

RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKIYE AND UZBEKISTAN: POST-KARIMOV PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The chance to forge new ties between Uzbekistan and Turkiye emerged in 2016 with the change of leadership, following about 20 years of ups and downs. The strained relations were due to several political hiccups like Turkiye's asylum to Uzbek dissidents, Currencycrisis of Turkiye, banning of Gulen schools and the Andijan event.

This study focuses on the relations between Turkiye and Uzbekistan in the post-Karimov period. The focus will be on the development of political relations and the opening of new ventures due to current geopolitics in Turkiye-Uzbekistan relationship dynamics. The geo-strategic position of Turkey enables it to become transit hub as it is situated in between energy scarce European market and energy rich countries on the other side. Uzbekistan needs to diversify its export partners where Turkey as a transit hub can play crucial role. The construction of trans-Caspian pipeline to move energy from Central Asia and the Caspian sea region to Turkey and for European markets, is primary strategic goal. Both sides needed constructive attitudes to further the relations.

There have been a number of high-level political visits and signing of important strategic cooperation agreements. Both heads of the state frequently refer to Turkic-Islamic symbols of shared identity while addressing their relationship. The bilateral relations have been improving in all the fields majorly in trade. To deepen and strengthen the relations further the trade goal of \$10 billion is set. In 2022, the relationship was elevated to a "comprehensive strategic partnership level".

Introduction

The dissolution of USSR and the end of bipolarity led to massive changes in geopolitics. The Central Asian economies emerged as independent countries and started their journey of

statehood. One of the first country to officially recognize the independence was Turkiye. The common cultural lineage of both the countries thought to be a path to deepen the bond. On the other hand, with the breakup of USSR and the end of cold war, the strategic importance of Turkiye decreased which prompted Turkey to re-think its foreign policy.

Turkiye itself was grappling with economic problems so Turkiye couldn't provide much economic aid. Therefore, Turkiye make soft power its diplomatic tool. The changes prompted Turkiye to invoke Turkish linguistic unity to preserve its relations with Central Asian states. The collaboration between Central Asian states and Turkey was witnessed in the process of Summits of Turkic speaking states which was started with Turkiye's initiatives in 1992. Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) was also established in 1992. In 1993 the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) was established to deepen the cultural ties among Turkish speaking states¹. Meanwhile, in opposition to Iranian Islam and communism, the West also pushed for Central Asia to embrace the Turkish model. Turkey saw the opportunity and presented itself as a bridge between western world and Central Asian region. Although Turkiye's ideas of pan Turkic ideology did not sit well with the nationalistic aims of Islam Karimov, the leader of Uzbekistan after the disintegration of USSR.

The relations between Turkiye and Uzbekistan have been marked with lack of stability and consistency. There has been number of ups and downs in the relations between both the nations. The chance to build new relations opened in 2016 with the death of Islam Karimov, the leader of Uzbekistan since 1991. The new leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev adopted a more open outlook in its foreign policy conduct. This paper mainly focuses on the political relations between Turkiye and Uzbekistan after 2016 and the geopolitical opportunities opening up which helps in maintaining the relationship of both the nations. This paper is divided into three sections followed by conclusion. The first section will give the overview of relationship in the past two decades, the second section will discuss the relationship dynamics after the change of leadership and the third section will give the analysis of relationship at individual, state and systemic level followed by conclusion.

Crisis in the relations

The first political hiccup erupted when Turkiye gave asylum to Uzbekistan opposition leaders Mohammad Solih, Abdurahmon Polat and other Uzbek dissidents. Turkey refused to extradite them. This led Karimov to recall Uzbek students studying in Turkey². Following this Uzbekistan withdrew from almost all Turkic World meetings and cut off visa-free travel. On the other hand, Karimov was also moving away from the ideas of pan-Turkism and evoke the nationalist ideas based on Uzbek culture and identity.

Turkiye's efforts were also distracted by 1994 currency crisis. Since the early 1990s, the foreign trade deficit and current account deficit have significantly expanded as a result of policies that were put into place without structural reforms which were needed for such policies³. Turkey's economy shrank by 6%⁴. There was significant deterioration in other macroeconomic indicators such as inflation, unemployment, interest.

