Ankara’s Central Asian policy offers a privileged perspective for analyzing the evolution of Turkey’s post-bipolar foreign policy. A key element for Turkey’s attempt to re-launch the country’s value and significance for Euro-Atlantic interlocutors after the Cold War, Central Asia progressively lost its centrality in Ankara’s foreign policy and strategic thinking. This process was the result of both the impossibility of competing for influence with regional powers and, at the same time, of the inauguration of a Turkey-centered foreign policy that naturally prioritized its immediate neighborhood. Hence, setting aside its attempt to pursue creation of a zone of influence in Central Asia, Ankara developed a more pragmatic policy based on the revival of frameworks for cooperation with Turkic Republics and, at the same time, on engagement with Russia and China on both the bilateral and multilateral levels.

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Ever since the advent of the post-bipolar international system, Central Asian Republics (CARs) have had a special place in Turkey's foreign policy planning and vision, in primis as a result of the ethnic and linguistic bonds which link Ankara to four out of five of them. However, especially in the '90s the Central Asian – and particularly Turkic – vector of Turkish foreign policy showed an evident gap between expectations and accomplishments, between planning and implementation as well as between rhetoric and concrete room for action. Building on the initial failures and shortcomings of its regional policy, Ankara developed a more pragmatic and inclusive stance based on the double pillar of enhancing the cultural and economic dimensions of Turkey's relations with the CARs as well as of engaging with the regional pivotal states – i.e. Russia and China.

The '90s: Naiveté vs. pragmatism

In spite of the recurrent and widespread interpretation portraying Turkey’s Central Asian relations as an alternative to souring Turkey-EU engagement, the first vector of Ankara’s foreign policy has always been compliant with and indeed functional to the latter, as well as, broadly speaking, to the Euro-Atlantic alignment. Indeed, enhancing political and economic cooperation with Newly Independent States (NIS) would have also meant increasing Turkey’s significance for Western partners, too far from the region and too distracted by European transition to engage directly in the post-Soviet area. Not by chance, the U.S. was the main sponsor for proposing the so-called Turkish model for the region. A secular model which, characterized by long-standing democratic traditions and by adherence to free-market rules, would have helped foster Western values and, most importantly, would have been an ideal antidote to the potential spreading of the Iranian model as well as to the return of Russian hegemony. From this perspective, Ankara’s projection towards Central Asia helped tackle the basic concern faced by Turkish decision makers in the post-bipolar system, i.e. the need to reaffirm the significance of the country for Euro-Atlantic partners and at the same time, advance its national interests in a rapidly changing regional environment¹. On this backdrop, Turkish Central Asian policy, as underlined by outstanding scholars, proved to be both demanding and inspirational². Demanding because it

² B. BUZAN · O. WÆVER, Regions and powers. The structure of international security. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2003, p. 393. The authors added also the disturbing dimension of the policy, resulting from the profound significance of relations with Central Asia for rightwing, nationalist segments of the political spectrum.
would have required an uncommonly proactive policy in a sensitive area and inspirational because of the emotional appeal of the idea – with a strong Pan-Turkic and messianic connotation – of a “gigantic Turkic world” emerging from the Adriatic Sea to the Chinese Wall, on which Ankara was called to project its influence.

Disillusion was, however, quick to come. Lacking the economic means to implement its policy as well as concrete Western backing going beyond declarations of intent, Turkey had to scale down both its rhetoric and its aims. It had to confront a harsh – and, to a great extent, unexpected – reality shaped by rejection of its “big brother” role by the same NIS it aimed to engage with on the one hand, and on the other by the evident impossibility of rivaling Russia, both in economic and strategic terms, in what Moscow began to identify as its “near abroad”.

Disillusion was followed by the taking of a more pragmatic stance that from the latter half of the ‘90s, inspired Ankara’s Central Asian policy. The basic pillar of this phase of Central Asian projection was close cooperation with the U.S., which directly engaged with the former Soviet southern area by devising a comprehensive regional policy which, significantly, focused on the two fields in which it proved unfeasible for Turkey to compete with Russia, i.e. security and energy cooperation. From the first perspective, Ankara, exploiting the role of regional pillar for NATO cooperation with the NIS, took full advantage of the transformation process undertaken by the Alliance. Indeed, the NATO umbrella provided the framework for launching Turkish security cooperation with CARs, in terms of training as well as modernization and joint military exercises.

