

# THE TURKIC COUNCIL'S POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS: ASSESSMENTS AND PROSPECTS

At first sight, the development of the Turkic Council appears as an attempt to build the foundations of economic integration and a deep cooperation between Turkic speaking states in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

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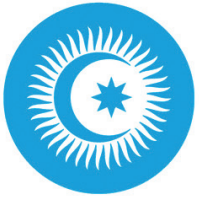
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The eight summit of the Turkic Council was held on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 in Cholpon-Ata city (Kyrgyzstan). At this Summit, the presence of Shavkat Mirziyoyev (president of the Republic of Uzbekistan) was of a major importance for the Council's work and goals<sup>1</sup>. The Cooperation Council of the Turkish Speaking States (*Turkic Council*) has been established by the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009 and takes the form of an intergovernmental organization bringing together Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. This organization has been established thanks to the process of Summits of Turkic Speaking States after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The "Turkic Council" has organs such as Council of Heads of States, Senior Officials Committee, Council of Elders, and Secretariat with headquarters in Istanbul. The Turkic Council also includes various affiliated organizations<sup>2</sup> such as TURK-SOY (*International organization of Turkic Culture*) established in 1993 and dealing with cultural relations between Turkic states as well as matters concerning education, science and art; TURKPA (*Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries*) established in 2008 in order to deepen inter-parliamentary cooperation among Turkic states; the Turkic Business Council established in 2011 and aiming at enhancing economic cooperation among Turkic speaking states, and the Turkic Academy established in 2010 whose purpose is to pro-

mote cooperation in intellectual, academic and cultural fields within the Turkic world.

At first sight, the development of the Turkic Council appears as an attempt to build the foundations of economic integration and a deep cooperation between Turkic speaking states in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

However, in order to comprehend the historical background of this intergovernmental organization we need to consider the Turkish foreign policy perspectives as well as the post-cold war context in Central Asia and Caucasus (and the birth of new independent "Turkish republics"). After the disintegration of the USSR these newly independent states have brought new challenges for the Turkish foreign policy toward the region. Indeed, the international politics has been deeply transformed towards the end of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the Turkish Republic failed to establish strong relations with neighboring countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia. As Efe Çaman and M. Ali Akyurt have pointed out in a contribution for the *Alternatives Turkish Journal of international relations*<sup>3</sup>, the Caucasus and Central Asia are perceived among both Turkish political elites and Turkish people as a "monolithic region". This perception can be explained through the "historical, cultural, religious, political, geographical and linguistic ties and familiarities" between Turkey and the region. The presence of Turkic commu-



# Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States



Azerbaijan



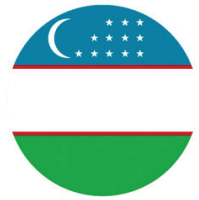
Kazakhstan



Kyrgyzstan



Turkey



Uzbekistan

nities in both Central Asia and Caucasus is important to comprehend the role and origins of the Turkic Council and its position within the Turkish region. Thus, Central Asia is considered as the original land of the ethnic Turkic population. However, the influence of Russia in the region should not be ignored.

Therefore, after the collapse of Soviet Union, Central Asia started to occupy an important place in Turkish Foreign Policy. Among the Soviet Union's fifteen republics that became independent states, there were five republics from Central Asia: namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Turkey was the first state to officially recognize these independent Republics<sup>4</sup>. In 1992 the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) was founded. The aim of this agency was to provide economic and technical assistance to the new Turkic Republics. The same year, the Turkic Republics (with the exception of Kazakhstan) became members of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) with the help and support of the Turkish diplomacy<sup>5</sup>. Thus, we can notice a shift in the Turkish Foreign Policy and especially in its definition of the neighboring region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus and Central Asia were added to the Balkans, Northeast Mediterranean and the Middle East as Turkey's neighboring regions. Thus, this new attitude of Turkey towards Central Asian republics implied a reconfiguration of Turkish foreign policy as well as new challenges for the cooperation with the Turkic world. Moreover, we can also evoke the role of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) established in

the beginning of 2000's. The CICA is another platform of cooperation between the Turkic Republics and Turkey. Turkey has held the chairmanship of the CICA from 2010 to 2014.

