domination.

The key concepts of neorealism were defined and developed by prominent scholars of this school such as Morgenthau, Gilpin, and Keohane as such: global politics is dominated by the state actors, states are constantly engaged in the geopolitical contest and struggle for power, hence the nature of international politics is to a large extent conflictual, and thus each state actor is responsible for ensuring its own security and well-being [6]. Although there was a paradigm shift in the 1990s in the realm of geopolitics

and foreign policy, the presence of Cold War mentality was felt across all spectra that were deeply embedded in the mindset of leading pundits and strategists in the West as well as in Russia. This kind of mentality is defined as the prevalence of worldviews and security perceptions that were dominant during the Cold War era [7].

Premised on such realist and neorealist principles although the newly independent states of Central Asia have been regarded as sovereign political actors, the region itself and the five ‘stans’ are seen through the prism of classical standpoints which are widely considered to be arena where the “New Great Game” is underway [3]. According to Cooley, in the 1990s and 2000s, the region was dominated by so-called the Big Three represented by Russia, China, and the USA have sought their geopolitical, economic, and security interests in Central Asia for the most part to access Caspian energy resources [3]. In this process, the Central Asian nations have been considered the clients of Russia, or even just pawns on a global chessboard. Meanwhile, besides so-called the Big Three, other regional powers such as Turkey and Iran have joined this power struggle in Central Asia, viewing the region as a natural realm to project their influence [3]. It is argued that in this geopolitical contest both Turkey nor Iran have no enough capabilities to dilute and eventually put an end to Russian hegemony in the region, at least they have the capacity to resist and undermine the reintegration of the Central Asian republics with Russia [4]. Thus the key tenets of classical realism and neorealism are employed in this research to shed light and explore the contest and struggle between Ankara and Teheran in the region.

**Iranian-Turkish competition:
history and current development**

The rivalry between Iran and Turkey has deep historical and civilizational roots that trace back to the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran. This rivalry encompasses religious, historical, and cultural dimensions. During the Ottoman and Safavid periods, these two powers were significant adversaries, competing for dominance in regions such as the Caucasus and the Persian Gulf. The European powers often benefited from the enmity between the Ottomans and the Safavids. The expansion of the Russian Empire southward into the Caucasus and Central Asia led to conflicts between Russia and both the Ottomans and Iran. However, Russia also provided Persia with some leverage to contain the Ottoman Empire.

Given that the Ottomans were perceived as the greatest threat by Armenians, Georgians, and other Christians in the Caucasus, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was seen as beneficial not only for the great powers but also for the region's indigenous population. While the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the semi-independence of Iran from British influence somewhat reduced the intensity of the rivalry, it did not eliminate the spirit of competition between the two states. In the post-bipolar era, both Ankara and Tehran have positioned themselves as the Muslim world's geopolitical, spiritual, and cultural centers. This is evident in the rhetoric of leaders such as Erdogan and spiritual leaders in Iran.

Despite historically opposing approaches to the Middle East, both Iran and Turkey remain significant players in the Syrian conflict. However, Moscow has managed to prevent a direct clash between the two states. Turkey opposes Iran's growing influence in the region, as Iran seeks to create a chain of Sunni states in the Middle East that are aligned against

Tehran. Referred to as the "Sunni axis," this bloc includes Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Pakistan. Ankara aims to involve Turkic-speaking states in this geopolitical rivalry. However, there are several challenges that hinder the implementation of Turkey's agenda in the region.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, which was a counterbalance to Iran in the region, and the establishment of a Shiite government in Baghdad opened new prospects for turning Iran into a powerful regional player. Yet geopolitical confrontation between Iran and Turkey rose to a new round of tension, especially with Erdogan's ascent to power which has sought to restore the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the Mideast. The first war in Karabakh served as the reason for the resumption of Iranian-Turkish hostility, in which Iran indirectly backed Armenia in the face of the threat of Turkey's growing influence and pan-Turkic sentiments in the Caucasus [8].