The third major constrain in the political relationship was witnessed with the banning of Gulen schools in Uzbekistan. The country, and the Ferghanavalley in particular, witnessed an Islamic construction and publishing boom, and the influx of foreign Islamic funders⁵. It includes Gulen schools of Turkey as well. They were seen as a crucial component of Turkey's soft power at a time. The life and contributions of Fetullah Gulen, served as inspiration for Gulen's school of Islam. These schools which gives Turkish interpretation of Islam banned by Uzbekistan in 2001. They according to State goes against regime's secular policies.

Another crisis erupted in the aftermath of Andijan event in 2005. The Andijan revolt, which started as a nonviolent protest calling for the release from prison of twenty-three local businesspeople suspected of belonging to or having connections to Al-Akromiia, led the Karimov administration to intensify its crackdown. The protest quickly expanded into a larger rally against the country's appalling socioeconomic conditions and pervasive corruption, and on May 13, 2005, President Karimov gave the Interior Ministry and National Security troops permission to open fire on the unarmed crowd. Official sources reported 187 deaths, however unauthorised sources put the number of fatalities between 700 and 1,500. After the Andijan massacre, thousands of alleged Islamists and the members of their families were imprisoned or faced other types of persecution⁶.

Turkey supported UN resolution against Uzbekistan and criticised the human rights record of Uzbek government. Karimov consequently declined to join the Turkic Council in 2009 and called off President Abdullah Gul's visit to Uzbekistan.

After years of strained relations, the visit of Turkish foreign minister in 2014 was an important turning point in the political relations of both the countries but the new door to rebuild the relationship opened with the death of Islam Karimov in 2016 and the coming of new leader. The new Uzbek administration marked the beginning of a significant period of cooperation between the two nations.

Uzbekistan and Turkiye relations in Post Karimov era

With the death of the first President Islam Karimov on September 2, 2016, Uzbekistan's political landscape underwent a transformation. Shavkat Mirziyoyev emerged as a new leader. The course of relationship between Turkiye and Uzbekistan started with Erdogan's official visit to Uzbek

city of Samarkand on 17-18 November 2016 where he met Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the then acting president of Uzbekistan. The visit presented the opportunity to strengthen the relations between both the countries. President Erdoğan emphasised that their goal was to elevate the two nations' relationship to a level that would honour the Turks and Uzbeks' enduring kinship. President Erdoğan said: "This is not only as a necessity of our shared interests but also as a requirement of our brotherhood and historical responsibility". Acting President Mirziyoyev addressed President Erdoğan: "It is now time to implement what we say. Our two great peoples should show their brotherhood to the entire world through cooperation"⁷.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan invited Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to make a state visit to Türkiye on October 25–26, 2017. This visit is considered monumental as an Uzbek President visited the country after nearly twenty years since 1999. Both leaders frequently use Turkic-Islamic symbols of common identity while discussing their relations. The bilateral relations have been improving in all the fields majorly in trade. Speaking about, how their economic relations are not at the right level and need to improve President Erdoğan stated during this visit that he hoped to see further development in their relations. The trade volume between both the countries stood at 1.2 billion dollars in 2016 and during the time of this visit (first eight months of 2017) has exceeded 900 million dollars.

The topic of tourism was also brought up during this visit, and Turkish Airlines began offering scheduled flights from Istanbul to Samarkand in an effort to improve people-to-people contact. This visit was an historic step in the bilateral relations as they were elevated to "Strategic Partnership Level".

The Turkish President's subsequent visit to Uzbekistan took place in April 2018, at the course of which they discussed ways to strengthen their bilateral business ties. For this a business forum was organised and prospects for mutual investments were discussed. An agreement was reached on opening up of two institutions in Bukhara in the name of Imam Bukhara and Imam Maturidi. During this visit plans were introduced to establish a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council mechanism between both the states. The Council is in dialogue format which was to be established in accordance with the Joint Statement of Heads of the State. Trade was also discussed with President Erdoğan claiming that bilateral trade volume reached \$1.5 billion in 2017 by increasing 25% and there is much more capacity left. The aim was set to increase bilateral trade volume to \$5 billion⁸.