In no sector was Ankara’s pivotal role for U.S. regional strategy as valorized as in energy. Turkey came indeed to be regarded as the regional pillar in the attempt to promote the so called East-West energy corridor, designed to link Central Asian producer states to European consumers through the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan, bypassing both Russian networks in the North and Iranian routes in the South. Aimed at fostering NIS’ independence and sovereignty, the Corridor project helped Turkey achieve one of the key objectives of its Caucasus-Central Asian policy, i.e. exploiting energy cooperation in order to secure new supply channels, to diversify its import sources and to exploit its geographical location to serve as an energy bridge toward European markets. On this backdrop, U.S. financial and political support proved to be a decisive factor for creation of the East-West corridor’s first leg, i.e. the oil and gas pipelines which in 2005 and 2006 were inaugurated on a route reaching Turkish territory (Ceyhan and Erzurum respectively) from Baku via Tbilisi.

Besides counting on the U.S.’ leading role, Turkish policy towards the area benefited from the activities carried out within the frameworks for
economic and cultural cooperation launched at the beginning of the ’90s, as well as from the private undertakings of Turkish entrepreneurs and philanthropists. From the first perspective, a key role in enhancing cooperation with Caucasus and Central Asian states was played by the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency, (Türk İşbirliği ve Kalkınma İdaresi Başkanlığı, TİKA). Established in 1992 in order to provide assistance to Turkish-speaking countries and neighbors, it aimed at helping NIS economic transition and state building processes. Another useful tool for the promotion of economic relations has been the Türk Eximbank, the state-owned export credit agency established in late ’80s, which between 1992 and 2000 provided CARs with more than 800 million dollars in credit to finance projects and trade.

On a cultural level, the Turkish government initiated the process that in 1993 led to the establishment of the Joint Administration of Turkic Arts and Culture (Türk Kültür ve Sanatları Ortak Yönetimi’nin, TÜRKSOY), an organization originally composed of the five Turkic former Soviet Republics plus Turkey and aimed at the preservation and dissemination Turkic culture, art, language and heritage. Another important component of state-promoted cultural initiatives was the Student Exchange Project, initiated in 1992 under the aegis of the Ministry of National Education and aimed at providing university-level education in Turkey to students coming from Central Asia. Seen as the cornerstone of the “Turkish Renaissance”, the project pursued the long-term goal of creating the future elites of the countries who, well versed in Turkish culture and language, would then act as a bridge toward Turkey. Consistently with this logic, in the decade between 1992 and 2002 more than 14,000 scholarships were awarded in Turkic countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia while at the same time a number of schools, Turkish language centers and even universities were established directly in the countries concerned.

Besides the state-to-state cooperation level, relations between Turkey and the CARs were fostered in the ’90s also thanks to private business initiatives. Encouraged by Turkish authorities to invest in Central Asia – but receiving almost no incentives from the state – Turkish entrepreneurs managed to significantly increase business with the CARs, consistently with the wider development of an export-oriented economic model. Although quantitatively limited, the trade flows were instrumental in es-

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3 The organization has granted observer status to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, to the Moldovan Special Province of Gagauzia as well as to the Russian Federation’s Republics of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Hakasia, Tiva, Saha and Altay.
5 According to DEIK data, in 2000 the total turnover between Turkey and the CARs was worth 895 million dollars, i.e. 1.08% of total annual Turkish trade.
establishing a commercial bridge that would prove to be fundamental in enhancing economic exchanges in the 2000s, i.e. in the phase of Turkey’s economic boom.

