



ASIA ANEW INITIATIVE AND VISITS OF THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF TURKEY TO CENTRAL ASIA

The 11th Ambassadors Conference held in August 2019 represents the starting point of the "Asia Anew Initiative" announced by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu. The idea that the center of gravity of the basic economic and political platform of the world is gradually shifting to the East, to China-centered Asia, has been increasingly accepted in recent years. This transformation, which is thought to accelerate with the Belt and Road Initiative, announced by China in 2013, has brought the necessity to take Turkey's interest to the region to a higher level, which are seeking to establish deeper relations with the countries of the region, to expand its sphere of influence and to develop commercial interests. Although the Asia Anew Initiative, designed according to the purposes listed above, seems that it has not achieved the desired results throughout 2020, due to the global coronavirus pandemic and it has started to gain an important dimension again as of the beginning of 2021. Although the main goal of the Asia Anew Initiative can be seen as increasing trade relations with ASEAN and RCEP countries, where East Asia and Southeast Asia stand out as a key regions, in fact, large areas such as South Asia and Central Asia, which are neighboring these regions, need to be studied closely.

In this context, in accessing China-oriented New Asia, the role of Central Asian countries has a decisive importance for Turkey. Historical brotherhood ties, as well as the political, economic and cultural relations that have rapidly developed in the post-independence period, promises to be able to develop attitudes and policies on the basis of common interests between Turkey and the countries of the region, towards East and Southeast Asia in the near future. The first two destinations, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which were visited within the Central Asia tour in March by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu, crowning these hopes with concrete developments have shown that is both possible and necessary.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu, within his Central Asia tour, while visiting Turkmenistan on 6th of March 2021, was received by President of Turkmenistan, Gurbangulu Berdimuhamedov. On the same day, Cavusoglu had a meeting with Rashid Meredov, Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. From 7th to 9th of March 2021, he visited Uzbekistan and met with the President Shevkat Mirziyoyev, Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Investments and Foreign Trade Serdar Umurzakov. Among the prominent topics on the agenda were transportation and energy issues in Turkmenistan, economy, security in Uzbekistan, opening of the Consulate General in Samarkand and planning of some high-level meetings. The determination of "Dostluk" field at the Caspian Sea to be researched jointly by Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan has attracted the interest of the countries and companies related in the field of energy, as well as Turkey. In this context, Cavusoglu invited the President of Turkmenistan,

Gurbangulu Berdimuhamedov, to the trilateral summit of Azerbaijan-Turkey-Turkmenistan. Drawing the new roadmap of economic and political relations, the 2nd meeting of the Uzbekistan-Turkey High-Level Strategic Cooperation and Determination of the Cooperation Program 2022-2023 between Ministries has formed the main items of the agenda in Uzbekistan. On the other hand, during the visit, Uzbekistan expressed interest in defense equipment, including Turkish UAVs and armored vehicles.

It was stated that during his visit to Turkmenistan, the meetings were productive with the President Gurbangulu Berdimuhamedov and Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rashid Meredov. New cooperation opportunities, especially in the fields of energy and transportation, were among the prominent issues during the talks. In terms of transportation, Turkmenistan is currently closed to all flights, but Turkish Airlines will be allowed to fly to Turkmenabad as soon as possible and Turkish truck drivers will be allowed to enter the country. However, truck drivers have to take Covid-19 test once when leaving Azerbaijan and once again when entering Turkmenistan. Foreign Minister Cavusoglu stated that Turkmenistan's being a neutral country with permanent status does not create an obstacle in the development of relations. In the field of energy, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan's joint investigation and development of "Dostluk" hydrocarbon field at the Caspian Sea was supported by Turkey and it was stated that the companies such as TPAO and BOTAS are ready to cooperate within this framework. The issue about the inclusion of Turkey to this project will be discussed at trilateral meetings and summits in the coming days and it was announced that with participation of the President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey-Turkmenistan and Turkey-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan summits will be held. Among the statements of Minister Cavusoglu, there is also the statement "We want to start the negotiations of preferential trade agreement with Turkmenistan as soon as possible". In short, new collaborations in the fields of economy, energy and transportation constituted the main topics of Cavusoglu's visit to Turkmenistan.

The first stop of Foreign Minister of Turkey in Uzbekistan was Samarkand. Cavusoglu with the participation of the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov, Deputy Prime Minister Responsible for Tourism, Aziz Abdulkhaimov, Turkey's Ambassador to Tashkent, Olga Bekar and Turkey's Consul General in Samarkand Caner Salih held of the opening of the Consulate General of the Republic of Turkey. At the ceremony, Cavusoglu declared that Turkey is the first country who recognizes Uzbekistan as independent country and in addition to the Embassy opened in Tashkent on April 28th, 1992, the opening of the Consulate General in Samarkand on the 30th anniversary of Uzbekistan's independence was a unique and meaningful. On the other hand, the Istanbul-Samarkand flights, which were launched in 2018, contributed to the development of both tourism and the mutual relations of the people. In general, issues in the fields of transportation,

