

MILITARY-POLITICAL ASPECTS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES: OVERALL DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT

Levon HOVSEPYAN

*Senior Researcher at
the Institute of Political Research
(Erevan, Republic of Armenia)*

Introduction

The geopolitical changes going on in the world in the aftermath of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union have prompted Turkey to take a fresh look at its foreign policy, as well as at several issues relating to the country's security and defense. The approach of Turkey's leaders to the country's national security strategy and policy has widened its horizons to encompass the place these two elements occupy in the overall development of Turkey's so-called alternative foreign policy. Since the very beginning of the 1990s, the Caucasus and the Central Asian region

(CA) have become a new alternative vector in Turkey's foreign policy. Given its ethno-linguistic and cultural communality with the Turkic-speaking nations that populate the region, Turkey began employing a new political strategy, trying to assume the role of leader there. This was a unique opportunity for it to raise its status as a regional power.

In this article, we will attempt to shed some light on the special features of the development of Turkey's military-political cooperation with the newly independent states of Central Asia.

End of the Cold War and the Reasons for Turkey's Intensified Foreign Policy in Central Asia

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union prompted serious changes in Turkey's foreign policy. The Turkish leadership was afraid that the end of the Cold War would undermine the country's position as a NATO member. It began looking for a new foreign policy strategy aimed at intensifying its influence in the Turkic-speaking countries of the post-Soviet expanse (*Türkçe konuşan ülkeler*).

In one of his articles, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs İsmail Cem noted: “Turkey, in the aftermath of the Cold War, has assumed a far greater geopolitical and strategic role at the centre of a vast land mass stretching all the way from Europe to the centre of Asia.”¹

The creation of a union of Turkic-speaking countries, with Turkey at its head, would raise the geopolitical importance of the latter, particularly in its interrelations with the West. Turkish analyst S. Laçiner notes that creating this kind of Turkic-speaking world (*Türk Dünyası*) would not be an alternative to the European Union or to the West as a whole. Turkey just thought that, with the support of the Turkic-speaking world behind it, it would feel more confident in its relations with the West.²

Although Turkey lost its former significance in the eyes of the West after the end of the Cold War, certain premises have nevertheless appeared for it to become a serious player in the Central Asian field; “since it has common ethnic, linguistic, and religious ties with these newly independent countries, Turkey saw itself as a bridge in the West’s interrelations with them.”³

During official meetings at different levels, the Turkish leadership took every opportunity to emphasize the important role their country was playing in the new geopolitical environment. According to Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, in the system of regional relations that formed after the Cold War, Turkey’s strategic role as a “stable member of NATO in this instable region” (meaning CA and the Southern Caucasus) is becoming increasingly important; the collapse of the Soviet Union has again confirmed Turkey’s status as a regional economic force.⁴

Turkey’s active policy regarding the Turkic-speaking Central Asian countries was supported at first in the West, particularly in the U.S., which needed a weapon for countering the attempts of Iran, Afghanistan (meaning Islamic fundamentalism), China, and the Russian Federation to augment their influence in this region.⁵

So, having enlisted a certain amount of international support, Turkey began establishing political and economic relations with the CA countries. At first, Turkey counted on being able to head the alliance of Turkic-speaking states it had created, but over time it realized it had overestimated its capabilities and began conducting a more realistic policy, an important element of which was establishing relations with the Turkic-speaking newly independent countries in the military sphere.

Main Vectors in Turkey’s Cooperation with the Central Asian Countries in the Military Sphere

At the initial stages of establishing contacts in the military sphere, the Central Asian countries regarded Turkey as a force with good experience in combating terrorism and arms trafficking and smuggling.

¹ See: I. Cem, “Turkey: Setting Sail to the 21st Century,” *Journal of International Affairs, Perceptions*, Vol. 2, September-November 1997.

² See: S. Laçiner, “Orta Asya ve Türkiye,” *Uluslararası Stratejik Araştırmalar Kurumu*, 28.10.2008, available at [<http://www.usakgundem.com>].