The "Shia Triangle" or "Shia Crescent" refers to a geopolitical alliance of Iran, Syria, and Iraq with the prevalent use of the Shiite populations of Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen [9]. This is in turn seen as a manifestation of growing Iranian influence in the region. Although the Iranian authorities have repeatedly stated that Saudi Arabia and Israel have become beneficiaries of Washington's anti-Iranian propaganda in the region, after all, Iranian influence may well create problems not only for the region's transit infrastructure but also may pose a threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Iran's increasing influence in Syria through its support for the government of Bashar al-Assad enables it to exert influence in Lebanon through its alliance with Hezbollah. This allows Iran to pressure Israel, gain access to

Mediterranean ports in Lebanon and Syria, and utilize these countries as transit routes for energy resources, bypassing Turkey and the volatile Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Aden. The 25-year gas export contract between Ankara and Tehran is set to expire in the near future, and Turkey has not yet expressed interest in renewing it, indicating a preference for Azerbaijani gas.

Diversifying export destinations would enable Iran to play a significant role in the global energy sector and reduce its reliance on countries within the "Sunni crescent." Additionally, maintaining control over the "Shiite crescent" region would prevent the consolidation of transit potentials among Arab monarchies and Turkey. However, Iran's energy strategy relies on the lifting of sanctions, which would require Iran's compliance with international demands regarding its nuclear program. Even without the easing of sanctions, Iran retains the ability to exert control over Syria through the Assad regime. Iran aims to fuel sectarian tensions in the region, using this as a tool to pressure its regional rivals.

Turkey, with its complex and strained relationship with Iran, views Iran's position in the region with concern. While both countries refrain from directly accusing each other, a growing sense of rivalry is often observed among diplomats. The Turkish Foreign Minister, in his speech at the Munich Conference, referred to the situation in the Middle East as a result of "sectarian politics," without specifying the responsible party [10].

While it is challenging to reconcile the vital interests of Ankara and Tehran, both powers perceive Kurdish separatism as a threat, which could potentially foster a rapprochement between Turkey and Iran. The pursuit of Kurdish independence has the potential to bring the two sides closer.

However, the Middle East region has become a battleground for confrontation between Iran and Turkey. Given that the strategic interests of Tehran and Ankara are intertwined in this region, further escalation of geopolitical rivalry raises the possibility of the conflict spreading to Central Asia. Although Turkey and Iran have shown some restraint, but it is not entirely ruled out that their relations could escalate further.

Iranian and Turkish Policy in Central Asia

The fall of the USSR and the emergence of sovereign states in Central Asia and the Caucasus changed the geopolitical configuration in the region. For the newly independent Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia, Ankara has become an important partner, although the level of economic and political influence of Ankara has been minimal. In the light of Russia's temporary retreat and disengagement from Central Asia in the 1990s Turkey and Iran endeavored to fill the power vacuum in the region. In this case, if the historical-civilizational commonality of the peoples of Central Asia gave advantages to Turkey, then Iran has a very unfavorable situation. The demise of the USSR was not beneficial for Tehran, since the resulting vacuum could be filled with forces extremely unfavorable to the Islamic Republic, such as Turkey and the United States. Tehran's anti-Western policy has become the reason for its isolation, and the newly independent states of Central Asia could compensate Tehran for the losses from isolation and provide an opportunity to enter new markets. Central Asia was regarded as a vital market, particularly there was a need to restore the economy after the costly Iran-Iraq war. Isolated Iran needed the Central Asian markets and the death of Islamic Revolution leader Ayatollah

Khomeini contributed to building a more pragmatic foreign policy in Iran [11].

While the Middle East is seen as an arena of Iran's aggressive policy, Tehran is showing its pragmatism towards Central Asia. Pragmatism is primarily due to Tehran's understanding of the underdevelopment of both political and orthodox Islam in Central Asia [12], and the dominance of secular heritage supporters and nationalists. In Central Asia, Iran is perceived as a threat and is seen as a force advancing the Islamization of the region. The paradox of Iran's policy is to support local Islamist groups that urged Central Asians to become "good Muslims" in their daily practice whereas Tehran seeks to curb Sunni radicalism in the region [13]. In its foreign policy, Tehran is more critical of the Western presence in the region.

