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TURKEY-UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS: STRATEGIC COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIP

TÜRKİYE-ÖZBEKİSTAN İLİŞKİLERİ: STRATEJİK İŞ BİRLİĞİ VE ORTAKLIK

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ABSTRACT

With its strategic location, the Central Asian region occupies an important place in Turkish foreign policy. The historical and cultural ties between Turkey and the Central Asian countries further increase the importance of this region. Located in the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan has a rich historical and cultural background. The versatile and multidimensional foreign policy pursued by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has further increased Uzbekistan's importance on a regional and global scale and opened up new opportunities for cooperation. Uzbekistan has become a decisive actor in Turkey's Central Asian policies, especially in recent years. Turkey generally prioritizes a foreign policy strategy towards Central Asia that focuses on regional stability and prosperity. In this context, Uzbekistan's multi-dimensional foreign policy in recent years is quite compatible with Turkey's strategy towards the region. Both Turkey and Uzbekistan have common interests in maintaining and promoting stability in Central Asia.

The article analyzes the main directions of development of bilateral relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan. Bilateral relations, which have historically had their ups and downs, have recently gained a strong and constructive functionality. The importance of this functionality and momentum is particularly emphasized in the paper. It is obvious that the strategic cooperation and partnership between the two countries will contribute significantly to regional stability. Moreover, the establishment of

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high-level consultation mechanisms and the effective use of these mechanisms allow for the institutionalization of bilateral relations.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Strategic Cooperation, Strategic Partnership, Turkey, Uzbekistan.*

ÖZ

Orta Asya bölgesi sahip olduğu stratejik konumu sebebiyle, Türk dış politikasında önemli bir yer kapsamaktadır. Türkiye ve Orta Asya ülkeleri arasındaki tarihsel ve kültürel bağlar, bu bölgenin önemini daha da artırmaktadır. Orta Asya'nın kalbinde bulunan Özbekistan, zengin bir tarihsel ve kültürel arka plana sahiptir. Cumhurbaşkanı Shavkat Mirziyoyev'in izlemeye çalıştığı çok yönlü ve çok boyutlu dış politika, Özbekistan'ın bölgesel ve küresel ölçekteki önemini daha da artırmış ve yeni işbirliği olanaklarının meydana çıkmasına zemin hazırlamıştır. Özbekistan özellikle son yıllarda, Türkiye'nin Orta Asya politikalarında belirleyici bir konuma yükselmiştir. Türkiye genel olarak, Orta Asya'ya yönelik bölgesel istikrarı ve refahı önceleyen bir dış politika stratejisini incelemektedir. Bu bağlamda Özbekistan'ın son yıllarda izlediği çok yönlü dış politika, Türkiye'nin bölgeye yönelik stratejisiyle oldukça uyumludur. Hem Türkiye hem de Özbekistan, Orta Asya'da istikrarın korunması ve geliştirilmesi konusunda ortak çıkarlara sahiptirler.

Makalede, Türkiye ile Özbekistan arasındaki ikili ilişkilerin temel gelişimi istikameti incelenmektedir. Tarihsel bağlamda inişli çıkışlı bir seyre sahip olan ikili ilişkiler, son dönemlerde güçlü ve yapıcı bir işlevsellik kazanmıştır. Makalede, bu işlevselliğin ve ivmenin önemi özellikle vurgulanmaktadır. İki ülke arasındaki stratejik işbirliğinin ve ortaklığın, bölgesel istikrara önemli katkı sunacağı aşikârdır. Ayrıca yüksek düzeyli istişare mekanizmalarının oluşturulması ve bu mekanizmaların etkin bir şekilde kullanılması, ikili ilişkilerin kurumsallaşmasına olanak tanımaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Orta Asya, Özbekistan, Stratejik İşbirliği, Stratejik Ortaklık, Türkiye.*

Introduction

Changes and transformations in international relations directly affect the foreign policy behavior of states. In this context, the strategic importance of regional policies is

increasing. The Central Asian region and civilization have a decisive position and place in human history. Turkey has common historical, social and cultural ties with the Central Asian states. In this respect, the region has an important place in Turkey's foreign policy.