³ See: Y. Demirağ, “Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türkiyenin Orta Asya Siyasetinde Gelinek Nokta ve Gelecekte Bölgeye İlişkin İzlenmesi Gereken Dış politika Stratejisi,” available at [http://www.jeopolitik.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=22&Itemid=28].

⁴ See: S. Demirel, “Newly Emerging Centre,” *Turkish Review*, Vol. 6, No. 30, Winter 1992, p. 9.

⁵ See: Z. Chotoev, “The Turkish Factor in the Evolution of the Central Asian Republics,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003, p. 73.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent CA countries needed to reform and modernize their armed forces, and Turkey, as a NATO member, looked more attractive to them: the leaders of the Central Asian countries thought that developing cooperation with Turkey and applying the latter's experience would help them to establish direct ties with the alliance and reduce their dependence on Russia. But at the beginning of the 1990s, the CA countries found it impossible to establish relations with NATO since they were still very dependent on Russia.

Moreover, Russia was extremely concerned about the prospect of Turkey and the CA countries developing stronger relations, even though there were other NATO members with greater opportunities for penetrating the region.

At first, NATO and the U.S. leadership supported Turkey's intensified activity in the Central Asian region. This process was seen as a preliminary stage in establishing relations between the alliance and the CA countries.

Soon the Turkish side understood that it needed to have a military presence in the region to achieve its political goals and expand its influence there. At the end of the 1990s, it began allotting the Turkic-speaking countries with a certain amount of money for carrying out modernization in different military spheres and implementing several programs.⁶

It should be noted that Turkey is also engaged in military cooperation in the region within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, contacts have intensified between representatives of the military departments of Turkey and the Central Asian countries.

In March 1993, Chief of General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces Doğan Güreş visited Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. A month later, the Kyrgyz president paid a return visit to Turkey. These meetings resulted in the signing of agreements on military training and education.⁷ Since the beginning of 1992, officers from the Central Asian countries have been taking retraining courses at Turkish military establishments.

The first intergovernmental agreement on military education between Turkey and Kazakhstan was signed on 23 February, 1993 in Alma-Ata, which was extremely advantageous for the Kazakh side, since the Turks assumed responsibility for all the material expenditures.

In August 1994, Turkish Minister of Defense Mehmet Gölhan paid an official visit to Kazakhstan. An agreement was signed on military science, technology, and education which envisaged granting significant privileges and material assistance to the Kazakh side,⁸ but the educational and training programs did not begin until the end of the 1990s.

In September 1996, a protocol on mutual understanding and expansion of Turkish-Kazakh cooperation in the military sphere was signed. This document envisaged cooperation within the NATO PfP program, joint participation in U.N. and OSCE peacekeeping missions, formation of a corps for retraining noncommissioned officers, creation of Kazakh coast guard service, and so on.

The same year, an agreement was signed on mutual assistance in the military industrial sphere and military-technical cooperation. However, the programs and projects designated in the military industrial sphere have yet to be put into practice.⁹

⁶ For more on Turkey's policy in Central Asia, see: L. Hovsepian, "Turkey's Policy in Central Asia in the 1990s as the Most Important Vector of Eurasian Policy. Achievement or Failure," in: *Turkologic and Ottoman Research*, No. 5, Erivan 2008, pp. 158-176 (in Armenian); L. Hovsepian, "The Turkish Model and Turkey's Central Asian Policies Conditioned by Western Strategic Interests," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (56), 2009, pp. 112-118.

⁷ See: G. Winrow, "Turkey and Central Asia," in: *Central Asian Security. The New International Context*, ed. by R. Allison, L. Jonson, Brookings Institution Press, London, Washington, 2001, p. 207.

⁸ See: *Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitelstvom Respubliki Kazakhstan i Pravitelstvom Turetskoi Respubliki o bezvozmeznoi voennoi pomoshchi*, available at [<http://ru.government.kz/docs/1066.htm>].