Nevertheless, all these developments since the 90's should not lead us to consider that the Turkic Republics share common foreign policy strategies and views, notably on regional energy security, management of energy resources, or conflicts in Caucasus and Central Asia (such as the Nagorno-Karabakh).

Therefore, the main areas of the cooperation of the organization could be listed as: *political, economic, customs and transportation, cultural and educational cooperation*. This paper explores the Turkic Council's areas of cooperation with a view to assess their success and limits. Indeed, exploring the economic and political balances of power in Central Asia and Caucasus as well as the Turkish regional policy perspectives allow us to consider in details the scope of the Turkic Council's policies in the region.

Thus, based on an overview of the Turkic Council's policies implemented in Central Asia and Caucasus we will first examine the Council's past and current achievements. Then, it will be necessary to qualify the strength and influence of the Turkic Council in the region by going through the constraints affecting the organization in its work (in terms of economic integration, foreign policy influence and unity...). Finally, we will focus on the upcoming challenges for the Council, as well as the prospects for the Turkey's foreign policy in the region.

**The presence of Turkic communities in both Central Asia and Caucasus is important to comprehend the role and origins of the Turkic Council and its position within the Turkish region. Thus, Central Asia is considered as the original land of the ethnic Turkic population. However, the influence of Russia in the region should not be ignored.**

**Turkic Council's policies and the areas of cooperation: the strengthening of a diplomatic network and the foundations of an economic integration?**

Regarding the official status of the Turkic Council, we can consider that the Council has seven main areas of cooperation: political cooperation, economic cooperation, customs and transport cooperation, cultural, educational and scientific cooperation, diaspora cooperation, tourism cooperation and international cooperation. Since each of these cooperation areas implies various policies implemented in the Central Asia and Caucasus, it is necessary to examine these policies in order to assess the success and progress in the work of the Council.

First of all, the political area of cooperation is based on two main regular platforms: the Council of the Heads of State (CHS) and the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM). They allow the member states to regularly meet in order to discuss political matters. Since the establishment of the Council, 11 meetings of Foreign ministers have been held. This political cooperation also takes place through a "Junior Diplomats Joint Training Program" that consists of a two-week training organized in one of the Member states in order to deepen their relations and knowledge about their common political agenda. Moreover, in the same vein, the Council also operates the "Official Foreign Policy Research Centers" with the aim of bringing together member states' academicians and think tanks to determine the Council's agenda. In this regard we can underline the role of the think tank SAM of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Center for strategic research, *Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi*) in organizing conferences with important ambassadors. The heads of SAMs have initiated various sessions held under thematic such as "*Countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia in the context of the Silk Road Economic Belt*" (initiated by SAM Azerbaijan in 2015)<sup>6</sup>, "*Realizing the potential in developing regional cooperation among the Turkic States with a focus on political, social, economic and cultural dimensions*", "*Developing a common agenda for increased cooperation among the Turkic States and in the region (2016-2020)*". Furthermore the Turkic Council also sends

election observation missions comprising international observers to promote fair, transparent and democratic elections in the member countries. We can cite in this regard missions worked in 2015 in Kazakhstan (in Almaty, Taraz), Turkey (in İstanbul, İzmir, Van), Kyrgyzstan (in Bishkek, Osh) and Azerbaijan (in Baku and Ganja)<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, the Council's political cooperation appears as an attempt to build a strong diplomatic network among Turkic States, through the organization of various events such as conferences, foreign ministers' summits, or election observation missions. These measures aim to deepen the diplomatic, strategic and political relations between the member states of the Council.

The economic area constitutes one of the main fields of cooperation in the Turkic world's cooperation. The Council has three "Working Groups" dealing with economic stakes such as "*improving the investment climate*", "*diversification of the economies*" and "*promoting entrepreneurship*". Moreover, the Joint Investment Portal of Turkic Council serves as an additional tool within this economic cooperation, the aim being to increase business ties among the Member States as well as strengthening investments in the region. As already stated in the introduction, the Turkic Council is affiliated with the Turkic Business Council, which contributes to economic cooperation. Indeed, the Business Council brings together entrepreneurs from the different Turkic States. In this vein, regular Turkish Business Forums are organized in order to tighten the links between the respective private sectors of the member states. On 19 February 2014 approximately 100 businessmen from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Turkey participated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Turkic Business Forum.