The Republic of Uzbekistan, which gained its independence in 1991, is located in the heart of Central Asia. Uzbekistan, which has strong spiritual and material resources, has been pursuing a versatile and multidimensional foreign policy since 2017. Turkey was the first country to recognize Uzbekistan's independence. Turkey has played an important role in Uzbekistan's integration into the international community. But for many years, there have been ups and downs in the development of the two nations' relations.

Since 2017, relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan have undergone a major transformation. Through high-level mutual visits and constructive dialogue, relations between the two countries have acquired a strategic character. The new mechanisms established between Turkey and Uzbekistan show that relations have risen to the level of strategic partnership.

The article focuses on the dynamics of strategic cooperation and partnership between Turkey and Uzbekistan. It is highlighted how crucial this strategic relationship and collaboration are for maintaining regional and global stability. In the article, the development of relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan is analyzed through a comparative method. This method determines the scope and question of the article. The article consists of three parts except the conclusion. In the first part, the place and position of the Central Asian region in Turkey's foreign policy is discussed in general terms. In the second part, the historical development of relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan is analyzed. The third part analyzes the dynamics of the strategic partnership between the two countries. The conclusion provides a general analysis of the subject.

The Growing Importance of Central Asia in Turkey's Foreign Policy

With its strategic location and natural resources, the Central Asian region occupies an important place in world politics. For many years, this region has been at the crossroads of global struggles. Following the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the region has again become the focus of international political, economic and transportation strategies. In this framework, the Central Asian region

continues to maintain its historical decisiveness in the foreign policy options of different actors. Above all, Central Asia is a great center of civilization. “It is one of the special regions that gave rise to powerful currents of thought, genius, science and art” (Roux, 2006: 19). “The Silk Road, which began in China and extended across Central Asia to Europe in the west and India in the south, brought both commercial and cultural riches to the region during a time when geographic discoveries had not yet been made and marine trade was not widely practiced. On the Silk Road, significant cities like Kashgar, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Merv were built, where not only goods and commodities but also cultures were exchanged” (Purtaş, 2011: 10).

Turkey's interest in Central Asia is not only geopolitical. There are deep historical and cultural ties between the countries of the region and Turkey. Therefore, unlike other international and regional actors, Turkey views Central Asia from different perspectives. “The end of the Cold War provided Turkey with an unprecedented opportunity to use its cultural and historical assets to expand its influence in the Caucasus, the Balkans and Central Asia” (Karpat, 2003: 229).

“After the Cold War, Turkey’s foreign policy, which positioned itself with its traditional partners such as Europe and the United States, has strived to diversify, especially since the era of President Turgut Ozal. This diversification, which does not constitute an alternative to each other, aims to increase opportunities for cooperation with Turkey's immediate neighborhood through regional policies” (Dilaver, 2020: 1). Within this framework, the then President Turgut Ozal made great efforts and endeavors in the preparation of the foreign policy strategy especially towards Central Asia. “In the period 1991-1993, Turkey played a key role in bringing the states of Central Asia as well as the South Caucasus into the international community” (Karpat, 2003: 356-357).

Until the 2000s, three main approaches were prominent in Turkey's Central Asia policy. The first approach, which romanticized the perspective on the countries of the region, essentially expressed a positive longing and passion. However, this longing and passion was not compatible with the rational content of international relations. Consequently, this had a significant impact on developing a logical strategy. However, the causes of this romanticism become apparent when the dynamics and circumstances of the post-Cold War era are taken into account. Furthermore, it is important to

acknowledge that some of the countries in the region, which were long under the influence of the USSR, were reluctant to cooperate. The second approach consisted of those who wanted Turkey to consult with the USA while deciding on its Central Asia policy. Although this strategy produced some short-term benefits, it impeded the formation of a long- and medium-term strategic cooperation mechanism with the countries in the region. As a result, it helped the United States, a hegemonic global force, to consolidate its interests in the area. The third approach defined the area more from the standpoint of a logical sphere of impact. This strategy placed a high priority on safeguarding Turkey's national interests and covered topics including economic integration, elevating bilateral relations to a strategic level, and cultural solidarity and organizations.