Among the philanthropic endeavors that helped cement relations between Turkey and the CARs, special mention goes to the Islamic movement inspired by Fethullah Gülen, which, active in Turkey since the ’80s, assumed its characteristic transnational dimension at the start of the following decade precisely by launching educational projects in the Caucasus and Central Asian Turkic states. Between 1992 and 1997, various groups of Gülen-inspired businessmen and teachers opened 73 schools and 3 universities throughout Central Asia,6 promoting an education cued to Western standards and founded on the double pillar of Turkish identity and “socially conservative, politically progressive, market-oriented” Islam.7 Philanthropic activities established by the Gülen movement had a double value in regard to enhancing Turkish soft power in Central Asia. On the one hand, they were a significant complement to state-promoted educational activities and, on the other, by involving a vast number of businessmen in the promotion of Turkish culture and identity fostered solid society-to-society linkages whose benefits go beyond the mere educational sphere. It is therefore not by chance that private and philanthropic initiatives, coupled with state-promoted cultural exchanges and cooperation, would prove to be the most effective tools for Turkey’s Central Asian projection, a structural component of national soft power which proved able to resist the setbacks experienced in government-level policy.

Strategic shortcomings and the dynamics of regional influence

While helping Turkey raise its Central Asian profile, Washington-Ankara regional cooperation at the same time reinforced their bilateral relationship, warding off the risk of abandonment faced by Ankara in the post-bipolar environment. However, as time passed such close cooperation ended up by revealing the opposite risk of regional entrapment, which occurs “when one values the preservation of the alliance more than the cost of fighting for the ally’s interest”.8

6 B. ARAS, Turkey’s policy in the former Soviet south: Assets and options, «Turkish Studies», vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, p. 50. Following a bottom-up approach, a peculiarity of the Gülen movement is the lack of a centralized structure or organization. This, in turn, implies that estimates on Gülen-inspired philanthropic initiatives – schools as well as hospitals or dormitories – both in Turkey and abroad vary greatly.


This trend was especially visible in the case of Turkish-Russian relations. However, Ankara’s projection toward Central Asia also created significant though lower-scale tensions with the People’s Republic of China, which grew increasingly uneasy about pan-Turkic rhetoric and policies coming from Ankara. Indeed, the independence of the CARs gave new impetus to the traditional separatist aspirations in “Eastern Turkestan”, i.e. in the Uighur-inhabited Xinjiang province. On the backdrop of the terrorist activities initiated by the constellation of groups aiming at Eastern Turkestan independence, the presence of a huge and well-organized ethnic-kin Uighur diaspora in Istanbul came to be regarded by Beijing as a threat to national interest and territorial integrity, creating a dangerous hiatus in bilateral relations. Therefore, although China’s Central Asian policy underwent profound modifications in the course of the past twenty years, the need to counteract separatist and terrorist movements in Xinjiang represented the single element which gave continuity to it, the common thread of its regional policy. And so even though the tools of Beijing’s regional policy evolved and its goals progressively expanded, the “Uighur hitch” in Sino-Turkish relations can be seen as a structural problem in bilateral relations.9

Turkey found itself embedded in a vicious circle of regional polarization which, fostered by competition for regional influence, arose on the Central Asian chessboard as well as on other scenarios of primary importance to Turkish foreign policy and national interest – the Caucasus, Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean in primis. The primary factor behind this polarization trend was Moscow’s attempt – and, to a great extent, need – to react to external pressure in its “near abroad” by stepping up regional economic and security cooperation in order to retain its traditional influence, if not hegemony. Aside from exerting pressure on a bilateral level, Russia’s dominant regional power role was primarily reaffirmed at a multilateral level – i.e. widening the CIS’ scope and institutionalizing the 1992 Tashkent security pact through establishment of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose charter was signed and ratified, among others, by Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and later Uzbekistan10. Moreover, the regional polarization trend was one of the driving forces behind Sino-Russian Central Asian engagement and cooperation – embodied by the formation of the “Shanghai five” group in 1996, institutionalized as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 – which represented a joint response to Euro-Atlantic regional pressure. Indeed, 

10 Although the CSTO Charter was signed in Tashkent, Uzbekistan became a full participant of the organization only in 2006. In 2012 the country withdrew from the CSTO – whose other founding members were, besides Russia, Armenia and Belarus.
the aim of jointly tackling the issues of energy, terrorism and military cooperation through multilateral frameworks directly rivaled the analogous attempt pursued through contemporary efforts undertaken directly under the umbrella of Euro-Atlantic frameworks (e.g. NATO) or indirectly through Western support (e.g. GUUAM). Besides Russia and China, the “Shanghai five” included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, joined by Uzbekistan in 2001.