The religious difference of Iran from the Turkic world was used as the main trump card as a balancing force in the politics of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Although Iran shares a common language with Tajikistan, the religious factor has always played an important role. Despite Iran has always backed Tajikistan, especially during the difficult period for Tajikistan of the revolt of the Uzbek colonel Mahmud Khudaiberdiev, relations between Dushanbe and Tehran could not be considered friendly. Then it was about the consultations held between the Tajik and Iranian security forces, and the alleged role of the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani "to save" the government of Emomali Rahmon [14]. However, relations with Dushanbe left much to be desired, in 2013-2016, a corruption scandal arose related to the financing of infrastructure projects in Tajikistan by Iranian businessmen. Against the backdrop of this incident, another scandal broke out related to the visit of the leader

of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, Muhiddin Kabiri, to Tehran [15], where he was met at the highest level, even though in Tajikistan he was accused of anti-government activities.

As a response to these events in 2016-2017, cultural representations of the Islamic Republic in Tajikistan were closed, which caused indignation among official Tehran [16]. In addition to the above incidents, Tajikistan took a number of diplomatic measures that did not inspire optimism for Iran. During the aggravation of Iran-Saudi relations, President Emomali Rahmon made an official visit to Riyadh, and in 2017 Tajikistan took part in the Arab-Islamic-American summit, which was clearly anti-Iranian in nature. Dushanbe thus demonstrated its readiness for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, Iran's key rival in the region, while placing the religious proximity above the linguistic one. Relations returned to normal only after 2019. The gradual withdrawal of the American military troops from Afghanistan, and the Taliban's return to power created a threat to ethnic Tajiks and Hazara Shiites traditionally backed by Tehran. Although this fact could bring Tehran and Dushanbe closer together to act as a united front against the Taliban, this configuration is unlikely due to a number of factors. In light of its takeover of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime seeks to gain international recognition and build strong ties with neighboring countries. Being under pressure from the United States, the former Afghan government in Kabul joined the sanctions against Tehran. Yet when the Taliban regained control of the country, they declared their readiness for constructive dialogue and, as a gesture of goodwill, opened the previously closed floodgates on the Helmand River and released water into the Iranian province of Sistan suffering from water shortages.

The next important factor is the growing influence of China in the region and the establishment of a dialogue between Kabul and Beijing on the use of the territory of Afghanistan as a transit zone.

With respect to the Central Asian nations, as opposed to Turkey, Iran has quite restrained plans. Iran has linguistic and religious proximity with the Persian-speaking communities in Central Asia as well as shares a common border. At the same time, Tehran plays an important role in the economic and political life of the countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia [53]. In addition to supporting the government of Emomali Rahmon, Iran has sought to build strong ties with Azerbaijan. However, in the process of determining the political and legal status of the Caspian Sea, Tehran adhered to positions that did not coincide with the interests not only of Baku but of Ashgabat. Moreover, the demonstrative flights of the Iranian Air Force near the Turkmen and Azerbaijani territorial waters almost led to an armed incident [17]. Although Iran was the main trade and economic partner, it can be assumed that Tehran's aggressive behavior largely induced Azerbaijani-Turkish rapprochement. The declaration of the neutrality of Turkmenistan was beneficial for Iran, thus it was possible to avoid the emergence of a threat from the north. Ashgabat considered Tehran a new trade and economic partner and relations between the two countries have been stable, despite disagreements over the Caspian Sea. In the Afghan issue, Turkmenistan adhered to neutrality, yet after the Taliban took control of the country in 1996, Ashgabat started negotiations with the Taliban through the mediation of Pakistan on laying a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan. This in turn enraged and caused Tehran's discontent, which

led to the temporary recall of the Iranian ambassador from Turkmenistan.

Although Tehran's relatively moderate relations with the Central Asia nations over the past few years were reduced to a minimum, recently the active expansion of Chinese capital in the region has become a catalyst for the intensification of Iran's policy in post-Soviet Central Asia, which some experts tend to call Tehran's "new Central Asian turn" [18]. Central Asia has become an important element in ensuring the security of the Islamic Republic, which a priori determines the high priority of this vector in Iran's foreign policy. The implementation of this policy has been developed in three main dimensions: geo-economic, civilizational and "realpolitik" [19]. Iran's activity in the Central Asian market also intensified after the signing of an agreement on a free trade zone with the member-states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Although relations reached a qualitatively new level after Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power in Uzbekistan, they were slightly spoiled due to the harboring of Uzbek Islamist leaders in Iran [20]. In 2019, Uzbekistan joined the China-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway route introduced a year earlier, thus developing its transit potential [21].