Ambassador Ali Kemal Aydın, former deputy under-secretary in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for the region, has pointed out that "*When we look at history, we observe that the time during which Central Asia countries were the most powerful and effective was when the Silk Road was the main route of world trade*". Thus, the region's energy security as well as transport strategy constitute an unavoidable challenge for the Turkic Council and the Turkish foreign policy. Therefore the customs and transport cooperation have a particular importance for the Turkic Council and its regional policy. In the same way as its business cooperation, the Council organizes regular "Working groups" bringing together Ministers of Transport and Heads of the Customs Administrations of the Member states. Trade and the customs issues related to the Silk Road are the main focus of this cooperation. During the "*Fifth International Forum on the Role of Customs Administrations on Promoting and Facilitating Trade among Silk Road Countries*", the Heads of Customs Administrations of several countries (namely, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Georgia, and Kazakhstan) have signed a "letter of intent" aiming at trade facilitation within the region.





The Council's policy has a role to play in Turkey's "Caravanserai" project as well as the Kazakhstan's "Silk Wind" one. The Caravanserai project was launched in 2009 in the framework of the Silk Road Customs initiative in order to facilitate trade and border crossing through a harmonization of customs procedures (within the concept of ancient Silk Road until the Chinese border). This project brings together the respective Customs administrations of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia. The Caravanserai project has been inaugurated within the Turkish regional policy, and thus Turkic Council has not been the main actor of this customs initiative. According to Vladimir Fedorenko (member of Washington's Rethink Institute) the *"Turkey's Silk Road Initiative is an important contribution to the Silk Road renaissance, primarily focusing on transportation, security, logistics and custom procedures at borders"*<sup>10</sup>.

Opening up the region's energy capacity is a long term objective of the Council. In this respect we can mention Turkey and Azerbaijan's trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP) project that has been added to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipelines. Namely, the TANAP project has been inaugurated by Turkey and Azerbaijan in order to enable the transportation of Azerbaijani resources (natural gas) to

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Europe. This project represents an important challenge for the Turkic Council and its policies within the concept of the East-West energy corridor. Silk Road customs initiatives and energy policies are striking examples of the involvement of the Turkic Council in the current economic challenges of the region.

The policies implemented by the Turkic Council are part of a broader strategy aiming at building an efficient diplomatic network among the Turkic speaking states. The establishment of the diplomatic network implies a close cooperation from respective member states' institutions and ministries. Indeed, the Turkic Council appears as a suitable framework to build this diplomatic network. As for the economic cooperation, the customs and trans-

portation projects seem mostly launched by the states themselves and the Turkic Council has obviously a role to play but it does not appear as the initiating actor of such cooperation.

**The limits of the Turkish Council's policies:  
an unfavorable balance of political and  
economic power in the region**

The collapse of Soviet Union has allowed new political perspectives in the Turkic World. As stated above, the Turkic Council established in 2009 has been the result of a long diplomatic cooperation process between Turkic speaking states. However, even if the Turkic Council has strong ambitions for the region's economic and political integration, its policies should not lead us to consider the Council as a major political force in Central Asia and Caucasus. First of all, despite a relative convergence of Turkic states' foreign policies, the states of Turkic world do not share a common view concerning regional perspectives. Also, the Turkic Council does not represent all the Turkic states (since Turkmenistan is not yet a member of the organization) and has to face the presence of Russia in the region. Furthermore, the economic inequalities between the member states as well as their geographical position (absence of common borders) lead us to consider the economic integration goal as yet uncompleted and fragile.

As explained before, the policy coordination efforts between Turkey and the new Turkic Republics in the 1990's has been based on the promotion of cultural, economic and political ties. The contribution of Muhittin Kaplan, Abdullah Yuvacı and Shatlyk Amanov<sup>11</sup> underlines an increasing voting cohesion of the Turkic Council member states in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Since 2007, the member states votes in the UNGA have been more and more cohesive, in other words the Turkic states' foreign policy preferences seem to converge (especially concerning Middle East and colonial issues). However, it could be a misleading perception to consider that these countries have similar foreign policy interests or perspectives. For example, concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict involving Azerbaijan and Armenia we do not observe a unity among Central Asian Turkic States. Indeed, in the framework of Turkic Summits both Turkey and Azerbaijan tried to obtain from Turkic Republics' leaders a joint statement condemning Armenia's policy in the region. This joint decision-making attempt failed notably due to the alliance within the Collective Security Treaty Organization<sup>12</sup> (CSTO, established as an international organization in 2002 and bringing together Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Belarus). On another plane, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan had a diplomatic discord related to the exploitation of oil resources in the Caspian Sea<sup>13</sup> at the time.

