

Political and Diplomatic Relations Between Uzbekistan and Turkey (1991–2024)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the formation of bilateral cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkey in the 1990s, the causes of political tensions and disagreements that arose between the two countries, as well as the efforts made to restore these relations based on new evidence. In particular, it highlights, through historical data, the development of cooperation in all spheres as a result of high-level official meetings and state visits conducted by the leaders of both nations. Moreover, it emphasizes that, at present, relations between the two countries have reached the level of a “Strategic Partnership,” which serves as an important foundation for establishing and strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation between them.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Cooperation, Relations, Integration, Democracy, Science, Culture, Contacts, State Visit, Security

1. Introduction

Throughout the course of historical development, regardless of which period we turn to, it can be observed that interstate relations in almost all centuries were primarily based on coercion, political influence, and the use of military power. Today, however, relations between states are no longer built upon the balance of power typical of the bipolar world order of the 20th century, but rather upon agreements grounded in universal and national interests. Indeed, history has repeatedly demonstrated that attempts to satisfy one’s national interests at the expense of other nations have led to irreparable negative consequences.

The collapse of the former political system brought a number of challenges for the Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan. Firstly, Uzbekistan was geographically distant and economically isolated from the global market. Secondly, political, economic, and diplomatic relations with developed nations had not yet been fully established.

Given this situation, it was essential for Uzbekistan, from the early years of independence, to establish cooperative relations with economically developed countries. Above all, the country needed to achieve a level where it could maintain diplomatic relations on equal footing with other advanced nations. In such a complex context — characterized by economic weakness and political instability in the Central Asian region — establishing diplomatic relations with various states was the most appropriate way to address existing problems.

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Uzbekistan simultaneously launched a number of industrial enterprises aimed at meeting the needs of its population and, drawing upon the experiences of developed nations, sought to improve the efficiency of its production capacities and introduce modern technologies. This, in turn, created favorable conditions for foreign companies and investors to operate in the country. As a result, numerous joint ventures and banks were established, and active efforts were undertaken to expand mutual trade relations. Uzbekistan's cooperation with other countries was not limited to economic reforms alone, but also played a crucial role in promoting positive partnerships in the fields of science, education, and culture.

In this context, the Republic of Turkey, a nation enjoying high prestige in the international arena, was among the first countries to recognize Uzbekistan's independence and to establish diplomatic relations with it.

It should be noted that Turkey is a state that has its own path of development, located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, and possesses favorable economic and geostrategic conditions. It is therefore appropriate to acknowledge that "Turkey, which is a close friend and economic partner for us, was among the first to recognize Uzbekistan's independence."^[1] From this perspective, conducting a scholarly study of the political relations between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Turkey represents one of the most relevant research topics of today.

2. Research Method

This article primarily refers to the works of state leaders and several scholars. Among them are: The monograph *"From the History of Economic and Cultural Cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkey"* co-authored by Q. Rajabov and X. Bekmuratov (Rajabov Q., Bekmuratov X., 2017); The monograph by B. Imamov *"Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations between Uzbekistan and Turkey (1991–2018)"* (Imamov B., 2023); The popular publication by Said-Abdulaziz Yusupov *"Modern Turkey: Ancient History and a Great Future"* (Yusupov S.A., 2018); The book by Qahramon Rajabov and Bahodir Qandov *"World Countries and International Organizations"* (Rajabov Q., Qandov B., 2015); The book by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, *"The Strategy of New Uzbekistan"* (Mirziyoyev Sh.M., 2021); The book by the President of the Republic of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, *"A Fairer World Is Possible"* (Erdoğan R.T., 2021); The articles by Yelena Parubochaya *"Summits of Turkic States (1992–2001): A Real Platform for Cooperation?"* and *"Integration of the Turkic World in the Modern Stage"* (Parubochaya E.F., 2011: 113–120); The article by R. Veysel *"Turkey's Influence on the Culture and Education Systems of Central Asian Countries"* (Veysel R., 2014: 26–32); The scientific article by F. Yusupova *"The History of Development and the Role of the Organization of Turkic States in International Law"* (Yusupova F., 2022: 33–35); The article by M. Mustofaev *"The Organization of Turkic States: New Global Approaches and Regional Challenges"* (Mustofaev M., 2022: 105–121); The article by A. Mirkomilov *"New Opportunities for Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation within the Organization of Turkic States"* (Mirkomilov A., November 11, 2022); And the article by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev *"New Opportunities for Integration and Cooperation"* published in the special anniversary collection *"The Turkic Council: Ten Years since the Nakhchivan Agreement"* (Şahverdiyev C., Veliyev C., 2019; Mirziyoyev Sh., 2019: 20–24).