As Tehran's assertion in Central Asia as a dominant power is unlikely in the region as a dominant power is unlikely, Iran's priority is to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the Central Asian nations by providing them with a transit route for exporting their oil and gas to foreign markets. Iran is seen as an important transport corridor for the countries of Central Asia, yet the complex geopolitical processes in the South Caucasus, especially the Karabakh crisis, made Iran a likely partner to enter the world market. However, the US sanctions made this prospect very vague and less

favorable harming Iran's capabilities. In these circumstances, Turkey sought to take advantage of Iran's shrinking sway. Control over the transit of hydrocarbons from Central Asia could give advantages to Tehran in negotiations with the EU and the US to ease the crippling sanctions. Cooperation with the Central Asian nations enables Iran to strengthen economic ties with China, which has recently been active in the framework of the "One Belt, One Road" strategy [22]. Moreover, further strengthening Sino-Iranian cooperation could change the balance of power in the region [23].

Central Asia has been a top priority in Turkey's foreign policy. For Turkey, the region has always been strategically important, Ankara puts a great emphasis on the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic commonality with the region's nations. Prior to the Russian colonial conquest of the region, the Ottoman Empire's influence in Central Asia was rather limited or nonexistent. Besides, the local rulers and khans were in no hurry to recognize the Ottoman sultan's spiritual leadership of the Islamic world as the former did not wish to acknowledge the symbolic supreme authority of the latter striving to maintain their sovereignty [24]. During the Russian-Ottoman wars throughout the 19th century, the colonial expansion of tsarism in the region intensified, and the Turks repeatedly tried to use anti-colonial actions in the region as an instrument of eroding Russia's growing influence.

Having penetrated deeper southward, Imperial Russia started to build fortifications in the Caspian region during the 1830s, which alarmed the Ottoman authorities. The growing Russian expansion in Central Asia and the Caucasus led to the increased activity of Turkish agents who sought to encourage anti-Russian sentiment among indigenous

populations. In most cases, the Turkish agents consisted of Muslim preachers of the Sufis of the Naqshbandi tariqa which gave rise to Turkish religious propaganda in Central Asia. At that time, many facts about the arrest of Turkish subjects for anti-colonial propaganda and incitement to kill Russian settlers in the region were revealed. An increasing influence of the Turks in the region angered the Russian colonial authorities who took necessary steps to curb the subversion arresting Turkish subjects for anti-colonial propaganda and incitement to kill Russian settlers in the region. The intensification of religious propaganda was due to the fact that the religious community united the ethnic groups in the region in the anti-colonial struggle. The uprising of 1898 in Andijan was spearheaded by religious leaders such as Dukchi Ishan.

Along the Central Asian khanates, the Turks sought to establish relations with the Kashgar ruler Yakub Beg, who tried to achieve recognition and support for the state he created from the Ottoman Empire and Germany [25]. The German Kaiser influenced the Sultan and used Turkey as an ally against Russia and Britain. In this case, Saliev argues that "all of this indicates that during this period the Ottoman Empire actively used religion and its institutions in its geopolitics in Central Asia, which, however, had a limited effect, since the region had long been more connected with Russia" [26. p.129]. The Turkish agents tried to use the discontent in the region for their own purposes during the First World War, in particular, to ease the pressure of the Russians on the Caucasian front, an attempt was made to give the uprising of 1916 in Central Asia a pro-Turkish character. At that time, anti-Russian propaganda was mainly carried out from the territory of East Turkestan, where, according to reports from the

tsarist intelligence, German-Turkish intelligence activity increased [27]. During the establishment of Soviet rule, Turkish activity in Central Asia dwindled and virtually ceased to be visible. Only the disintegration of the Soviet empire allowed for the resumption of relations between Turkey and the Central Asian nations.

