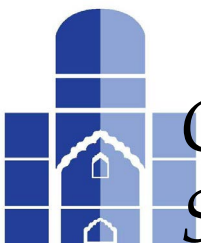


# The Rise of the Organization of Turkic States: Is Turkic Cooperation Filling a Geopolitical Vacuum?

Svante E. Cornell

SILK ROAD PAPER  
December 2025



*Central Asia-Caucasus Institute  
Silk Road Studies Program*



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**“The Rise of the Organization of Turkic States: Is Turkic Cooperation Filling a Geopolitical Vacuum?”** is a *Silk Road Paper* published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center. The Silk Road Papers Series is the Occasional Paper series of the Joint Center, which addresses topical and timely subjects. The Joint Center is a transatlantic independent and non-profit research and policy center. It has offices in Washington and Stockholm and is affiliated with the American Foreign Policy Council and the Institute for Security and Development Policy. It is the first institution of its kind in Europe and North America, and is firmly established as a leading research and policy center, serving a large and diverse community of analysts, scholars, policy-watchers, business leaders, and journalists. The Joint Center is at the forefront of research on issues of conflict, security, and development in the region. Through its applied research, publications, research cooperation, public lectures, and seminars, it functions as a focal point for academic, policy, and public discussion regarding the region.

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ISBN: 978-91-88551-78-8

Printed in Lithuania

Distributed in North America by:

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

American Foreign Policy Council

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Distributed in Europe by:

The Silk Road Studies Program

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## Executive Summary

In October 2025, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) convened a pivotal summit in Gabala, Azerbaijan, demonstrating its emergence as a significant geopolitical entity on the Eurasian landscape. During the summit, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the OTS's evolution into a key geopolitical center, while Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev referred to it as an authoritative structure uniting Turkic populations. This gathering marks a critical juncture in the organization's development, solidifying its influence in a region that links the Mediterranean to Central Asia.

The Gabala summit showcased the OTS's commitment to enhancing collaboration on various fronts, including security, defense, economic development, transportation, digitalization, and sustainable energy. A notable development was the introduction of the "OTS plus" framework, which aims to strengthen partnerships with non-Turkic states in the vicinity. This evolution reflects a remarkable transformation for Turkic cooperation, escalating from modest aspirations to a robust international organization in a remarkably short period.

The emergence and rapid development of the OTS challenge conventional frameworks employed by Western bureaucracies to assess the geopolitics of the region. Typically categorized into rigid geographic divisions, bureaucracies covering the Middle East, Europe, and Central Asia often overlook the intricate relationships across these boundaries. Turkic cooperation ignores these geographic categorizations, as it not only resides

within the context of former Soviet republics but also includes Türkiye—a pivotal player straddling both Europe and the Middle East.

A key element of Turkic Cooperation is the relatively equal standing of its members. While Türkiye is obviously considerably larger than the other members, it is telling that the main drivers of Turkic cooperation for many years were Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan; and that Turkic cooperation really took off following Uzbekistan's renewed enthusiasm for the initiative. In other words, the perception of the OTS as somehow beholden to Turkish President Erdogan is a red herring.

The ethnolinguistic character of Turkic cooperation has led many observers to remain skeptical, as it has led to the exclusion of non-Turkic states. Yet on a practical level, the OTS has displayed an openness to cooperate with countries like Georgia; more recently, the inclusion of an "OTS plus" format could create conditions for a more inclusive approach to regional states that are not majority Turkic.

Given the current geopolitical climate, the rise of the OTS is poised to reshape power dynamics across a broad expanse of territory, prompting a reevaluation of strategic frameworks by Western governments and multilateral organizations. Understanding the implications of the OTS's evolution will be crucial for policymakers and stakeholders engaged in the region and beyond.