Besides, it should be remembered that not all the Turkic States are part of the Turkic Council<sup>14</sup>. As a conse-





quence, the Turkic Council does not include the majority of the Turkic population in Central Asia. Since, Turkmenistan has important natural gas reserves<sup>15</sup> (the largest in Central Asia), with the absence of Turkmenistan, the Council is deprived of a strategic and energy-rich member country. According to Dr. Altay Atlı<sup>16</sup>, as a result of its present membership the Turkic Council encounters obstacles in its economic integration strategy. He asserts that *"when it comes to forming economic and security alliances, it is still national interests and realpolitik that matter"*<sup>17</sup>. The Turkish regional strategy is a striking example of this prevalence of national interests among Central Asia and Caucasus countries. The importance of Caucasus for the Turkish foreign policy is not just part of a nationalist and ethnic perspective, indeed, being a regional leader urges Turkey to be an unavoidable actor within the Turkic World (and here the Turkic Council can appear as a relevant tool for the Turkish foreign policy).

Obviously, geographical locations of Turkic Council's member states constitute a barrier in order to implement an efficient economic integration in the region. Here, it is important to define what is an "economic integration". In this respect the website Investopedia<sup>18</sup> proposes a relevant definition: *"an arrangement between different regions that often includes the reduction or elimination of trade barriers, and the coordination of monetary and fiscal policies. The aim of economic integration is to reduce costs for both consumers and producers and to increase trade between the countries involved in the agreement"*<sup>19</sup>. Taking into consideration that definition, the Turkic Council is far from achieving an economic integration in Central Asia and Caucasus. The lack of common borders in Turkic World appears as an important impediment. Although Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (also Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) share common borders, the Caspian Sea separates Azerbaijan from the other members. Moreover, except considering the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan (itself separated by Armenia from Azerbaijan's main territory), Turkey does not share a border with Azerbaijan. However, the border issue should not be considered as an unavoidable obstacle for economic integration, but more as a problem for the Turkic world's unification prospects in the broader sense.

In addition, concerning the economic potential of the Council's member states, we observe strong disparities. Indeed these differences can be noticed regarding the GDPs of Turkic States. The Turkish GDP represent approximately 857 billion USD whereas respectively 48 billion USD for Uzbekistan, 40 billion for Azerbaijan and 159 billion USD for Kazakhstan.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, due to these inequalities in terms of economic potential and weight, the principle of an equitable integration seems difficult to attain. Turkey, has undeniably a key role to play within the Turkic world to realize this goal.

Another constraint on the work of the Turkic Council lies in the Russian influence within the Central Asia and

the Caucasus. When the newly independent Turkic Republics were under the Soviet Union, Russia has kept a cultural, linguistic and political influence in the region. Indeed, Russia has a strong interest in the establishment of a unified economic "Eurasian" space. Furthermore, Russia asserts itself as a leading power in the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union<sup>21</sup> (EAEU, in which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from the Turkic World are members). According to Ksenia Kirkham from King's College London, the Russian influence in Central Asia and Caucasus through the EAEU can be analyzed as a *"Russian counter-hegemonic-initiative"*. The article asserts that the Russian regional hegemony has the potential to be total<sup>22</sup>. Thus, the "Near Abroad"<sup>23</sup> Russian policy gives particular importance to Central Asia and Caucasus in terms of access to energy resources, and maintaining a regional security. Thus, due to the Russian leadership posture in the region, namely its significant weight within the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Turkic states seem to be economically and politically dependent on Russia. Therefore, this political and economic balance of power within the Central Asia and Caucasus does not allow the Turkic Council to establish itself as the major force in the region and to impose a competing economic integration project vis a vis Russia.