“Turkey's focus and effort on the Central Asian states have been distracted by the economic crises of 1994 and 2001, weak coalition administrations, persistent terrorist occurrences, and attempts to join the European Union (EU)” (Sarı, 2017: 358-359). All of these obstacles made it impossible to develop a mature and rational Central Asia policy and strategy. However, as international actors' involvement in the area has increased, it has had a significant impact on the Central Asian countries' foreign policy decisions. New realities have emerged as a result of the Russian Federation's (RF) reaffirmation of its political and economic dominance and China's expanding regional interest. The EU has made an effort to revitalize its approach to the region's energy security. In contrast, the US has given economic and security concerns top priority in its interactions with the area. Despite the fact that President Turgut Ozal's pragmatic economic policies for the Turkic World were effective and took into consideration global conditions, a strategic infrastructure could not be built in the course of this process. Despite all of these drawbacks, collaboration between Turkey and Central Asian nations, which share historical and cultural threads, has steadily grown, particularly in relation to social and human issues. “On Turkey's initiative, the process of "Summits" to be attended by the heads of state of the Turkic Speaking States was initiated in 1992. In 1993, with the agreement signed by the Ministers of Culture of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Turkey, the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), known as the UNESCO of the Turkic world, was established” (Yuce, 2021). Turkey continued to maintain contact with the Central Asian countries through the Summit of Heads of State, which started in 1992. “In 1992, the Turkish Cooperation and

Coordination Agency (TIKA) was established as a national institution to seize new opportunities for cooperation, particularly with the Turkic Republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus” (Dilaver, 2020: 2).

Turkey's Central Asia policies have begun to take on an economic development-focused and project-based content during the 2000s. During this time, Turkey's foreign policy, particularly in its interactions with the West, did not include the Central Asian region or a broader “Eurasian geography.” It was absolutely incorrect to depict Eurasia as an alternative to Turkey's relations with the West because it was a requirement, not an option, in its foreign policy (Tellal, 2005: 66). Turkey’s foreign policy needed to become more adaptable in light of the evolving multipolar discourse and changes to the global system. Concepts like institutionalization and economic integration based on shared interests were crucial at this point. In this regard, notwithstanding minor political ebbs and flows throughout the AK Party's rule, Turkey's relations with Central Asian nations have stabilized along a certain rational line. This was brought about by more realistic expectations and the understanding that relations with these nations also depend on the actions of significant regional players, particularly Russia (Sari, 2017: 380).

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has started to have an important place in Turkey's Central Asia policy. In 2009, the "Nakhchivan Agreement on the Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States" was adopted with historic signatures in Nakhchivan. This agreement essentially showed that the relations had acquired a strategic character. Since 2011, relations with the countries of the region have been further strengthened through regular summits held every year. On November 12, 2021, the "Turkic World Vision 2040" document was announced at the summit. The vision document emphasized the need to "develop a strategic vision to recognize and address the impact of rapid changes in the world on the member states. In this context, it was stated that member states, as well as societies and institutions, should adapt to the emerging realities” (Turkic World Vision 2040, 2021: 1).

The fundamental shifts and changes in global politics have made it possible for Turkey's Central Asia policy to take on a strategic dimension. The development of institutional and strategic cooperation structures is crucial in this situation. Central Asia will eventually gain in prominence on the global political and economic stage. In this

regard, it is crucial that Turkey's policies toward the neighbors have a strategic underpinning. Turkey can expand its influence in the region through a series of relations that are founded on reason. In this context, new transportation and economic development initiatives will help hasten the development of a healthy regional relations model. Building harmonization procedures will increase regional cooperation and bring strategic predictability and decisiveness.