Current Turkish policy towards the Central Asian republics can be divided into three main periods. The first period is characterized by the fact that, for the secular republics of the region, a religious revival could create significant problems. In 1991, in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, religious authorities tried to declare their political ambitions on the wave of a religious renaissance, a little later, religious groups provoked a conflict that escalated into a civil war in Tajikistan. The religious nature of the regime in Iran, against the background of the secular in Turkey, was the least popular. In contrast to Iran, the collapse of the USSR was greeted enthusiastically in political circles in Turkey, as British scholar Gareth Winrow notes: “The sudden rediscovery of almost forgotten peoples of Turkic origin led to inflated hopes and unrealistic expectations on the part of some Turkish officials” [28. p. 3].

In the first period, Turkey increasingly focused on pan-Turkic sentiments. Backed by the United States although Ankara hoped to establish itself in the region as a “big brother”, this policy met resistance from local authorities and the population [29]. The first period was also characterized by the fact that despite Turkey’s obvious desire to assert itself in the region, it was not always possible to build well-established relations. For instance, the initiative of “Turkic unity” proposed by Turgut Ozal was rebuffed by the leaders of the Central Asian republics. Former

President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev described these events as follows: “It seemed to many that Turkey would be able to solve all our problems ... But what did this mean in reality? This meant abandoning the newly acquired independence and breaking off traditional relations with neighbors. This also meant just substituting the old big brother with a new one” [30. p. 196].

Besides Kazakhstan, the Uzbek leadership did not support Turgut Ozal’s initiative either. Relations with Tashkent became more complicated in 1993 when the Turkish authorities granted asylum to the Uzbek opposition leader Muhammad Salih, who was convicted in his homeland of undermining national security. Tashkent’s attempts to extradite oppositionists by the Turkish authorities were unsuccessful [31], and after the failed assassination attempt on Islam Karimov, the Uzbek authorities tightened control over religious organizations, including almost all Turkish educational institutions in the country were closed, and students in Turkey were immediately recalled to the homeland. Strained relations reached a climax in 2011 when the Turkish parliament included Uzbekistan among the unfriendly countries [32]. Despite the optimistic start, relations with Kyrgyzstan were far from being the best. They were also overshadowed after President Almazbek Atambaev refused to close Turkish educational institutions associated with the religious authority Fethullah Gulen, who was accused in Turkey of attempting a coup d’état [33]. It can thus be noted that despite the fact that relations were established, the first stage of Turkish-Central Asian relations did not meet the expectations of the Turkish leadership. Several factors can be identified as the reasons: first, the geographical remoteness of Turkey itself from the region; second,

the strong cultural and political influence of Russia, and third, the level of Turkey's economic presence was much limited. This also manifested itself during the period of aggravation of Russian-Turkish relations, when the authorities of Kazakhstan [34] and Kyrgyzstan [35] showed pro-Russian commitment. During the meeting of the 68th session of the UN General Assembly, while discussing the Crimean crisis, the Central Asian republics were among the countries not supporting the condemnation of Russia's annexation of the peninsula [36].

The second stage was characterized by the expansion of the economic, political, cultural, and humanitarian influence of Turkey within the framework of multilateral platforms. During this period Ankara increasingly gave priority to its "soft power", including the propaganda of Turkish culture, language, and even cuisine has intensified. It is worth mentioning that this trend has intensified around the world with the advent of the Justice and Development Party [37], the Turkish film industry has changed the genre of serials and talk shows, giving preference to propaganda, where "they present a sanitized, idealized version of Turkish life [38]. The activities of Turkish educational centers in the countries of Central Asia also intensified. In addition to the existing Manas International University in Bishkek and the Khoja Ahmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University in Turkestan, a large number of language courses, lyceums, research centers, universities were also opened, the quota for students from Central Asia was also expanded under the program of academic mobility, state and waqf grants for studying at universities in Turkey. Moreover, many clergymen appeared in spiritual institutions and competed with graduates of Arab religious

centers. In most cases, representatives of "pro-Turkish views" actively positioned themselves as anti-Salafi and received the sympathy of local religious communities, primarily Sufis.

The inception of a new third stage in Turkish foreign policy has been facilitated by several factors, some of which were independent of Turkey itself. Firstly, these geopolitical changes emerged after the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent imposition of economic sanctions. Secondly, this is the situation in Xinjiang, where the pressure on ethnic and religious minorities has intensified, and Turkey has tried to use both moments to its advantage.