On this backdrop, the CARs’ participation in Moscow and Moscow-Beijing led cooperation initiatives was a hard setback for Turkish projection toward Central Asia and a demonstration of Russia’s persisting influence on the region, as well as of China’s increasing one. Indeed, while during the ’90s – consistently with the aim of fighting the “East Turkestan” movement in the Xinjiang – Beijing’s interests and policies toward the region were confined to increasing border security and stability in a defensive posture, after the end of the last century and at the beginning of the new one China took a proactive stance aimed in primis at fostering economic relations with the CARs. Besides being consistent with the aim of seeking new markets for Chinese goods, this policy pursued the ultimate goal of promoting the development of the country’s northwestern regions – and chiefly of Xinjiang – in order to weaken the separatist movement.

Driven by economic as well as security interests and pursued mainly by boosting financial, commercial and trade relations, China’s projection toward Central Asia yielded impressive results in the course of the last decade, especially in terms of trade. Indeed, China surpassed Russia as the main trading partner for Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while total turnover between China and the CARs rose from 2.8 billion dollars in 2003 to 45.2 billion in 2012. Although within the same timeframe Turkey’s trade with the CARs grew substantially – from 1.2 to 6.9 billion dollars – the total figure still remains far from both China’s and Russia’s (27.4 billion in 2012)11.

Aside from showing the intrinsic limits of Turkey’s economic influence in Central Asia compared with regional competitors, Chinese Central Asian policy directly affected Ankara’s regional goals in the strategic energy field. As a matter of fact, Beijing’s policy, besides being driven by the aforementioned motivations, was shaped by the strategic goal of diversifying its hydrocarbon supply channels, reducing its dependence on both Middle Eastern suppliers and vulnerable sea routes. In doing so, China reached out to the same producers – Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan – which were instrumental to the U.S.-Turkish attempt to complete the East-West Corridor by linking its Central Asian leg

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11 IMF Data Warehouse, Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS).
to the Caucasus portion through the Caspian. Therefore the possibility for Central Asian hydrocarbons to reach Turkey and European markets, already hindered by traditional Russian opposition to laying a pipeline on the basin’s seabed, was greatly downsized – if not definitively excluded – by the progressive attraction of regional producer countries into the Asian energy cooperation orbit, triggered by China’s NOC investments and by the infrastructure projects realized between 2006 and 2010 on Beijing’s initiative.

AKP Central Asian policy

The shortcomings, if not the failure, of Turkish foreign policy toward Central Asia in the course of the ‘90s reflected two intrinsic limitations of its post-bipolar stance. First and foremost, it showed the naiveté behind proposal of the “Turkish model”, which proved to be unfeasible in both political and economic terms. Secondly, Turkish failures in Central Asia revealed the misjudgment of its basic assumption, i.e. the belief that bandwagon strategy toward the U.S. would pay off on the regional level too. On this backdrop, the need to rethink Central Asian policy was only a part of the wider reconsideration of Turkey’s strategic positioning in the post-Cold War environment, a process which, initiated at the turn of the century, culminated with commencement of the AKP decade in late 2002.

Reconsideration of Turkish foreign policy led to a gradual marginalization of Central Asia in national strategic thinking, as a result of both international contingencies and doctrinal premises. From the latter perspective, consistently with Davutoğlu’s understanding of Turkey’s role and position in the post-bipolar international system, a key feature of AKP foreign policy has been the conceptual self-repositioning of the country on the Eurasian chessboard. No longer a peripheral country (kanat ülke) with a mainly defensive stance – as it used to be and as it used to be perceived in the Cold War system – Ankara has been steadily affirming the central country (merkez ülke) role granted to Turkey by its strategic strengths, i.e. by its geographic, cultural and historical features. Such a shift in the country’s self-perception and self-portraying led, in turn, to the development of a new cognitive map shaping national foreign policy according to a Turkey-centered logic. This consideration paved the way for a natural prioritization of the country’s immediate neighborhood, that is to the drawing of a priority circle for action whose boundaries were determined by the radius of Ankara’s range of influence as well as by the degree of influence exerted on Turkey by its neighbors. Accordingly, Central Asia fell progressively outside Turkey’s foreign policy priorities12, while the

Caucasus did not, leading to a *de facto* partition of Turkic space consistent with the wider process of regionalization and sub-regionalization undergone by the former Soviet South.

