

## **“Enhanced Strategic Partnership” Between Turkey and Kazakhstan in Changing Global Geopolitics**

**Prof. Mehmet Seyfettin EROL**

*President of Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies (ANKASAM)*

The friendly relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan, shaped on the basis of historical and cultural ties, have become one of the most reliable partnerships in the Eurasian region for the last 30 years. The relations established since the day Kazakhstan gained its independence have been expanding steadily. With the “Strategic Partnership Agreement” signed in 2009, relations have moved to a new dimension. During the visit of the President of Kazakhstan, Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Turkey, the relations were raised to the level of “Enhanced Strategic Partnership”.

The developing relations between the two countries create significant results not only at the bilateral level, but also at the regional and international level. Both countries are going through a period in which they are redefining their international positions. The two countries, which have a common interest in increasing international and regional peace, security, stability and prosperity, adopt a common foreign policy vision. The “Enhanced Strategic Partnership Agreement” can be accepted as an indicator of this.

### **International Position of Kazakhstan**

Developments in international politics point to the birth and construction process of a multipolar system against all odds. In this new process, Asia is gaining importance, and Central Asia, located at the center of this great continent, is becoming one of the focuses of the international power struggle. Central Asian countries are trying to determine a new role for themselves in the new international system. In this context, the foreign policy of Kazakhstan, which is bordered by the two great powers of Asia, Russia and China, is one of the central countries of Central Asian geopolitics, and has an important position on the route connecting Asia to Europe, gains importance.

In the 30th anniversary of its independence, Kazakhstan is in the process of transformation in its domestic politics as well as international developments. For this reason, how Kazakhstan will cope with the problems it faces at home, what kind of foreign policy it will follow and what role it will play in the geopolitics of Central Asia are substantial questions. These questions are important not only for Kazakhstan but also for all regional countries and global actors.

First of all, if we look at the international level, Kazakhstan’s geographical location excludes any dependency relationship with any global actor. The worst-case scenario for Kazakhstan, which borders both Russia and China, is to be stuck between these two great powers. For this reason, Kazakhstan should follow a balanced policy, and establish close relations with both countries, but these relations should not turn into a relationship of dependency. The dependency relationship that Kazakhstan will enter with one of these two countries may provoke the other and create notable security problems for Kazakhstan.

The western connection also remains important for Kazakhstan. The war in Ukraine has placed energy security at the center of international debate, and there are significant opportunities for energy-rich Kazakhstan. Also, Kazakhstan has the potential to play a positive role in terms of food security triggered by the Ukraine war. In order for Kazakhstan to realize these potential opportunities, it needs to establish an active relationship with Western as well as Eastern countries. It is also obvious that this balance-based multi-vector policy is an important way out in the context of saving Kazakhstan from geopolitical pressure and stuckness. Therefore, Kazakhstan has to follow very sensitive and delicate diplomacy that does not compromise its

full independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and keeps the balance between global powers.

At the regional level, the importance of Kazakhstan has been also increasing. As the center of power in international competition shifts to Asia, the Central Asian region gains importance. On the other hand, the importance and weight of geopolitical conflicts in international competition is increasing. For example, developments in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine are important geopolitical conflict areas. Developments in energy security increase the strategic importance of the Caspian Sea. Kazakhstan is becoming an extremely strategic corridor in both East-West and North-South axis.

Regional developments create serious security risks for both Kazakhstan and Central Asian countries. It does not seem possible for any country to fight these risks alone. Therefore, regional cooperation has gained more importance than ever before. Kazakhstan plays a decisive role in ensuring regional cooperation. For Kazakhstan, which is a much more stable country economically, politically and socially compared to other countries in the region, regional stability must be ensured in order to maintain this stability. The countries of the region also need Kazakhstan for more cooperation and stability.

Kazakhstan follows a strategy in favor of peace and stability both in its relations with global powers and in its regional policies. This strategy is a requirement of a multi-vector foreign policy understanding. Multi-vector foreign policy means contributing to the stability and prosperity of the region while maintaining balances between global power centers. As such, Kazakhstan is turning into a model for the region.

### **Turkey and Kazakhstan in Eurasian Geopolitics**

In terms of Kazakhstan's global and regional role, its relations with Turkey are of particular importance. First of all, there are similarities between Turkey's foreign policy priorities and Kazakhstan's priorities. Both countries follow a foreign policy that protects the balances and contributes to the peace in the region, preserving their full independence and strategic autonomy, without being dependent on any global power. Therefore, it is possible for Turkey and Kazakhstan to cooperate in the face of various global and regional problems and play a constructive role in solving the problems.