Pan-Turanism in Central Asia: Opportunities and Risks

Xi Jinping's rise to power marked a new stage in history, notably the growing Chinese economic expansion in Central Asia and throughout the world was overshadowed by a repressive policy against ethnic and religious minorities in domestic policy. Although this issue requires careful study and is not the subject of this article, it is difficult to argue what was the root cause of this kind of policy. There are several overlapping and conflicting interpretations of this issue. While some are inclined to believe that the growing pressure is a manifestation of the "proletarian spirit" of Comrade Xi, others argue that increased pressure on Muslims is a reaction to the growing cases of involvement of China's Muslims from Xinjiang in Islamist groups in Afghanistan [39] and Syria [40]. Uyghur separatism has on numerous occasions represented a threat to China. During the 1990s and beginning of 2000s separatist sentiments grew among Muslims in Xinjiang. Turkey and the United States strive to effectively use this for their own purposes.

On the one hand, the issue of violation of the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in China is the subject of disagreement between the West and Beijing, and between Ankara and Beijing on the other [41]. Erdogan has spoken out more than once against China's crackdown on ethnic minorities in Xinjiang [42; 43]. Ankara does not hide its sympathy for political dissidents and Muslim activists from Xinjiang, most of whom have taken refuge in Turkey. In addition to defectors from Xinjiang, citizens of Kazakhstan who express anti-Chinese and anti-Russian rhetoric, activists of the 'language patrols' have also found refuge in Turkey. Regarding the latter, it is worth noting that they have become more frequent recently, despite the attempt by the authorities to suppress such kinds of actions.

Besides China, Iran is forced to deal with separatist tendencies, especially among Iranian Azerbaijanis [44], yet not as harshly as China does. It should thus be noted that for Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan, where a significant proportion of Turkic-speaking communities live pan-Turkism poses a threat. Any manifestation of pan-Turkism is painfully perceived by the ruling elites of these countries. Despite the efforts to curb the spread of Pan-Turkic ideas in the Turkic republics of Central Asia, there is a tendency for Turkish President Erdogan to grow in popularity, in most cases be perceived as the leader of the Turkic world [45]. Relationships that have been slightly tainted in the past years have evolved from "unwanted big brother" to strategic [46]. Turkey thus seeks to open the gates to Central Asia and the South Caucasus with the help of military, economic, and cultural tools to change the regional balance of power in favor of its interests [47].

Sensing changes in geopolitics and the

desire of the Central Asian nations to keep the balance of power in the region, Ankara is actively pursuing a policy to strengthen its position. Against the backdrop of growing Sinophobia and Russophobia in the region, Erdogan is pursuing strengthening Turkey's influence in the region, as in the case of the map of the "Turkic world" presented to Erdogan by Turkish nationalist leader Devlet Bahçeli [48], which can be perceived as a direct challenge to Russia and China. In this sense, Ankara is counting on possible support from the West, since they see the development of pan-Turkism opposition to the Kremlin-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In turn, Moscow sees an external trace in the growth of anti-Russian sentiments and it seems not accidental that the article by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [49] about the growth of xenophobia against Russians, and a hint that it was orchestrated "from outside". The Central Asian public is accustomed to this kind of statement by individual Russian politicians, but this article published by Sergei Lavrov, an experienced diplomat, and Putin's closest associate, had a clearly defined purpose. And it is not without reason that this article was published on the eve of the VIII summit of Turkic-speaking states in Istanbul.

Conclusion

It is evident that Central Asia is a strategically important region in global politics. The latest events in Kazakhstan in the first half of January 2022 showed that Russia has no intention to allow Kazakhstan to get out of its influence. It is abundantly clear that although Turkey and Iran have sufficient capabilities to challenge Russia, it seems they will not be

able to completely oust Russia and China. Yet they may well create competition for them and use anti-Chinese and anti-Russian sentiments for their own purposes.