3. Results and Discussion

Turkey is a country that has followed its own development path in the international arena and established its foreign policy activities by the end of the 20th century. Turkey successfully

implemented its “Turkish model” within the framework of a market economy, developing a unique path of economic and social progress[2]. As a result, economic reforms in Turkey yielded tangible outcomes, placing the country among the ranks of developed nations.

In 1991, the diplomatic visit of Turkish President Turgut Özal to the USSR not only encompassed Moscow but also included Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other Soviet republics[3]. On December 8, 1991, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was established, and Turkey became the first country to recognize the newly independent republics[4]. This recognition opened avenues for Central Asian countries to establish connections with European states through Turkey.

The development of cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkey can be analyzed in three stages: Stage 1: 1991–1999, Stage 2: 2000–2016, Stage 3: Starting in 2016.

1. First stage (1991–1999): During this period, cooperation was established in various fields, and bilateral agreements and treaties were signed. However, due to some Turkish commercial companies failing to fulfill contract terms and the alleged links of Uzbek-Turkish lyceums in Uzbekistan to religious-political extremist organizations, relations temporarily slowed down.
2. Second stage (2000–2016): Relations manifested in various forms, including official visits by Turkish government leaders and participation in international conferences. During this period, diplomatic and political relations experienced a decline. While trade, transit, and other economic ties remained stable, cooperation in other fields was limited and lacked systematic development.
3. Third stage (2016–present): Regular meetings and state visits between the presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkey elevated bilateral relations to a new level of “strategic partnership” across all sectors.

Official state visits between the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkey began in late 1991. During President Islam Karimov’s official visit to Turkey from December 16–19, 1991, several key agreements were signed, including the “Treaty on the Foundations and Objectives of Relations between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Turkey,” the “Agreement on Economic and Trade Cooperation,” and the “Protocol of Understanding.”[5]

On April 28, 1992, Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel’s visit to Uzbekistan marked a significant event in the development of bilateral relations[6]. On the same day, the Turkish Embassy in Tashkent was inaugurated, followed by the opening of the Uzbek Embassy in Ankara in January 1993[7]. The establishment of embassies significantly accelerated political, socio-economic, and cultural cooperation.

President Karimov visited Turkey again on June 29–July 1, 1992[8], and subsequently in June 1994 and November 1997, while also attending the 75th anniversary celebrations of the Republic of Turkey in October 1998[9]. This period established a tradition of joint ceremonies, festivals, and academic conferences between the two countries.

Conversely, Turkish President Demirel visited Uzbekistan on May 7, 1996[10], and participated in the high-level IV meeting of Turkic-speaking countries and the 660th anniversary of Amir Temur later that year[11].

In 1996, the legal foundation of bilateral relations was further strengthened through the “Treaty of Eternal Friendship and Cooperation” and over 70 agreements covering political, trade-economic, scientific-technical, anti-terrorism, anti-drug, health, transport, tourism, and cultural spheres[12].

Turkish heads of state have frequently visited Uzbekistan, expanding cooperation between the countries. Turkish President S. Demirel paid an official visit to Uzbekistan on

March 15, 1999[13]. During the visit, Turkish President S. Demirel and President of the Republic of Uzbekistan I. Karimov attended the opening ceremony of the SamKochavto joint venture in Samarkand[14]. The launch of this plant helped increase Uzbekistan's economic potential and make it one of the only countries in Central Asia producing buses and trucks.

During the second stage (2000–2016), official visits continued, although mainly in the context of international conferences. For instance, in September 2000, President Karimov and Turkish President Ahmet Sezer met during the UN Millennium Summit. On October 16–17, 2000, President Sezer made an official visit to Uzbekistan. Bilateral agreements on consular exchanges, economic and trade cooperation, and collaboration in culture, education, science, health, tourism, transport, communications, and media were signed[15].

The visit of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Uzbekistan on December 19, 2003, played a key role in expanding these agreements, including cooperation in combating international terrorism, visa exemption for diplomatic passport holders, investment protection, and avoidance of double taxation. Despite occasional political slowdowns between 2008–2013, economic ties and transit cooperation remained stable.

Bilateral relations were revitalized following international conference meetings, such as the February 7, 2014, meeting between President Karimov and President Erdoğan in Sochi during the XXII Winter Olympics. Both leaders agreed to hold annual meetings at the level of foreign ministries and heads of state[16].

President Karimov consistently emphasized equality and mutual interests during his foreign visits, principles reaffirmed during the Sochi meeting. After a period of stagnation, Turkey initiated renewed engagement, contributing significantly to restoring bilateral relations.

On the sidelines of the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, held in Shanghai, China on May 20-21, 2014, and during his visit to Tashkent in July, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu met with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan Abdulaziz Kamilov and government representatives[17]. The meetings discussed issues related to further developing mutual cooperation.