⁹ See: A. Shilibekova, "Turkey-Kazakhstan Relationship in the Military Sphere. Outcome and Outlook," *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies (EJEPS)*, No. 1 (2), 2008, p. 69.

Turkey's cooperation with Kyrgyzstan began with signing an agreement in 1993 under which the country was allotted military-technical and material assistance.¹⁰ But Turkey did not begin rendering more active assistance to the Kyrgyz Armed Forces until 1999.

In June 2001, Turkey provided the Kyrgyz Armed Forces with military equipment and communication means totaling almost \$1 million, although a sum of \$1.5 million was designated in the inter-governmental agreement signed in October 2000.¹¹

According to the agreement signed in March 2002 between the Turkish Armed Forces General Headquarters and the Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Defense, the Turkish side was supposed to provide military and material assistance amounting to \$1.1 million; by 2003, this amount had reached \$3.5 million.¹²

In October 2000, the Turkish and Uzbek ministries of defense signed an agreement on military and military-technical cooperation, as well as an agreement on cooperation in security and fighting terrorism, according to which Turkey pledged to provide the necessary military-technical assistance.¹³ The above-mentioned agreements made a significant contribution to strengthening cooperation between the two countries in the military-technical sphere and security. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the agreement on cooperation in military education signed as early as 1992, although it was not ratified for a long time.

During his visit to Uzbekistan in March 2002, Chief of General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu signed an agreement with the Uzbek side that envisaged providing the republic with gratuitous military assistance totaling \$1.2 million (deliveries of military-technical hardware to Uzbekistan ceased in 2004).¹⁴ The country was allotted \$1.5 million to combat terrorism in 2003, and a total of \$610,000-worth of military-technical means and educational accessories were delivered in 2004. On the whole, between 2002-2004, Turkey rendered Uzbekistan a total of approximately \$3 million 300 thousand in gratuitous military-technical assistance.¹⁵

In 2003, during his trip to Uzbekistan, Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed an agreement on cooperation in the military sphere which envisaged retraining Uzbek servicemen (within the framework of the antiterrorism campaign) and sending Uzbek air force officers to study in Turkey.¹⁶

During the second half of the 1990s, the question was repeatedly raised of Turkey supplying the Central Asian countries, primarily Uzbekistan, with its armored vehicles. In particular, in May 1996, during Turkish President Süleyman Demirel's visit to Uzbekistan, Chief of General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, who was a member of the delegation, suggested organizing the joint production of armored vehicles in the republic, which however the Uzbek side did not condone.¹⁷

¹⁰ See: "Kırgız ordusunu Türkiye modernize ediyor," *Zaman*, 25.07.2008.

¹¹ See: *Kyrgyzstan Daily Digest*, 8 June, 2001, available at [http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/kyrgyzstan/hypermail/200106/0023.html].

¹² See: *Novostnoe soobshchenie Mezhhregionalnogo fonda informatsionnykh tekhnologii*, available at [http://mfir.ru/defensive/obzor/ob31-10-03-4.html]; *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 31 October, 2003; "Kirghiziia: bazy v obmen na stabilnost," available at [http://www.redstar.ru/2002/07/02_07/3_02.html].

¹³ See: *Cumhurbaşkanı Sezer Özbekistan'da... Sezer: "Türkiye Orta Asya Türk Cumhuriyetlerinin ve bu arada Özbekistanın terörizm konusundaki kaygılarını anlamaktadır,"* available at [http://www.byegm.gov.tr/YAYINLARIMIZ/HABERANADOLU/HABER-ANA/2000/10/HA17x10x00.HTM].

¹⁴ See: H. Kanbolat, "Özbekistan Cumhuriyeti 15 Yaşında," *Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ASAM)*, 14 Eylül 2006, available at [http://www.asam.org.tr]; "Özbekistan ile ilişkilerde askerî yardım ivmesi," *Zaman*, 19.03.2002.