The trends toward the partition of Turkic space and the marginalization of Central Asia in Turkish strategic thinking became evident first of all in the energy cooperation sphere, with particular reference to the traditional aim of becoming a vital energy hub on Europe’s doorstep. Driven by the growing difficulties in opening up the Central Asian leg of the East-West Corridor, Turkey – although officially still investing in such a vector\(^{13}\), and keeping the strategic partnership with Azerbaijan firm – increasingly focused on a parallel and more promising north-south dimension. Hence, in line with the wider goal of promoting economic interdependence with its immediate neighbors, the north-south energy project was steadily developed by fostering and promoting cooperation with Russia as well as with Iran, Iraq and potentially Israel.

Broadly speaking, AKP policy toward Central Asia has pivoted around a double track, shaped by renewed investment in the cultural vector of relations with CARs as well as by pursuing engagement and cooperation – instead of competition – with regional powers, both on the bilateral and multilateral levels. Besides being the result of growing awareness of the limits to its own influence projection, the improvement of relations with Russia and China is a key feature of wider Turkish strategic rethinking, which clearly transcends Central Asian boundaries, ensuring Ankara big dividends from a multi-regional perspective. Moreover, apart from strategic considerations, Russia is still a key economic partner for Turkey, in terms of energy supply as well as of investments and trade. At the same time, ever since the overtures made to Beijing on the Uighur issue – recognized as a “domestic” Chinese issue in 1999 – bilateral relations have steadily deepened, especially in economic terms. On this backdrop, the development of an inclusive view of Turkish Central Asian policy and the pursuit of regional cooperation with China and Russia culminated in April 2013, with the highly symbolic signing of the Memorandum which granted Turkey "dialogue partner" status in the SCO framework.

After a period of initial neglect, AKP policy towards the CARs got new impetus with the 2007 election to the Presidency of the Republic of Abdullah Gül, who made Central Asia a priority of his own foreign policy. It is not by chance that Gül’s first visits abroad were paid to the region and that, after 2008, a revival of multilateral cooperation schemes with Turkic republics took place. In November 2008, in Istanbul, heads of parliaments of the Republics of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

\(^{13}\) Energy cooperation was, for instance, one of the main topics covered during the visit President Gül paid to Turkmenistan in May 2013.
signed an agreement establishing the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-speaking Countries (TÜRKPA). Aimed at fostering political dialogue as well as socio-economic, cultural, humanitarian and legal relations among the parties, TÜRKPA has since then met on a yearly base in plenary sessions hosted by members’ national assemblies.

Ankara’s initiative gave also new life to the dormant framework of the so-called Turkic Summits which, launched in 1992, underwent a period of stalemate in the 2000s. Involving the same members of TÜRKPA, Turkey promoted the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (CCTSS), created at the Nakhchivan summit in October 2009. Showing the magnitude, vision and scope of the relationship’s new course, the Cooperation Council is built upon a rather large and ambitious agenda, ranging from strengthening mutual confidence and promoting shared positions on foreign policy issues among members to creating favorable conditions for trade and investments, to coordinating efforts to combat international terrorism, separatism, extremism and trans-border crimes.14 Outstanding among the projects initiated under the CCTSS framework are the establishment of a business council, a joint arbitration court, an inter-university union and a joint agency administrating transportation corridors.