The third stage of cooperation between the Republics of Uzbekistan and Turkey. Regular meetings between the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Sh. Mirziyoyev, and the President of Turkey, R. Erdogan, in 2016 and subsequent years, brought the relations between the two countries to a new level. After all, "There were periods of distrust and coldness between us, but we united and melted these ices, and this coldness will never return,"[18] emphasized Sh. Mirziyoyev.

From 2016 onwards, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and President Erdoğan, regular meetings further strengthened bilateral relations. Key visits included Erdoğan's visit to Samarkand on November 17–18, 2016, with discussions on trade and economic cooperation. By the end of 2015, bilateral trade reached USD 1.2 billion[19].

On April 29–May 1, 2018, Erdoğan made a state visit to Uzbekistan, discussing strategic relations, trade, cultural, and other forms of cooperation[20]. During the meeting, the heads of state discussed the current state of strategic relations between the two fraternal countries, prospects for their further development, expansion and deepening of bilateral cooperation in trade, economic, cultural and other areas, and reaching specific agreements on them.

Relations between the two countries have been consistently praised in the world media. For example, in the annual ranking of the influential Turkish publication "Turcomoney", the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev was recognized as the "Foreign Statesman of the Year" in 2018. This was announced at a ceremony in Istanbul attended by the Speaker of the Turkish Grand National Assembly Binali Yildirim, Istanbul Mayor Mevlüt

Uysal, representatives of the country's government, parliament, public and business circles[21].

As a result of the regular meetings and dialogues between the leaders of the two states, cooperation has been intensified through interparliamentary dialogue, new opportunities for trade and investment partnership, and exchange of views on current issues on the agenda of the international community, in particular, Turkey has become one of Uzbekistan's five major trade and economic partners.

Regular high-level meetings continued, culminating in the February 19, 2020, inaugural session of the Uzbekistan–Turkey Strategic Partnership Council in Ankara, a new format for bilateral dialogue[22]. As part of the visit of the Head of our state to Turkey, the first meeting of the High-Level Uzbekistan-Turkey Strategic Cooperation Council was held in Ankara on this day. This council is a new format of dialogue in the history of bilateral relations.

On March 29, 2022, Erdoğan paid an official visit to Uzbekistan, focusing on elevating strategic partnership, expanding political, parliamentary, trade-economic, and cultural - humanitarian cooperation, with the signing of joint statements and agreements[23].

The official visit began with a narrow-ranging meeting between the leaders of the two countries. The main focus of the meeting was on enhancing the level of strategic partnership and expanding political, inter-parliamentary, trade, economic, and cultural-humanitarian ties between the two countries. At the end of the high-level negotiations, a ceremony of signing and exchanging documents took place. The leaders of the two states signed a joint statement following the second meeting of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council.

For your information, to date, the contractual and legal basis of Uzbek-Turkish cooperation is the Treaty "On Permanent Friendship and Cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkey" and 123 documents on trade, economy, transport, tourism, culture, as well as the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking. Of these, 12 are interstate, 56 are intergovernmental, 21 are interdepartmental, and 34 are documents on cooperation in other areas[24].

On November 8, 2023, the leader of Uzbekistan, Sh. Mirziyoyev, held a meeting with the President of the Republic of Turkey, Recep Erdogan, who visited Uzbekistan to participate in the sixteenth summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization[25]. The meeting discussed issues of expanding ties between the two countries in all areas, developing strategic partnerships, and accelerating joint projects and programs.

On June 6, 2024, President Mirziyoyev visited Turkey, inspecting defense industry enterprises and participating in high-level meetings to accelerate joint projects and programs. During this visit, Mirziyoyev was awarded the "Order of the Republic of Turkey." [26]

Overall, recognition by Turkey elevated Uzbekistan–Turkey cooperation to a new level. Throughout various stages, bilateral meetings under Presidents Karimov and Mirziyoyev strengthened political and economic ties with regional countries and advanced equitable, mutually beneficial cooperation with developed nations, especially Turkey.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, as one of the developed countries in the world, Turkey was among the first states to recognize Uzbekistan's independence and established practical and constructive dialogue from the outset. In developing Uzbekistan–Turkey relations, particular attention was paid to forming a strong legal framework for cooperation. Bilateral state visits, high-level political dialogues, and agreements signed by the presidents of the two countries laid the legal foundations for cooperation across all sectors.

Uzbekistan–Turkey relations evolved in different ways during the years of independence. Thanks to the political activity of Presidents Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, bilateral relations reached a new strategic level. Uzbekistan, basing its foreign policy on principles such as peace, stability, equality, mutual trust, respect, mutual interest, and non-use of force, has actively promoted and initiated both bilateral and multilateral agreements. Today, Uzbekistan and Turkey, sharing a common language, religion, and historical roots, have become important strategic partners. The notion of strategic partnership signifies that mutual trust and support between the two sides are maintained at a high level.

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