Türkiye is keen on enhancing regional relationship by integration of sister states of Central Asia. In terms of security also both the countries are keen on working with each other bilaterally or through different regional forums.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev paid official visit to Turkey in Feb 2020. The first meeting of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was held here. The goal to attain bilateral trade volume to \$5 billion reiterated during this visit. In 2019 compared to the previous year, the volume of bilateral trade increased by 27 percent⁹. The economic cooperation can be seen in other sectors also, like in transport sector.

During the 7th summit in Baku on October 15, 2019, Uzbekistan formally became a member of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States. Both the Presidents met again on the sidelines of the 8th Summit of the Turkic Council in Democracy and Freedom Island.

The next visit which was held in Uzbek city of Tashkent in March 2022 was important one as it was marked by 2nd High Level Strategic Cooperation Council Meeting. A number of documents and agreements were signed for multifaceted cooperation during the course of this visit including the agreement on preferential trade. The goal of trade volume to be \$5 billion was again addressed. To deepen and strengthen the relations further the goal of \$10 billion was set¹⁰. The bilateral relation was promoted to the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership level”. The amount of trade turnover has expanded by 2.5 times while the number of joint ventures has climbed by 5 times in recent years. Uzbekistan has seen a seventy-fold rise in Turkish investment¹¹. Turkey's intention to continue providing development assistance to Uzbekistan through TIKA in Uzbekistan, has been repeatedly emphasised by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The 9th Summit of Organization of Turkic States held in Samarkand. The term presidency had been passed from Turkey to Uzbekistan. The President held bilateral talks with his Uzbek counterpart. The Turkish President was presented with ‘the High-Level Imam al-Bukhari Order of the Republic of Uzbekistan’ by President Mirziyoyev and ‘the Supreme Order of Turkic World’ by Organization of Turkic States for Turkey’s contribution in strengthening the relations among Turkic States. The display of solidarity among Turkic nations was also seen in the Extraordinary Summit of the Organization of Turkic States in Ankara against the backdrop of Feb 2023 earthquake in Turkey.

According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) the export of Turkey to Uzbekistan stood at \$558 million in 2016 and Uzbekistan’s export to Turkey were \$716 million. In 2017 the trade levels increase displaying increased levels of cooperation post-Karimov period. The export of Turkey to Uzbekistan were \$732 million and Uzbekistan’s exports to Turkey were \$903 million. In 2018, the Turkey’s export to Uzbekistan increases in comparison to previous years and stood at \$1.11 billion which shows Turkey getting advantage over bilateral trade. By 2021, Turkey exported \$1.87 billion worth of commodities to Uzbekistan. The main products include Liquid dispersing machines, Packaged medicaments and plastic pipes. Uzbekistan

exported \$1.68 billion worth of goods to Turkey where the main products were Refined copper, Non-Retail Pure Cotton Yarn and Copper wire¹².

As Turkish economy has been growing the demand for energy is also growing for domestic use as well as for industrial purpose. Turkey needs to maintain its energy security. A country maintains its energy security mainly through diversifying energy mix as well as energy suppliers but in Turkey's case there is third element also and that is, to become transit hub. The geo-strategic position of Turkey enables it to become transit hub as it is situated in between energy scarce European market on one side and energy rich countries on the other side. The surrounding countries include Azerbaijan, Iraq, Iran and extended neighbours like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Russia. Therefore, Turkey is crucial partner for neighbouring countries to maintain smooth flow of energy resources to Turkey and to European markets¹³.

On the other hand, Uzbekistan's plentiful hydrocarbon resources are drawing attention from developed and developing countries. Situated in the centre of the region surrounded by Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan plays a significant role in Turkey's Central Asian Policy.

Uzbekistan is opening up the economy post Karimov era and maintaining stable and balanced relations with other countries. Uzbekistan needs to diversify its export partners where Turkey as a transit hub can play crucial role. The primary strategic role here is the construction of trans-Caspian pipeline to move energy from Central Asia and the Caspian sea region to Turkey and for European markets¹⁴. Trans-Caspian pipeline is an under-sea pipeline that would cross the Caspian sea between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. The expansion of Southern Gas Corridor which includes Trans Anatolian Pipeline, Trans Adriatic pipeline and South Caucasus to Trans-Caspian pipeline could bridge the gap between European market and Central Asian Energy.