Historical Development of Turkey-Uzbekistan Relations

Uzbekistan is one of the most important nations in the Central Asian region due to its advantageous position. Uzbekistan, home to 33 million people, is the historical and cultural hub of Central Asian Turkic civilization and has a lot of potential. Geographically, Uzbekistan is situated in the middle of a semicircle formed by the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, and the Tarim Basin, which is home to the largest reserves of oil and natural gas. Uzbekistan is a significant component of the region where the interests of the Russian Federation, China, India, and Western nations collide in this context (Doroshko, 2013: 236). Due to its position and potential, Uzbekistan is a very significant nation in terms of global and regional security. Additionally, the presence of more than 2.5 million Uzbek-born citizens living in other nations broadens this nation's regional significance (Doroshko, 2013). Political unrest in the region's neighbors consequently has a direct impact on Uzbekistan's domestic and foreign policies.

Having gained its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan's relations with Turkey have followed an up and down course. Turkey was the first country to recognize Uzbekistan after its independence. In 1996, a "Treaty of Perpetual Friendship and Cooperation" was signed between the two states (Mamadjonov, 2020: 405). During the long rule of Uzbekistan's first President Islam Karimov, Turkish-Uzbek relations were not always friendly. Islam Karimov paid four official visits to Turkey during his tenure (1991, 1994, 1995 and 1998) (Taldybaeva, 2020). The first crisis between the two countries occurred in 1993. Turkey's offer of asylum to Uzbek opposition leader Muhammad Salih and his supporters strained relations. This led Karimov to recall Uzbek students studying in Turkey (Aben, 2020). The differences of opinion between Turkey and Uzbekistan on this issue later turned into an open problem (Mamadjonov, 2020: 407). After that, Uzbekistan withdrew from almost all Turkic World meetings. During

this process, Turkish entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan were put under pressure and some of the company managers were deported (Kanlidere, 2017: 164).

As a result, while the people of both nations were closely tied by a shared history, religion, language, beliefs, traditions, and customs, there were also clear differences of opinion because of the leaders' and political inclinations (Mamadjonov, 2020: 406). These differences of opinion have significantly hindered the deepening of relations and delayed the acquisition of a strategic framework. Conditions were established in October 2000 to address the issues in Turkish-Uzbek ties. To address the divisive issues between the two nations, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer traveled to Tashkent. However, the wishes made during this visit were just written on paper and were not fulfilled (Mamadjonov, 2020: 407). Another crisis in Turkey-Uzbekistan relations emerged in the context of the Andijan events in 2005. Turkey criticized the Uzbekistan administration on human rights due to the events in Andijan. Therefore, the Karimov administration canceled President Abdullah Gül's visit to Tashkent. It also terminated agreements in the military field. This crisis was considered as the biggest crisis in the relations between the two countries. Despite the stability in trade, transit-logistics and other economic relations, problems in the political sphere negatively affected the overall state of bilateral relations in 2008-2013 (Mamadjonov, 2020: 408).

Despite the political problems in bilateral relations, Turkey and Uzbekistan have steadily maintained their trade and economic cooperation. Turkey's trade volume with Uzbekistan increased from 75 million dollars in 1992 to 1.5 billion dollars in 2015. (Hepaktan & Cilbant, 2016: 98). Although the Karimov administration had a conservative framework on political issues, he aimed to diversify its foreign economic relations. It was therefore supportive of any foreign investment in Uzbekistan's economy. Uzbekistan is a country with great potential in terms of its resources. "There are more than 100 types of underground minerals in Uzbekistan. The main ones are gold, copper, silver, lead, zinc and uranium. Uzbekistan is also rich in tungsten, natural gas and other underground raw materials. Uzbekistan ranks fourth in the world in terms of gold mines, second after Russia in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and ninth in the world in gold production" (Yucememis et.al, 2017: 175). The Karimov administration aimed to realize

Uzbekistan's economic potential. In this respect, economic relations with Turkey were important.