# Introduction

In October 2025, the members of the Organization of Turkic States held a summit in the Azerbaijani city of Gabala. Hosting the summit, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated that the OTS “has grown into one of the key geopolitical centers.” Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, for his part, termed the organization and “authoritative structure” uniting Turkic peoples. Indeed, the summit marks a milestone in the rapid rise of this organization, an increasingly important factor in the broader region connecting the Mediterranean to Central Asia.

With the Gabala summit, the OTS took steps to become an important geopolitical force on the Eurasian continent. What changed with the Gabala summit was the clear willingness of OTS member states to move deeper into cooperation in security and defense, while further deepening their cooperation in economic development and transportation, as well as launching new initiatives in the field of digitalization and sustainable energy. In addition, the OTS launched a format, “OTS plus,” to structure its relationship with non-Turkic states in the region.

What is striking about the rise of the OTS is the pace of the transformation of Turkic cooperation from relatively modest ambitions half a decade ago to the full-fledged international organization we see today. How did this process gain speed so fast, and what are the consequences for the broader region?

## Thinking About Regions

The rise of the Organization of Turkic States is one of many developments challenging the traditional lenses through which Western bureaucracies view the vast geography stretching from the Mediterranean all the way to the Chinese border. Whether in Europe or North America, government and multilateral bureaucracies have tended to divide the world into neat-looking categories. Countries like Iran, Syria and Israel are part of a “Middle East” or “Near East” department and viewed together with most of the Arab world, including Gulf States and often some North African countries. Türkiye, by contrast, is sometimes viewed as Middle Eastern but most often as part of Europe – something the Turkish government has actively advocated for since the founding of the Republic over a century ago. As for Central Asia and the Caucasus, their classification is more varied. Typically, they are considered part of Eastern Europe, sometimes lumped together with Russia, but in the U.S. the South Caucasus states have been considered part of Europe while Central Asia was instead joined with South Asia.

The point is that Turkic cooperation stretches across these bureaucratic boundaries and impacts what bureaucracies variously define as Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East. Its center of gravity clearly lies in what were once Soviet republics, but its most powerful participant is a country straddling the boundary of Europe and the Middle East. In a world where artificial boundaries between geographic entities no longer reflect reality, Turkic cooperation reaches across these boundaries.

## **Strategic Shifts and Cooperation Mechanisms in Central Eurasia**

The rise of Turkic cooperation has to be seen against the background of broader changes at the global and regional level. Three of these, in particular, deserve mention. The first is the increasingly unstable and unruly character of international politics. Connected to this is the rise of a new polarization between the West and a loose anti-Western axis. And the third is the economic challenge that largely landlocked states experience developing their economies in this changing reality.

The states involved in Turkic cooperation lie in the center of a vortex of growing instability. The states themselves have largely escaped serious destabilization, but their vicinity has seen dramatic developments that have changed the security calculus for all involved. To the west, the civil war in Syria affected all states involved to some degree. Türkiye was the most directly and seriously affected, but even Central Asian states experienced a flow of radicalized youth joining jihadi organizations in the Syrian war. Further, the Iran-Israel conflict, of which the war in Gaza is the most dramatic exhibit, similarly has affected the position of Iran, which borders three Turkic countries, not least following Israel's actions that have sharply reduced Iran's regional influence. Further north, the Russian aggression against Ukraine – since 2013 and in full-scale mode since 2022 – has drastically altered the way regional states see their large northern neighbor. Finally, to the south the war in Afghanistan and the return to power of the Taliban has been an important factor affecting Central Asia's security, while also limiting the region's access to connections to the south.

Of specific interest to this region, and to the alarm of its leaders, they have found themselves literally stuck in the middle of a growing global confrontation that could be termed a “New Cold War.” On one side is the global “West,” led by the United States and Europe, in which countries like Japan and Australia also are part. On the other side is an alignment of states led by China and Russia, joined by the likes of Iran and North Korea. Whereas this new “axis” is relatively loose, lacking the institutions that anchor the Western states, the growing collaboration among these states in countering the West is now undeniable. In the Ukraine war, Iran and North Korea have contributed directly to the Russian war effort, while China has been an enabling force while maintaining a semblance of neutrality. And conversely, in the Iran-Israel conflict, Russia and China have sided much more openly with the Iranian position than was the case in the past.