Turkey's support to Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia also display Turkey's Central Asian ambitions. Central to the negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia is to allow a bridge road connecting Azerbaijan to its autonomous region Nakhichevan. If it is constructed it will bypass Iran. For Turkey, Russia and Iran presents the main challenge in Caspian sea region¹⁵.

The recent Ukraine-Russia war exposes the energy security in Europe. Europe is looking to diversify energy suppliers and with the construction of trans-Caspian pipeline, the Europe's energy needs could find an alternative to Russian energy. Turkiye and Uzbekistan need to grab the new geopolitical opportunities arising in their favour and develop the relationship further. Both sides needed constructive attitudes to maintain the dynamic of their bilateral relationship.

Analysis of the relationship

Individual Level

The change in leadership in Uzbekistan is the most crucial reason behind the betterment of relations. Shavkat Mirziyoyev who became President after the death of Karimov in 2016 had been Prime Minister for 13 years since 2003 in Karimov administration. He has taken constructive steps in solving the long-standing bilateral issues. Although Mirziyoyev has continued the basic tenets of foreign policy from '2012 Foreign Policy concept of Uzbekistan' but the extent and the level of collaboration intensified.

The reconstruction of Uzbekistan's economy, since coming to power was Mirziyoyev's top priority and he guided his administration's foreign policy in this direction. His way of conducting foreign policy stood apart from his predecessor in that, when it came to dealings with other countries it gave priority to economic matters rather than political matters. There had been a number of diplomatic visits done by both the Presidents in each other's respective countries.

State Level

The Uzbek and Turkish people have similarity of common traditions and culture which gives them a sense of belongingness with each other. Uzbekistan's joining of Turkic Council in 2019, which displays Uzbekistan's eagerness to nurture cultural aspect of relationship between both the countries.

Over the last five years, there has been a notable increase in economic cooperation. Cooperation in various other sectors is also intensifying. The transport sector has a great potential and interaction in this sphere plus communication is increasing. Number of joint implementation projects has been undertaken.

The favourable environment provided by both the countries- increasing liberalization, easing control over foreign investment in Uzbekistan and Turkiye's need for market, its energy needs are helpful in strengthening the cooperation.

Systemic Level

The downturn of the West and the rise of new power centres have had a significant worldwide influence on the attitudes of governments in the global South. The financial crisis of 2008 is important to mention in this regard. There was widespread public outcry with the system. The withdrawal of UK from EU, the election of Donald Trump, the emergence of China as more assertive, China's Belt and Road initiative and the return of Russia in global power politics all signifies the power shift from West¹⁶.

Both Putin and Erdogan exhibit a strong sense of nationalism based on anti-Western feelings and a desire to establish a multipolar world order. The July 2016 failed coup attempt in Türkiye significantly strengthened ties between the two nations, particularly in light of the Turkish leadership's mounting dissatisfaction with the West's unwillingness to recognise Türkiye's security concerns¹⁷. Türkiye has also developed closer ties with China. Türkiye has moved away from west towards east. Türkiye has also made Central Asian region as its priority and Uzbekistan due to its geography acts as a gateway to Central Asia.

Conclusion

The relationship since 1991 between Uzbekistan and Türkiye has been marked by highs and lows. The period of consistency and stable relations started with the coming of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in the power in 2016. The new leadership of Uzbekistan adopted a more open, balanced and constructive attitude in foreign policy approach. Türkiye on the other hand also sees Uzbekistan as an important ally in Central Asian region. Uzbekistan lies at the centre of the region having land borders with all the other Central Asian republics. Türkiye and Uzbekistan see a sharp rise in economic ties since 2017. The political relationship improved significantly with 'head of the State' level trips happening almost every year. The focus is also given on improving people to people contact and business relations.

Current events have an impact on the dynamics that shape Turkey's policy in Central Asia. The countries can benefit from each other's strategic location. The connectivity projects have been in talks for quite a time, though not much activity have been witnessed so far. The emerging scenario with Russia and Ukraine war, these connectivity projects if realized could be fruitful for Uzbekistan, Türkiye and for Europe as well.

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