¹⁵ See: *Özbekistan Ülke Raporu*, Aralık 2004, T.C. Başbakanlık Türk İşbirliği ve Kalkınma İdaresi (TIKA), 04.06.2007, s. 67, available at [http://www.tika.gov.tr].

¹⁶ See: "Türk-Özbek askeri işbirliği için anlaşma," *Sabah*, 20.12.2003.

¹⁷ See: D. Trofimov, "Tashkent between Ankara and Tehran: Lessons of the 1990s and Outlook for the Future," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (11), 2001, p. 112.

On the whole, in contrast to its cooperation with other Central Asian republics, Turkey's political relations with Uzbekistan were very unstable. This hindered further intensification of bilateral cooperation in the military sphere.¹⁸

Every year since 1999, 5-6 officers from Kazakhstan are trained at the NATO PfP Training Center in Ankara, which is the first to be opened in the Alliance's Participating States. Its employees have been carrying out training programs both in the Turkic-speaking CA republics and in several Balkan and Caucasian countries. Turkish servicemen have also been participating in the training programs of the Kazakh peacekeeping battalion.¹⁹

In addition to the aforesaid measures, since the end of the 1990s, the Turkish side has been allotting resources to modernize different spheres of the Central Asian republics' armed forces. In particular, in June 1998, a treaty was signed that envisaged allotting Kazakhstan \$500,000 in gratuitous financial assistance.²⁰

According to the agreement signed in 1999, Turkey allotted approximately \$700,000 for modernizing Kazakhstan's military communication means. Later, another agreement was reached on granting the country another \$1 million. An agreement was also reached on training Kazakh servicemen in Turkey, on the two countries jointly combating international terrorism, and on cooperation in other military spheres.²¹

In March 2001, a protocol was signed on carrying out measures aimed at further coordination and intensification of cooperation between the two countries in the military-technical sphere. In order to render assistance to the Kazakhstan armed forces in Astana, a special representative office of the Turkish General Staff was established, and it was announced that "Turkey was willing to help this country to modernize its army and navy."²²

According to the Turkish-Kazakh program of military-technical cooperation, Kazakhstan was to receive approximately \$10 million before 2010, which was to be spent on purchasing and modernizing military vehicles, naval technology, and so on.²³

During his visit to Turkey in October 2003, Minister of Defense of Kazakhstan Mukhtar Altynbaev signed a new agreement, in accordance with which the republic was issued gratuitous assistance in the form of military hardware, training means, etc. totaling \$1.5 million.²⁴

In June 2005, Turkey sent Kazakhstan additional military hardware and equipment totaling \$1.3 million (including 24 Land Rover Defender 110 vehicles manufactured by the Turkish Otocar Company and 90 units of communication means).²⁵

¹⁸ Despite the close (at first) Turkish-Uzbek cooperation, since the second half of the 1990s, these relations have become mistrusting and unstable, primarily in the political respect. This is related to the fact that leader of the Uzbek opposition party, Erk, fled Uzbekistan and found refuge in Turkey. Following this event, the republic's ambassador to Turkey was recalled. The tension in relations reached its peak in 1999, when Turkey was found to be involved (according to the Uzbek law-enforcement structures) in the events associated with the attempted assassination of Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

¹⁹ See: A. Shilibekova, *op. cit.*

²⁰ See: E. Parubochaia, "Voenno-technicheskoe i voenno-obrazovatelnoe sotrudnichestvo v kontekste Kazakhstano-Turetskikh otnoshenii," *Izvestiia AGU* scientific journal, No. 4-1(60), 2008.

²¹ See: M. Eaton, *Major Trends in Military Expenditure and Arms Acquisition by the States of Caspian Region. The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, ed. by G. Chufirin, SIPRI, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 100-101.

²² See: A. Kostiukhin, "Voenno-promyshlennyy kompleks gosudarstv Tsentral'noi Azii i ikh voenno-tehnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo s zarubezhnymi stranami v 1990-e gg.," *Zarubezhnoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 5, 2009, p. 18.