The visit of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to Uzbekistan in July 2014 was an important point in the development of political relations. It was the first visit at the level of Foreign Ministers in 13 years (Mamadjonov, 2020: 409). However, after the change of government in Uzbekistan, a significant rapprochement between the two nations began. On December 14, 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev became the President of Uzbekistan after Karimov's death. With Mirziyoyev's coming to power, a new era of Turkish-Uzbek relations began. New possibilities and opportunities have begun to emerge in various areas of cooperation such as cultural, political, economic, foreign policy and security (Mamadjonov, 2020).

Generally speaking, during the Karimov era, Turkish-Uzbek ties were compartmentalized. In this regard, it is possible to take into account the fact that the political crises of 1993 and 2005 did not affect commercial connections. The 2005 Andijan events in particular significantly altered the dynamics of Uzbek foreign policy. Events in Andijan, which impacted Uzbekistan's relations with Western nations, prompted new inquiries about foreign policy. It turned back to the Collective Security Treaty Organization presided over by the Russian Federation in this situation. At the same time, it changed course and asked that the US government leave the Khanabad military facility during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan by the US. Uzbekistan once more withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2012 and adopted a balance of power approach. In conclusion, the Karimov administration has chosen a circumspect approach to foreign affairs. The opening-up process in Uzbekistan has been impacted by this issue. It is plausible to claim that both internal and externally objective factors contributed to this cautious foreign policy. Additionally, under Karimov, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were always vying for dominance in the region. Karimov's stance was more inward-looking than the versatile and global approach of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the leader of Kazakhstan. Unquestionably, the security problems associated with Uzbekistan's location and fluctuating internal balance played a role in the development of this approach.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev's Rise to Power and the Transformation of Relations

The first President Karimov's passing on September 2, 2016, ushered in further changes to Uzbek political life. Shavkat Mirziyoyev received 88.61 percent of the vote to win the presidential election on December 4, 2016. Mirziyoyev served as Samarkand's *khokimi* (governor) from 2001 to 2003, and from 2003 to 2016 he was the Uzbekistan's prime minister. The Uzbek Republic's new president has begun to view regional relations differently. President Mirziyoyev stated that they have begun to put the principle of "Central Asia as the main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, a completely new political atmosphere has emerged in the Central Asian region, and relations based on mutual trust and good neighborliness will" into practice in his address to the *Oliy Majlis* on December 22, 2017 (Presidency of Uzbekistan, 2017). The surrounding nations applauded the new Uzbek leader's regional initiatives, which were seen as the start of a new process. Essentially, this novel strategy helped to advance ties between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as a stabilizing force in Central Asia. The development of a regional platform with Kazakhstan became a top priority in foreign policy.

The fundamental tenets of Karimov's balance-based foreign policy have not been abandoned by Mirziyoyev. It is conceivable to assert that fundamental foreign policy tenets are being applied consistently in this situation. The aforementioned internal dynamics and security perceptions persisted as the deciding element in the process of putting foreign policy into practice. The new leader of Uzbekistan, however, had a more proactive and open outlook on his interactions with other countries. Thus, a multitude of expectations were brought with this new period.

The current concept's first declaration of military neutrality was strengthened by the new Uzbekistan military policy, which was adopted on January 9, 2018. The doctrine also forbade deploying troops to take part in cross-border hostilities, building foreign military bases on the nation's territory, or joining military alliances (Bekmurzayev, 2019: 5-6). Mirziyoyev maintained the customary balancing stance between China, Russia, and the United States while continuing to pursue Karimov's balanced foreign policy. The scope and level of cooperation with the great nations was what set this approach apart from the previous balancing mechanism (Bekmurzayev, 2019: 6).

The versatility concept was one of the Mirziyoyev administration's new foreign policy tenets. In this versatility worldview, Turkey had a prominent place. The

Mirziyoyev administration stressed strategic partnership and cooperation with Turkey in this context. At the same time, Turkey sought to build a solid and long-lasting working relationship with the new Uzbek government. The strategic aspect of relations was important for regional security and economic growth, and both parties understood this. As a result, conditions were conducive for relationships to develop strategic content.

