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 21st century is moving towards Asia was also expressed in a speech delivered to Eurasian Business Forum in China in August 2019. The "Asia Anew Initiative" was also aimed at deepening the ties with Asia. China-centered Asia, has been increasingly accepted in recent years. This transformation, which is thought to be in line with the "Road and Rail 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 purpose of increasing the economic relations, with 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, Gurbanguly 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, the visit of Uzbekistan included a meeting with the President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Investments and Foreign Trade Serdar Umarzakov. Among the prominent topics on the agenda was the realizability of the investments and projects in the fields of economy, energy and transportation industries. The important issues that were discussed during the meeting were strengthening the countries’ relations with ASEAN and RCEP countries, 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 Asia Anew Initiative, which was put forward within the "Road and Rail Initiative", announced by China in 2013, had brought the idea that the center of gravity of the basic economic and political platform of the 21st century is moving towards Asia. China-centered Asia, has been increasingly accepted in recent years. This transformation, which is thought to be in line with the "Road and Rail 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.

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In this context, in accessing China-oriented New Asia, the role of Central Asian countries has a decisive importance for Turkey. Historically, China is not only a cultural, 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.

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The Speaker of the National Assembly of South Korea Park Byeong-seug paid an official visit to Tajikistan, where he had a meeting with the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon. The two leaders 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 international investment 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 appoint him its chairman. 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 of 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 (Azerag.de, 29.03.2021).

Turkmenistan held elections of the members for the newly created upper house of parliament. The President of the country Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov 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 (Hroni-kam.com, 29.03.2021).

A meeting of the Foreign Ministers Council of the Commonwealth Independent States (CIS) was held in Moscow. The meetings exchanged views on the most urgent issues of the international agenda, considered draft documents aimed at further expanding the CIS, including in foreign policy, cooperation in humanitarian and security fields. The delegations also approved drafts of the road map 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).

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the government of Kazakhstan has signed an Enhanced Partnership Framework Agreement, which aims to accelerate modernization, digitization, 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 Belarus nuclear power plant would generate 40% of the country’s total 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 electric transmission lines and upgraded four substations (BelTA, 01.04.2021).

The Energy Minister of Kyrgyzstan Kabanbek Turdubaev participated in the meeting of the Committee of the Parliament on Fuel, Energy Complex and Sub-soil 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, 03.03.2021).

A company from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Masdar started the construction of a wind power plant in Navon 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).

Turkish and Azerbaijani citizens are able to travel passport-free between the 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 sisterly 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 natural 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 Kirgistan region in the main part of Uzbekistan with the Kyrgyzstan region surrounded by the territory of Kyrgyzstan. The road is open to pedestrians and cyclists. One of the roads will be closed again due to a border conflict between the residents of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In August 2019, the Sokh-Kirgistan road was opened for a short period to facilitate the movement of the two countries' citizens to travel passport-free between the two countries (Mediapersona, 01.04.2021).

A new Border Interaction Office (OPIV) was opened at the Uznozakh customs 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 OPIV will expand 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 to Russia (TASS, 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.az, 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 wood or bone, decorated with seven finger holes and one thumbhole (Azernews.az, 02.04.2021).