### **Central Asia and Caucasus stakes and prospects: A Turkic Council bypassed in current energy issues?**

Taking into consideration the policies implemented by the Council and its weaknesses and limits lead us to evoke the current and future prospects for the Council. What role can the Turkic Council play within Caucasus and Central Asia? in terms of regional policy, regional resources, and diplomatic networks. First of all, the realities confirm the Turkic Council's limited influence in the region, indeed on 12 August 2018, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Iran signed an historical agreement concerning the Caspian Sea resources' repartition<sup>24</sup>. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the Caspian Sea had no legal statue determining the resources repartition among the neighbor's states. This vast oil and gas resources repartition agreement has been signed in Kazakhstan and the

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five countries settled on a formula avoiding future contentions. Thus, the Turkic Council seems sidelined in energy developments in the region, especially when it comes to the legal field. As described in the previous part, the Russian influence in Caucasus and Central Asia appears deeply-rooted through diplomatic, economic and strategic cooperation schemes.

However, it is possible that the Turkic Council can have a role to play concerning the operation and development of the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP)<sup>25</sup>. Namely, the TANAP can be considered as a tool for the Turkish foreign policy in order to strengthen Turkish influence in the region. Here the collaboration of the Turkic States in the framework of the Council could facilitate the realization of security cooperation region-wide (especially between Turkey and Azerbaijan). Indeed Azerbaijan is a fundamental partner in the TANAP project and the Southern Gas Corridor. Moreover, the European Union has shown a huge interest in this project and it can constitute a window of opportunity for the Turkic Council to assert itself as a partner for the European Union in terms of energy transportation and distribution.

The other prospect concerning the Turkic Council is the inclusion of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in several areas of cooperation. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are currently working on a strategic partnership<sup>26</sup>, the participation of the new Uzbek President in the next Summit of the Turkic Council will be an important step for the Council. However, regarding the development of gas pipeline projects in the region, the opportunities for the Turkic Council to play a major role in Central Asia and Caucasus turn out to be weak. The Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China gas pipeline project (inaugurated in 2009) is a striking example of the diversification of energy flows in which the Turkic Council has no influence (or to have at most a limited role). The TAPI gas pipeline project (between Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) leads us to draw the same conclusion. Michael

Hart<sup>27</sup> has pointed out that the “*Central Asia’s energy market has decisively reoriented itself to the east [...] Energy policies have focused on the development of new transit routes in the form of large-scale pipeline projects, aiming to diversify the supply chain and open up the region to the rapidly growing markets of eastern Eurasia*”<sup>28</sup>. Thus, the Turkic Council appears as an organization bypassing current energy stakes in the Caucasus and in Central Asia.

In terms of cooperation in the field of diplomacy cooperation, and the political dialogue between the Turkic States (and in a certain extent transportation policies), the Council remains an important organization. Nevertheless, as tried to be explored in this paper, the economic and energy cooperation are heavily determined by national interests in the region. In this respect, the Russian, Chinese, as well as Turkish foreign policy practices constitute the key determining factors for the development of cooperation in the wider Caucasus and Central Asian geography.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the paper examines the Turkic Council’s practices in the fields of diplomacy, economy, customs and transportation projects. The Caucasus and Central Asia are rich in energy resources. Indeed, Turkic states’ foreign policies have a strong interest in the exploitation and transportation of Caspian Sea’s resources. The Russian, Chinese and Turkish influence and presence in the region can also be explained by this energy challenge. However the Turkic Council faces two main obstacles that prevent it from becoming a central actor within Central Asia as well as in the Caucasus. First of all, the respective Turkic national interests are not necessarily similar or converging toward the same objectives and policies. Then, the Russian strong influence and the emerging Chinese one present an unfavorable balance of power for the Turkic Council states in Central Asia and Caucasus. Thus, the Council obviously aspires to economic integration as well as a wide cooperation in terms of customs and transportation and attempts to build a strong diplomatic network among the Turkic States (with cultural, scientific, touristic, political and business ties). However, Russia seems to have a leading position in the region and competes with the Chinese influence. Therefore, the Turkic Council cannot be considered as a major force in the region. Nevertheless, highlighting the several areas of cooperation already developed by the Turkish Council allows us to comprehend the current stakes and prospects in Central Asia and Caucasus. Each member state of the Council has a strategic position in the region, in terms of energy, customs and economic opportunities. The Turkic Council may also have a key role to play in the diplomatic sphere. Hence the hope that the relations between Turkic states in the framework of the Turkic Council could result in a fruitful cooperation in a number of areas, both political and economic.

## Endnotes

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