²³ See: M. Kenzhetaev, "Kazakhstan's Military-Technical Cooperation with Foreign States: Current Status, Structure and Prospects," *Moscow Defense Brief*, available at [<http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/1-2002/at/kmtcfs/>], 3 April, 2008.

²⁴ See: "Turtsiia predostavit Kazakhstanu na bezvozmezhdnoi osnove voennuiu tekhniku i oborudovanie na summu okolo 1,5 mln doll.," *RIA Novosti*, 29 October, 2003.

²⁵ See: R. McDermott, "Turkish Military Assistance to Kazakhstan Highlights Western Dilemma," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 2, Issue 115, available at [<http://www.jamestown.org/>], 15 June, 2005; "Turkey Providing Military Aid to Kazakhstan," available at [<http://www.worldtribune.com/>], 6 March, 2006; "Savunma Sanayii Gündemi," *SSM*, Ocak 2009, Sayı 7, s. 80.

In October 2005, an intergovernmental agreement was signed in Ankara on providing the Kyrgyz Armed Forces with gratuitous military assistance. In November of the same year, a protocol was signed in Bishkek, according to which the Turkish side rendered the republic military-technical assistance totaling \$800,000.²⁶

In May 2007, the Kyrgyz army was provided with additional military-technical means (including communication systems and sniper rifles) totaling around \$650,000.

Kyrgyzstan received a total of \$2-million-worth of military-technical and financial assistance from Turkey in 2007.²⁷ Military cooperation between the two countries has continued to intensify.

For example, in June 2008, another agreement was signed, according to which Turkey allotted a total of \$1 million intended for further modernization of the Kyrgyz army.²⁸

In January 2009, another protocol was signed between the Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Defense and the Turkish General Staff (it was executed in the summer of the same year) on granting gratuitous military-technical assistance to the Kyrgyz Armed Forces (11 vehicles, radio communication means, signal systems, night vision devices, sniper rifles, and special military uniforms).²⁹ According to Ambassador of Turkey to Bishkek Serpil Alpman, this aid amounted to \$1 million 370 thousand.³⁰

Turkey has made repeated attempts to establish bilateral cooperation with the CA countries in the military industrial sphere. For example, the Kazakhstan Ministry of Defense and the ASELSAN Company are cooperating in creating weapons systems for the Kazakh army. In addition, they signed a protocol on creating a joint working group staffed with specialists from both countries. Another agreement on cooperation was signed with the ASELSAN Company, according to which the Turkish side pledged to assist in introducing a state-of-the-art communications system in the Kazakh army.³¹

Turkish Ambassador to Kazakhstan Taner Seben noted that at the end of 2004, Kazakhstan had received aid totaling approximately \$13 million.³²

Bilateral cooperation in the military sphere also continued in subsequent years. Programs have been implemented to train and configure special operations forces. This is being carried out both in Turkey and in Kazakhstan. Approximately 500 Kazakh servicemen have been trained within the framework of the Commandos, Special Purpose, Sniper Training, and Internal Security training programs.

Since 2005, servicemen from Kazakhstan's Special Operations Forces have also been participating every year in the Anatolia tactical exercises in Turkey (these exercises were last held in May-June 2009). Around 150 Kazakh servicemen have undergone training in land and naval educational establishments in Turkey, in particular at the Kuleli military high school and at land and military medical academies.³³

Turkey has also signed agreements with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan in security aimed jointly fighting any possible Islamist intrigues.

For example, after an Islamist attack in August 2000, the Turkish side offered Uzbekistan financial support and agreed to train its antiterrorist subdivisions at its military educational establishments.

²⁶ See: "Turtsiia okazhet voenno-tekhnicheskuiu pomoshch Kyrgyzstanu," Information Analytical Portal Obshchestvennyy Rejting, available at [<http://www.pr.kg/>], 25 November, 2005.