The resurgence of cooperation among Turkic countries has also triggered an intensified flow of development aid reaching Central Asia. Indeed, Turkish bilateral development assistance to the CARs grew from 92.7 million dollars in 2004 to 154.4 million in 2011 – with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan among the top ODA recipients. However, while the dynamics of Turkish development aid policy in the XXI century perfectly reflect the continuous importance of Central Asia they also show the downgrading of its relative weight in Turkish strategic thinking and foreign policy orientation. Indeed, while in 2004 aid to Central Asia constituted about 41% of total Turkish disbursement, 2011 figures represented only 12.5% of the total amount of ODA, principally directed towards Middle Eastern countries (292.64 million) and Sub-Saharan Africa (21.3 million).15

Conclusions

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s dissolution, the Turkic vector of Ankara’s foreign policy basically failed, due to Turkey’s inability to rival Russian regional influence in the two strategic areas of economic and security cooperation. Subsequently, the steady rise of the Central

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Asian vector of China’s foreign policy added a new and important regional competitor for Turkey, revealing the limits of Ankara’s influence projection toward the area and creating lines of polarization and tensions.

From being a foreign policy priority, Central Asia progressively lost its centrality to Turkish foreign policy planning – and, broadly speaking, to Turkish strategic thinking. Besides being the result of the policy’s shortcomings and of the growing awareness of the limits inherent to projection towards Central Asia, such a dynamic was fully in line with the gradual affirmation of a Turkey-centered foreign policy, which naturally prioritizes its immediate neighborhood. As such, Turkish Central Asian policy offers a privileged perspective for analyzing the development of Ankara’s post-bipolar foreign policy. Indeed, the double track currently shaping Ankara’s Central Asian policy embodies two important characteristics of the Turkish foreign policy vision. First of all, it shows the value attached to soft power projection beyond its close neighborhood as well as the virtuous circle between state and private initiatives in this specific field. Secondly, it embodies the new inclusive view which has shaped Turkish foreign policy since it overcame the traditional “security-first” approach and which has facilitated regional engagement with Russia and China. Hence, although the current course of Central Asian policy may recall – both in scope and tone – the initial phase of the relations, the similarities actually tend to hide more than they reveal about the current course of Ankara’s regional policy. The attempt to create its own sphere of influence based on ethnic and linguistic linkages is definitively over, replaced by a pragmatic stance which, built upon a “loose” Pan-Turkism, aims at fostering relations with the CARs while at the same time investing in cooperation with the regional powers. As in other regional scenarios, such a stance may enable Turkey to play an important role in fostering stability and promoting dialogue and cooperation among central Asian actors.

As said, the marginalization of Central Asia in Turkish strategic thinking has been the result of the doctrinal premises which guided AKP foreign policy. At the same time, however, it was also the result of international contingencies which, since the opening of the AKP decade, have attracted Ankara’s attention to the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and North African scenarios. Contingencies may, however, soon bring Central Asia back to the top of Turkey’s agenda. On the eve of NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, Central Asia seems poised to regain the centrality to Eurasian relations and power balancing it used to have in the past. In such a context, the double track which shapes its Central Asian policy may provide Ankara with a significant degree of influence – both bilaterally and through multilateral frameworks for cooperation – and the more so in consideration of the high degree of investments made in the Afghan and South-Asian scenarios. Particularly relevant may prove to be, in this

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context, Ankara’s engagement with the SCO, currently the most inclusive regional framework dealing with security issues and, therefore, best positioned to tackle the regional and transnational issues linked to post-conflict reconstruction. Turkish policy’s efficacy will, however, be largely independent from its own choices and conversely linked to the degree of SCO’s inclusiveness, as well as to the degree of efficiency of the framework itself – still to be demonstrated. Come what may, it is nonetheless worth noting that once again Turkish Central Asian policy, far from being an alternative to Euro-Atlantic alignment, may instead play a useful role also for its Western interlocutors, in view of their exit strategy from the Afghan scenario.

On this backdrop, the only risk unfolding in Turkey’s Central Asian policy is that its two vectors, although complementary, may come into conflict – i.e. that the loose Pan-Turkism which underpins relations with the CARs may jeopardize relations with regional powers, as happened in the summer of 2009 following harsh Turkish reactions to China’s crackdown on Uighur demonstrations in Xinjiang.