The course of relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan, which had been stagnant for many years, changed radically with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Samarkand in November 2016 (Abdülkerimov, 2022). It was crucial that both Presidents wanted to give Turkey and Uzbekistan's relations a strategic context. For instance, while President Erdogan viewed Uzbekistan as Turkey's "priority partner" in Central Asia, President Mirziyoyev described Turkey as an "important and long-term ally" of Uzbekistan (Erol, 2018). In light of this, President Erdogan's meeting with Uzbek President Mirziyoyev during his visit to Samarkand reinvigorated ties between Turkey and Uzbekistan and ushered in a new era in the two countries' mutual relations. After 21 years, Mirziyoyev visited Turkey as President, becoming the highest-ranking Uzbek politician to do so in October 2017 (Abdülkerimov, 2022).

On the eve of the visit, Mirziyoyev signed a decree on simplifying visa procedures for Turkish citizens. On February 3, 2018, the Parliament of Uzbekistan approved the decree (Mamadjonov, 2020: 409). The decree included the issuance of visas by Uzbek authorities to Turkish citizens within 3 days and a 30-day visa exemption. "It is recognized that both nations wish to follow a plan that emphasizes public diplomacy and soft power elements in order to avoid the recurrence of some crises that have already occurred" (Erol, 2018). This issue demonstrates that relationships now have a strategic component. "The decision made on the goals of furthering the development of economic and commercial relations, as well as the move taken regarding visas and its cultural and tourism component, are unquestionably very significant in this context" (Erol, 2018).

During Mirziyoyev's visit, a joint declaration was signed elevating relations between the two countries to the level of strategic partnership. On the basis of this declaration, the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was established to intensify cooperation (Tolipov, 2021: 2). During the visit, it was also agreed to increase cooperation in the field of tourism. The pilgrimage of Turkish citizens to Islamic shrines

on the territory of Uzbekistan was facilitated. At the same time, agreements were made to intensify the flow of tourists from Uzbekistan to Turkey (Mamadjonov, 2020: 410). Another important agreement during the visit was on military-technical cooperation. During his official visit to Turkey, the President of Uzbekistan also emphasized the inter-parliamentary relations between the two countries. Mirziyoyev visited the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT) and closely followed its activities, with a special emphasis on strengthening inter-parliamentary relations and exchanging experience on legislative activities and mechanisms of parliamentary oversight (Satibaldiyev, 2018).

In April 2018, at Mirziyoyev's invitation, President Erdogan paid an official visit to Uzbekistan. During the negotiations, agreements were reached on close cooperation in the field of development. Agreements were also reached on the activities of the International Islamic Academy, the Imam Bukhari International Research Center and the Islamic Civilization Center (Mamadjonov, 2020).

The reciprocal visits had a beneficial purpose and opened the ground for the advancement of Turkish-Uzbek relations to that of strategic cooperation. Important steps have been taken to further strengthen economic relations between the two countries. For example, the parties aim and plan to increase the bilateral trade volume from 2 billion dollars in 2019 to 5 billion dollars in the near future (Tolipov, 2021: 2). In the first half of 2019 alone, 251 Turkish companies were established in Uzbekistan. The number of companies established in the recent period has increased by 51 percent (DEIK, 2019). In 2021, the mutual trade volume reached the threshold of 3 billion 600 million dollars and thus economic relations made a great breakthrough. Again only in 2021, 407 companies with Turkish capital were established in Uzbekistan. Considering that two thousand Turkish companies are active in Uzbekistan in total, it seems that bilateral relations have gained a serious momentum (Agzamhocayev, 2021). Turkey has become the third country to invest directly in Uzbekistan after Russia and China.

Uzbekistan's government desires to actively participate in regional transportation initiatives. In this regard, the Navoi-Turkmenbashi-Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway transportation corridor, which will link the railways of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to the Turkish transportation network, is of great significance to Uzbekistan. Through the Turkish port of Mersin, this railway will give Uzbekistan access to the

Mediterranean Sea. Uzbekistan has made a lot of improvements to its transportation system. In this regard, Mirziyov's order established a comprehensive plan for 2018–2022, which will upgrade Uzbekistan's transportation infrastructure and diversify its routes for the transit of commodities and foreign trade (Tolipov, 2021: 5).