²⁷ See: *TSK'dan Kirgizistan'a malzeme yardimi*, 25 MAYIS 2007, available at [<http://e-gazete.anadolu.edu.tr/>].

²⁸ See: "Kirgiz ordusunu Turkiye modernize ediyor," *Zaman*, 25.07.2008.

²⁹ See: "Turtsiia predostavit voenno-tekhnicheskuiu pomoshch Kyrgyzstanu," Information Portal, available at [<http://www.kginfo.ru/>], 28 January, 2009.

³⁰ See: "TSK'dan Kirgiz ordusuna yardım," *Star*, 01.07.2009.

³¹ See: *Positive Development of Kazakhstan-Turkish Relations*. Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 20 December, 2008, available at [<http://www.mod.kz/index6723.html>].

³² See: "TSK'dan Kazakistan'a askeri araç yardımı," *Milliyet*, 23.02.2005.

³³ See: News Report of the Belarusian Ministry of Defense site, available at [<http://www.mod.mil.by/news4.html>], 10 June, 2009.

On the basis of an agreement signed in October 2000, terms were reached on pooling efforts to combat terrorism and different types of criminal activity. The possibility of providing Uzbekistan with Turkish weapons and military hardware was discussed.

Kyrgyzstan was also allotted financial aid, and in the fall of 2000, the presidents of both countries decided to create a joint group for combating international terrorism.³⁴

Turkey's attempt to assume the main role in the fight against the Taliban is very understandable, since it is aimed at boosting its own influence in the region by establishing closer ties in military security.

Conclusion

Many projects have failed, since too much depended on the U.S.'s material and technical assistance. Turkey does not have the resources necessary to independently provide the assistance needed to the region's countries, the security of which requires protection of the borders and provision with air defense devices and special operations forces.³⁵ Moreover, Turkey's attempts to establish cooperation with the CA countries have come up against Russia's greater influence in the region.

Nevertheless, Turkish assistance proved extremely propitious in some military cooperation programs. For example, according to Turkish sources (2006), 20,300 servicemen from more than 90 countries of the world have undergone military training in Turkey; and more than 93,000 servicemen from 16 states have taken on-site military training courses. It is worth noting that these were mainly servicemen from the Balkan, Central Asian, and Caucasian countries. For example, 3,862 people from Azerbaijan were trained by Turkish military instructors, 911 from Georgia, 1,299 from Turkmenistan, 401 from Kyrgyzstan, 426 from Uzbekistan, 383 from Kazakhstan, 3,296 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1,635 from Albania, and so on.³⁶ Training was mainly carried out under the auspices of the Turkish Partnership For Peace Training Center created at one time in Turkey.

So based on a fact analysis, it can be confirmed that there is no fundamental military cooperation between Turkey and the CA countries. The Turkish side has done nothing more than provide the region's countries with a certain amount of support in the education and retraining of military personnel, issue a few financial grants, as well as try to establish cooperation in the military industry.

In addition to the limited opportunities of the Turkish side itself (despite all the efforts exerted, it has been unable to implement important military-industrial projects requiring large financial expenses, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan which still have a certain amount of military-industrial infrastructure inherited from Soviet times), the attitude of the leadership of the Central Asian republics has also played a significant role. Their military-technical needs are being satisfied by means of cooperation with the Russian Federation and other countries with a leading position in the military sphere.

The fact that Turkey does not have a well-developed scientific-technical base is also of particular importance, although it has been implementing major projects aimed at enhancing its own military industry. Evidently, it was interested in implementing joint programs with the CA countries not only from the viewpoint of expanding its military-technical, but also its political presence in the region.

³⁴ See: M. Eaton, op. cit., p. 110.

³⁵ See: I. Muradian, *Regionalnye problem turetsko-amerikanskikh otnoshenii*, Yerevan, 2004, p. 54.

³⁶ See: "TSK, 16 ülkeden 93 bin personeli yerinde eğitti," *Milliyet*, 02.01.2006.