

On challenges confronting Turkey in Central Asia

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Recent developments in Central Asia have highlighted significant challenges for Turkey's foreign policy in the region. Following the "Central Asia – EU" summit in Samarkand on April 4, 2025, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan signed a joint declaration supporting the UN Resolutions 541 (1983) and 550 (1984), which explicitly condemn the proclamation of the self-proclaimed "*Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus*" (TRNC) and call on all countries not to recognize it. Additionally, these Central Asian Turkic republics have expressed their intention to establish direct diplomatic relations with the Republic of Cyprus with the aim of strengthening ties with the European Union. Agreements have already been reached with Nicosia, thereby enabling the enhancement of diplomatic relations and the establishment of embassies.

This decision caught many by surprise, especially given the integration programs within the Turkic world of recent years, which have been expanded across various spheres of life among the member states of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Turkey's reaction, as reflected in its media outlets suggests a sense of betrayal. This is due to the fact that Ankara had been leveraging the OTS's integration achievements as a political asset. The TRNC's observer status in the OTS was seen by Turkey as a step toward gaining broader international recognition for the TRNC, with hopes that Central Asia would lead the way in acknowledging its sovereignty.

However, the Central Asian republics' decision to align with the EU on the Cyprus issue indicates a deviation from Turkey's strategy. This decision underscores concerns among these nations about Turkey's growing influence in the region, which they perceive as a potential threat to their sovereignty. The move also serves to balance Ankara's cultural and geopolitical ambitions, which have included initiatives such as a unified alphabet, educational programs, and even the proposal of a single state language for the OTS members.

This development reflects the complex dynamics of regional politics and the delicate balance between cultural integration and national sovereignty.

The geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia have long been shaped by the interplay of major powers, including post-Soviet Russia, China, and Turkey. Initially, Turkey gained access to the region as the Turkic republics sought to counterbalance Russia's influence and China's growing presence. The integration framework was built on ethnic and linguistic identity, aiming to unite the Turkic states despite historical conflicts and contradictions.

The concept of the "*Turkic world*" was supported by the West, with Turkey positioned as the executor of the initiative. Over three decades, the program aimed to foster cultural and civilizational ties, ultimately leading to a geopolitical union under Ankara's leadership, backed by the U.S. and the U.K. This initiative, known as the "*Great Turan*", sought to challenge the dominance of Russia and China in the resource-rich and strategically located region.

However, recent developments, such as the joint decision of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan to support Cyprus's sovereignty and oppose Turkey's stance on Northern Cyprus, indicate significant challenges for the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). This strategic maneuver signifies a redistribution of power, reflecting a shift in the balance of power and the Central Asian republics' desire to maintain their sovereignty and adapt to the changing global dynamics.

The weakening of Russia's position due to the conflict in Ukraine and the U.S.-led sanctions war has created opportunities for closer ties between the EU and China. "One Belt–One Road" initiative and China's economic expansion in Central Asia have further reshaped the region's geopolitical landscape.

The European Union (EU) is increasingly positioning itself as a key player in Central Asia, independent of the United States, and is ready to rely on Beijing for this initiative. This shift suggests a new balance of power, filling the space vacated by Russia and forcing Turkey to reconsider its role in the region. For Ankara, the situation in Central Asia is becoming unfavorable, as the local elites' push for greater autonomy, combined with the financial and economic activities of global players competing with Turkey undermine Ankara's efforts to expand its influence.

Turkey has long invested in programs to establish cultural and civilizational ties with the Turkic republics, including educational, religious, and political initiatives aimed at sanctifying the "*historical unity of the peoples of the 'Great Turan'*". However, Turkey's "soft power" has lacked the financial and economic component that international experience shows is the most effective method of strengthening partnerships and alliances.

Turkey has lagged behind both Russia and, more significantly, China in its economic development and investment policies in Central Asia. This is an objective reality, as Ankara does not possess the financial and economic strength to match its geopolitical ambitions. Now, the Turkic republics of Central Asia have a new financial source in the form of consolidated EU investment funds, which are ready to make significant contributions to the developing economies of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

At the Samarkand Summit, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the EU's first €12 billion investment package for Central Asia under the *Global Gateway* program. She outlined four priority areas for cooperation: the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, critical raw materials (hydrocarbons and rare earth metals), green energy, and digital connectivity. This support is expected to grow in the future if Central Asian capitals align with the EU's geopolitical priorities.

Von der Leyen emphasized the political aspect of the deal, stating that Europe expects hydrocarbons, rare earth metals, and "political dialogue" in return for investments. As a demonstration of their readiness to meet this condition, three Turkic capitals signed a communiqué rejecting the recognition of the so-called "*Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus*", delivering a significant blow to Ankara's pride and its ambitious plans.

The recent developments in Central Asia indeed represent a significant setback for Turkey. Ankara's inability to impose its conditions on the Turkic republics regarding the inclusion of the EU in the regional geopolitical game highlights the challenges it faces. Even if such conditions had been proposed, the allies within the Organization of Turkic States

(OTS) would probably have considered them irrational in the context of global competition for European investments.

In contrast, European solidarity once again proved its effectiveness. The *communiqué* recognizing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus by the Central Asian republics appears to be the result of successful diplomatic efforts by Athens and Nicosia. Their agreement to the EU's investment program in the Turkic states was contingent upon the protection of Greek interests.

On a broader scale, Brussels has dealt a blow not only to Turkey's "Cyprus case" but also to its vision of the "*Great Turan*" project. This move has exposed the fragility of OTS solidarity and its lack of competitiveness in the face of increasing pressure and economic expansion by wealthier and more powerful players in Central Asia.