In terms of economy, Turkey is an important country in terms of Kazakhstan's access to the Western market. Trade relations between the two countries tend to increase constantly. Mr. Tokayev's visit to Turkey has been an important turning point in which agreements that will further revive economic relations have been signed. Economic relations between the two countries will not only increase the trade volume but will also facilitate Kazakhstan's access to European markets. Therefore, Kazakhstan-Turkey relations will positively affect Kazakhstan's economic and political relations with the West. This is of great importance in terms of Kazakhstan's policy that observes global balances.

Relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan continue to contribute to regional security. As the leading countries of the Organization of Turkish States, Turkey and Kazakhstan carry their regional relations to an institutional basis. It acts in a participatory and inclusive manner without excluding any country in the region. Both the regional integration process has been accelerated and the will to maintain global peace and stability has been demonstrated.

### **Consequences of Mr. Tokayev's Visit**

Mr. Tokayev's visit to Turkey is of great importance in terms of embodying the friendship and common interests between Turkey and Kazakhstan. During the visit attended by 6 Ministers and many high-level officials, both Mr. Tokayev and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

gave extremely positive messages and displayed friendly images. However, this visit was not only a visit where symbolic messages of friendship were given but also an important milestone in which concrete steps were taken.

First of all, bilateral relations have been moved to the Enhanced Strategic Partnership level. In this context, a total of 15 agreements were signed in the fields of the defense industry, military intelligence, information technologies, transportation, culture, agriculture, transportation, trade, customs, environment, education, youth, communication and archives. These agreements show that the relations have both moved to strategic areas and gained a very wide scope. In addition, it has been determined as a target to increase the trade volume between the two countries to 10 billion dollars.

The concrete results of Mr. Tokayev's visit to Turkey can be listed as follows.

- 1) After the tragic events in January, the message was given that Kazakhstan has largely overcome the problems in domestic politics and that foreign policy is carried out strongly while the internal restructuring process continues.
- 2) The message was given that the January events did not create a break in Kazakhstan's foreign policy and that Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, which takes care of the balance, is maintained.
- 3) It has been one of the best examples of what Mr. Tokayev's multilateral-vectored foreign policy move meant.
- 4) It has shown that some perceptions such as pan-Turkism are out of place.
- 5) It has also been seen that Kazakhstan does not remain indifferent to global events/developments in foreign policy, plays a constructive role, and in this context, approaches every country, especially its neighboring countries, at an equal distance in the construction of the corridor/bridge between Central Asia and Europe.
- 6) The importance given to Turkey has been shown in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, and Turkey has shown that it is ready to further develop its relations with Kazakhstan.
- 7) The relations between Turkey and Kazakhstan have not only been accepted as a partnership that serves the common interests of the two countries, but the two countries have given the message that they are ready to play leading roles in multilateral cooperation structures to strengthen regional peace, stability and prosperity. The signed agreements point to an expanded strategic partnership that covers all areas of relations between the two countries.
- 8) It has been seen that the relations will grow even more with the action initiated by the leaders, as Turkey welcomed Mr. Tokayev like a brother.
- 9) The two countries have confirmed that they have a common attitude towards the challenges posed by the change in global geopolitics and regional security problems. The game of table tennis emerges as a symbolic dimension/message of this.
- 10) The message was given that it will continue to contribute to the establishment of international peace and security by complying with international law.
- 11) Turkey's strong support for the reforms carried out by Kazakhstan in domestic politics has been confirmed. As a matter of fact, this visit can be seen as a reflection of Turkey's friendship and solidarity during the January events. Therefore, in this visit, the message that Turkey will stand by Kazakhstan and the Kazakh people was given once again clearly.

### **The Role of Leaders in Turkey-Kazakhstan Relations**

Leaders have a significant impact on the realization of the foreign policy visions of Turkey and Kazakhstan. Both Presidents follow a balanced, pragmatic and constructive foreign policy strategy.

Mr. Tokayev plays a significant role both in Kazakhstan's foreign policy and in the internal reform process. Both international trends and regional problems require Kazakhstan to conduct very sensitive and tactful diplomacy. In this respect, Mr. Tokayev's experience in foreign policy and his sensitivity to geopolitical issues are of great importance for the "New Kazakhstan". Mr. Tokayev's experience in the field of foreign policy is also an indication that his country will follow active diplomacy.

When we look from the eyes of Turkey, it is seen that the new reform movement initiated in Kazakhstan is the biggest guarantee of Kazakhstan's growth and expansion.

Kazakhstan's active diplomacy also requires a closer relationship with Turkey. Turkey and Kazakhstan constitute an important corridor between the East and the West, both politically and economically. For this reason, Mr. Tokayev's visit to Turkey was not an ordinary leaders' summit. Mr. Tokayev was welcomed by Mr. Erdogan at the highest level and the leaders of both countries showed a strong will for the development of relations. This will is an indication that the relations of the two countries, which are based on deep-rooted friendship, will continue to strengthen in the same direction. Therefore, although this visit of time is short, it is very intense, and it is a historical step towards further strengthening and moving the existing relations forward.