Turkey and Uzbekistan also cooperate on the Afghanistan issue. A new situation has developed for both Afghanistan and the region following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The security of the Central Asian nations, particularly Uzbekistan, is directly linked to the current state of affairs in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan participates in the "Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process" platform, which was established under the leadership of Turkey to resolve the Afghanistan issue. The establishment of a lasting stability in Afghanistan is very important for both Turkey and the Central Asian states. In this framework, Turkey acts in coordination with the countries of the region and Uzbekistan.

After a 17-year break, Uzbekistan attended the meeting of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in Bishkek in 2018 and officially became a member of the Organization of Turkic States at the summit held in Baku in 2019 (Abdülkerimov, 2022). Uzbekistan's accession to this organization can be described as historic. The summit of the Organization of Turkic States in 2022 will be hosted by Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

Uzbek leader Mirziyoyev's visit to Turkey on February 19-20, 2020 was of great importance. Within the scope of the visit, the first meeting of the Turkey-Uzbekistan High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was held on February 19, 2020, chaired by President Erdogan and President Mirziyoyev. The High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council has become a new and functional format for the Turkish-Uzbek dialogue (Mamadjonov, 2020: 411).

The bilateral relationship between Turkey and Uzbekistan was reviewed during Mirziyoyev's visit in all of its aspects, and steps to be taken to expand the partnership-based cooperation were discussed. The parties also discussed regional and global issues in addition to bilateral relations. (Organization of Turkic States, 2020).

President Erdogan paid an official visit to Uzbekistan on March 29-30, 2022. The second meeting of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council took place during

the visit. Erdogan stressed that the joint declaration he and Mirziyoyev signed will serve as a future road map and added “Today, we reaffirmed our commitment to maintaining our close communication on local matters as well as our solidarity in international forums, particularly the Organization of Turkic States. We share a lot of similarities, especially in terms of the sources we rely on for sustenance.” (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2022).

As a result, since 2017, relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan have taken on a strategic dimension, and their mutually beneficial collaboration has reached the status of a strategic partnership. The parties' strong level of reliance on one another and support serves as the foundation for the strategic cooperation between the two nations. In this regard, the occurrence of strategic partnerships enables Turkey and Uzbekistan to coordinate their actions on crucial international relations issues (Tolipov, 2021: 7).

Conclusion

New opportunities and challenges arise as a result of fundamental changes to the international system. The general nature of interstate relations is impacted by these opportunities and challenges. The dynamics creating Turkey's Central Asia policy are influenced by ongoing events. In this context, it is clear to see how a regional policy with a strategic focus on Central Asia is being built. Central Asia is directly impacted by the changes in global relations as a result of its strategic location. As a result, this region is becoming increasingly important in the context of international systemic transformation.

Turkey and Uzbekistan have built a set of relations based on mutual trust and stability, especially after 2017. This stability and trust have not always been simple to achieve historically. The full-fledged development of relationships was significantly hampered in former times by differences in viewpoint, views, and perceptions. However, since 2017, there have been positive changes in the dynamics and course of relationship development as a result of both sides' constructive attitudes. Uzbekistan is a nation that shouldn't be disregarded due to its potential on the political, economic, and cultural fronts. With its deep historical and spiritual heritage, Uzbekistan is practically in the center of Central Asia. It also distinguishes forth due to its geopolitical and demographic advantages.

Deepening economic cooperation is made possible by Turkey and Uzbekistan's growing mutual trust. Turkey's Asian policy place Uzbekistan, which holds a crucial position in terms of transportation links, in a deciding position. It is accepted that Asia will become the hub of the global economy. In this regard, the strategic alliance between Turkey and Uzbekistan makes a substantial contribution to the Turkish foreign policy's overarching Central Asia strategy. Turkey and Uzbekistan are putting into practice a foreign policy mechanism that has both a regional and global focus and content since they share historical and cultural aspects. This situation enables the strategic relationship to further consolidate and develop.

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