economy and security were discussed within the scope of the visit. Among them, it was requested to take the necessary steps to initiate a Free Trade Agreement and to continue Preferential Trade Agreement negotiations. The trade volume between the two countries is 2.3 billion dollars and it is aimed to increase this number to 5 billion dollars. The issues related to the interest of Uzbekistan in Turkey's defense industry products, especially a significant interest and demand for unmanned aerial vehicles and armored vehicles were reflected in the press. In the general framework, during negotiations for the purpose of improvement of relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan, where the preparation for the 2nd meeting of High Level Strategic Cooperation Council was discussed and a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Translation Services and the Cooperation Program for 2022-2023 between the Ministries was also signed.

The tour of Foreign Minister of the Republic of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu will continue with Tajikistan in the coming days. On the other hand, contacts with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in various fields continue without slowing down. The Foreign Minister Cavusoglu visited Kyrgyzstan on 19th of March announced the following statements: "It was signed Cooperation Protocol for 2021-2022 between the ministries of foreign affairs of the two countries; started the preparations for the 5th meeting of the Kyrgyzstan-Turkey High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council; will be opening for the service of the Kyrgyz-Turkish Friendship Hospital, the target for the bilateral trade volume is 1 billion USD, the total value of Turkish investments in Kyrgyzstan has reached 1 billion USD and Turkey Maarif Foundation will open its first school in the region in Kyrgyzstan". Meanwhile, the Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan, Mukhtar Tileuberdi while visiting Turkey in March made important contacts.

As a result, Turkey maintains its multidimensional interest in all countries of the region. Foreign Minister Cavusoglu's intensive Central Asia tour organized in March is the closest example of this. The main approach of Turkey, to improve relations with Central Asian countries every day to a little further, which are developing on the ancient law of brotherhood basis and at the same time to establish stronger connections towards East and Southeast Asia together with the Central Asian countries. As Cavusoglu impressed, there is a radical transformation in history: "The pendulum of history has once again turned to Asia. The 19th and 20th centuries were European and American centuries, respectively. Today, all data show that the 21st century will be the Asian century". The Asia Anew Initiative, which was put forward for taking place in the center of this historic transformation and improving the national interests of Turkey, will be successful as long as it is supported by innovative projects and targeted political tools. In this context, the ties with the Central Asian countries will continue to be one of Turkey's most valuable and powerful sides.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Speaker of the National Assembly of South Korea, Park Byeong-Seung paid an official visit to Tajikistan, where he had a meeting with the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon. The parties discussed issues of comprehensive cooperation between the countries. They agreed to expand bilateral cooperation through the Economic Development Cooperation Fund and the Korea International Cooperation Agency. President Rahmon proposed to Korean businesses to create logistic and trade centers in Tajikistan's free economic zones and provide the country with preferential loans (Asia-Plus, 02.04.2021).
- The Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation of Turkmenistan and Russia held a meeting. The Commission recommended intensifying cooperation of business circles of the countries and economic ties of their regions. The parties agreed to deepen cooperation in the field of digital technologies, mechanical engineering, transport and communications. Turkmenistan and Russia would sign several important agreements, including the intergovernmental agreement on promotion of interregional cooperation and the intergovernmental program of economic cooperation for 2021-2023 (Kabar, 31.03.2021).
- The leaders of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States recently had an informal online summit. The Council's Honorary Chairman, Nursultan Nazarbayev, proposed to change the Council's name and other leaders supported this initiative. Moreover, the Council adopted a declaration, which proclaimed the city of Turkistan as "a spiritual capital of the Turkic World." The secretariat of the organization was instructed to prepare drafts of the "Turkic World Vision - 2040" and "Turkic Council Strategy 2020-2025" (Anadolu Agency, 01.04.2021).
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov met with the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon. The sides discussed various issues of bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. The Tajik President hailed Azerbaijan's recent success in regaining control over its territory and thanked Azerbaijan for the assistance to Tajikistan in the fight against COVID-19. President Emomali Rahmon also invited President Ilham Aliyev to pay an official visit to Tajikistan (Azertag.az, 29.03.2021).
- Turkmenistan held elections of the members for the newly created upper house of parliament. The President of the country Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov also participated in the elections and became a member of the upper house receiving 100% of the votes. The upper house of parliament consists of 56 seats, including eight seats appointed by the Turkmen president and 48 elected by voters (Hronikatm.com, 29.03.2021).
- A meeting of the Foreign Ministers Council of the Commonwealth Independent States (CIS) was held in Moscow. The ministers exchanged views on topical issues of the international agenda, considered draft documents aimed at further expanding interaction in foreign policy, cooperation in humanitarian and security fields. The delegations also approved drafts of documents on cooperation within the framework of the CIS and sent them to the Council of CIS Heads of Government for consideration (Cis.minsk.by, 02.04.2021).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the government of Kazakhstan have signed an Enhanced Partnership Framework Agreement, which aims to accelerate modernization, digitalization and regional integration in the post-pandemic period. The previous 2017 agreement between the parties contributed to the creation of Kazakhstan's green economy and cemented its position as a regional leader in renewable energy in Central Asia. By April 2021, the EBRD invested more than \$7.95 billion in 280 projects in Kazakhstan (Kazinform, 02.04.2021).
- According to the World Bank's new forecast, GDP of Russia will grow by 2.9% in 2021. Previously it expected a 2.6% growth. Moreover, the institution predicts that the economy of Russia will continue to rise in 2022 by 3.2%. Revision of Russia's indicators came due to lower than expected GDP contraction in 2020 and quick easing of the pandemic-related restrictions. (TASS, 31.03.2021).
- Recently, the Energy Minister of Belarus Viktor Karankevich announced that Belarusian nuclear power plant would generate 40% of the country's energy needs or 18.5 billion kWh per year. Karankevich mentioned that the nuclear power plant is being integrated into the country's energy system. In particular, authorities completed implementation of the two out of three technical stages, built and renovated more than 1600 km of high-voltage power transmission lines and upgraded four substations (BelTA, 01.04.2021).
- The Energy Minister of Kyrgyzstan Kubanychbek Turdubaev participated in the meeting of the Committee of the Parliament on Fuel, Energy Complex and Subsoil Use, where he announced that the country plans to negotiate gas supply with Turkmenistan. Minister Turdubaev mentioned that Kyrgyzstan negotiates the same issue with Uzbekistan. The Minister explained that gas import from Turkmenistan would reduce internal prices and decrease electricity consumption. (24.kg, 30.03.2021).
- A company from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Masdar started the construction of a wind power plant in Navoi region of Uzbekistan. It also signed an agreement with the government of Uzbekistan to increase the capacity of the power plant from 500 MW to 1.5 GW. As a result, foreign direct investment in the project will grow from planned \$600 million to \$1.8 billion. Increased capacity of the plant will provide electricity to 1.5 million homes and reduce carbon emissions by 3.3 million tons (UzReport, 02.04.2021).
- A Turkish company Aksa Enerji plans to build two 470 MW power plants in the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan. The company intends to invest \$300 million. An annual capacity of the plants would be 3.9 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity. Implementation of the projects will save up to 550 million cubic meters of natural gas per year. It is expected that the projects will create 900 additional jobs (UzReport, 02.04.2021).