It is worth noting that Iran's bet on Islamist groups during the 1990s did not yield significant benefits to Tehran, but rather strengthened the position of its geopolitical rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The weak presence of Shiite communities in Central Asia, except for Tajikistan's Badakhshan province, induced Tehran to provide support to Sunni political Islam. Although Tehran's policy achieved a particular effect during the 1990s in Tajikistan, in other republics Iran did not find support from the secular and religious elites. Today, Tehran's priority in Central Asia is to boost economic cooperation with the five republics, at the same time maintaining Iran's role as an alternative corridor for entering the foreign market, bypassing Russia. As part of the implementation of this strategy, it will be beneficial for Tehran to escalate the tense situation in the South Caucasus and prevent the launch of the Zangezur corridor. In light of the January 2022 events, the damaged reputation of Kazakhstan as a stable country will push China to quickly implement a project to build a railway in the direction of Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan. It is obvious that such a scenario, namely building the Chinese railway network is beneficial for Iran. Turkey has become more active in the region over the past decade, relying on pan-Turkic sentiments, accompanied by the demonization of the image of Russia and China.

Growing political pressure from Russia and the economic expansion of China, especially in light of the latest developments around Afghanistan, leave Central Asia in a difficult situation, which

makes Turkey the only alternative to get out of the "geopolitical lockdown". At the same time, the further dissemination of pan-Turanism can change the geopolitical configuration in the region, the strengthening of Turkey and Pan-Turkic ideas is of concern to China, Iran, and Russia, respectively. To deter and erode Ankara's growing influence in Central Asia the geopolitical axis "Moscow-Beijing-Tehran" with the prospect of joining Kabul may emerge.

It is worth mentioning that for the Western world led by Washington, the probability of the creation of the continental "Moscow-Beijing-Tehran" triple block is perceived as threatening and a potential source of geopolitical tensions in Eurasia, which was consistently warned by leading American strategists [4]. Specifically, such a powerful alliance may emerge if the US keeps seeking an antagonistic and hostile relationship towards Beijing and Tehran, which in turn may induce further rapprochement among Iran, China, and Russia. Despite the persistent cautions made by certain American strategists of risks to perpetuating Washington's hostility towards Tehran, which may eventually result in the rapprochement of Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran, American attitudes towards not only Iran but with respect to Russia and China have largely remained antagonistic. Instead of encouraging closer cooperation between Turkey and Iran, Washington has further aggravated the geopolitical situation in Eurasia by imposing economic sanctions and isolating Iran and Russia, as well as by containing Beijing's growing economic and geopolitical influence in the region. China's rise as a global power through BRI and its cooperation with Russia and Iran may lead to further diminishing and eroding American and Western influence in Eurasia.

Under the Obama administration, Washington sought to soften its relationship with Tehran by concluding the Iran nuclear deal that curtailed Tehran's nuclear program, and in response the US agreed to lift sanctions imposed on Iran [50]. With Donald Trump's rise to power, however, Washington withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed back all sanctions, thus sour and belligerent relationships between the US and Iran have resumed. Moreover, the Donald Trump administration sought to limit its foreign policy engagement and tightened its immigration policy under the pretext of preventing foreign terrorists from entering the US [51]. This reversal in American policy towards Iran has forced Tehran to seek closer cooperation and partnership with Russia, China, and the Central Asian nations. Notably, Iran has sought to cooperate with the members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) led by the Kremlin as well as Tehran was granted an observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) [50]. From this perspective, Iran could play a significant role in the region and could connect the Central Asian countries to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Moreover, the further rapprochement of Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran may be

achievable in the long run despite the existing disagreements among them.

Western-backed Ankara is not interested in the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran triple alliance and in order to prevent and undermine such a scenario Turkey is leveraging ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties with the Central Asian republics, particularly placing a great emphasis on Pan-Turkic ideas and kinship [52]. In addition to cultural affinity, Turkey has pursued to leverage its soft power and secular Islamic democracy by creating a network of Turkish secondary schools and higher educational institutions across the region and offering scholarships to young people from Central Asia for studying at universities in Turkey.

It would be in the interest of the Turkic-speaking countries to shun excessive popularization of the Pan-Turanism and Pan-Turkic ideas that irritate their powerful neighbors. With respect to Turkey and Iran, it is necessary to give preference to economic pragmatism and work on the principle of the "Asian paradox", whereas political problems should remain in the shadow of economic cooperation. Only, in this case, all parties would be able to achieve real progress in the framework of long-term cooperation.

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