Society and Culture

- Turkish and Azerbaijani citizens are able to travel passport-free between two countries starting from April 1, 2021. The Protocol was signed on December 10, 2020 between Turkey and Azerbaijan. It allows both countries' citizens to travel by presenting their new generation identity cards. The new practice is expected to strengthen already existing strong ties between the two brotherly nations (Aa.com.tr, 29.03.2021).
- The Kazakh Minister of Ecology, Geology, and Natural Resources Magzum Mirzagaliyev and the Russian Minister of Natural Resources and Ecology Alexander Kozlov signed "The Program of cooperation in the development of specially protected nature areas for 2021-24 between Kazakhstan and Russia". The document envisages bilateral cooperation and sharing experiences in managing specially protected nature areas. The signing took place in Orenburg as part of the implementation of the bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of environmental protection (Kabar.kg, 31.03.2021).
- Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan opened a road connecting the Rishtan region in the main part of Uzbekistan with the Sokh enclave region surrounded by the territory of Kyrgyzstan. The road is open to pedestrians and cars. The road was closed in 2013 after a border conflict between the residents of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In August 2019, the Sokh-Rishtan road was opened for a short period to be closed again due to requirements of the Eurasian Economic Union (Mediazona.ca, 01.04.2021).
- A new Border Interaction Office (OPV) was opened at the B. Konyshbayev checkpoint on the Kazakh-Uzbek border on the initiative of the governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and in cooperation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The functioning of the OPV will allow expanding border cooperation and facilitate mutual participation in events organized in the borderlands. One of the aims of this work is to counter the traffic of opiates from Afghanistan (Avesta-news.kz, 31.03.2021).
- A rare portrait of Suleiman the Magnificent, the longest-reigning sultan of the Ottoman Empire, was sold for £350,000 (\$481,000) in an auction in London. The sale price of the 16th-century portrait nearly tripled pre-auction estimates, which had predicted the portrait could be sold for as high as £120,000. The painting previously was in a private collection in France since the 19th century (Uzdaily.uz, 04.04.2021).
- Azerbaijan and Turkey jointly prepared a file requesting the inclusion of Azerbaijan's traditional musical instrument "balaban" to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The file will be considered at the 17th session of the Intergovernmental Committee on the Intangible Cultural Heritage to be held in 2022. The balaban is a cylindrical-bore, wind instrument made of mulberry or other harder woods with seven finger holes and one thumbhole (Azernews.az, 02.04.2021).