The position of the Turkic states in this regard is precarious. On one hand, they have in common a clear desire not to let this “New Cold War” dictate their foreign policy and not to be forced to side with either the West or the New Axis. Instead, they seek to maximize their independence and ability to chart their own course of action, while maintaining political and economic relations (transactional or better) with powers on both sides of the global confrontation. Yet on the other hand, some of the states are institutionally integrated on opposing sides of this confrontation. While Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are non-aligned, Türkiye is a key member of NATO, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization. Yet neither wants to be confined to following the general consensus in these “blocs.” Kazakhstan, for example, has clearly distanced itself from Russia’s war in Ukraine, at considerable cost in terms of Russian pressure. Türkiye, meanwhile, has been a strong supporter of Ukraine, providing arms and political support to Kyiv, but Ankara has maintained relations with Russia

and refused to join the unilateral sanctions imposed by other NATO and EU countries.

A third consequence of the increased unrest and growing polarization has been the added challenges for economic development of countries in the region. The mutual sanctions imposed by Russia and the West from 2014 onward hit the region hard, in combination with dramatic fluctuations of the price of oil. Large-scale devaluations took place in the years following 2014, lowering purchasing power for the population. Türkiye similarly endured years of economic hardship and currency fluctuations. And while some entrepreneurs in the region have benefited from the opportunity arising from helping Russia circumvent sanctions, this has hardly benefited the economy as a whole or reduced unemployment. To add to this, the growing confrontation also hampered Central Asian states' access to world markets as the land transport route through Russia was limited, all while the hopes for a large-scale opening of transport routes across Afghanistan were dashed.

These dramatic developments have been a powerful force driving the search for cooperative endeavors across Central Eurasia. This has taken the shape of increased bilateral cooperation among key countries, a growing amount of trilateral initiatives involving Azerbaijan and several Central Asian countries in specific areas, and regional endeavors involving all five Central Asian states. Most of these remain *ad hoc*, however, although the dialogue between Central Asian Heads of State in the form of consultative meetings is now being institutionalized.<sup>1</sup>

Against this background, it is clear that neither Türkiye nor Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states see any benefit in siding permanently with one of the emerging blocs. Instead, they see their interest in defying the logic of a

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<sup>1</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Layers of Cooperation: The Gradual Institutionalization of Central Asian Cooperation," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 1, 2025.

(<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13885>)

new bipolar confrontation that would force all countries to choose sides. To counter that, they have launched a plethora of cooperative initiatives. The rising cooperation among the five Central Asian states is one key example of this. However, the only one at present that transcends the boundaries of the former Soviet Union – and involves a key regional power – is the development of Turkic cooperation and more specifically the OTS.

Entirely aside from cultural and ethnic linkages, this format has a compelling logic: for Türkiye, it provides a welcome opportunity to exert influence in the heart of Eurasia and to expand the country's economic linkages in numerous sectors, including defense industry. For Azerbaijan and Central Asian states, it provides crucial involvement of a regional power that can, to some degree, balance Russian and Chinese presence, while also providing opportunities to develop east-west economic transport and communication routes that are crucial to the region's development.

## The Turkic World – From Abstraction to Reality

The Turkic world obviously exists as an objective category, but for Turkic cooperation to be successful, it must have some rooting in the population of the region. Does it exist in the minds of its inhabitants, as a cultural, social, political category?

The Turkic world spans an enormous geographic area, with Turkic populations ranging from the Balkans in the west to China in the east, and from the Volga in the north to Iran in the south. With this immense geography, the differences between the Turkic peoples are considerable. Turkic languages are themselves divided into several categories: the Oghuz group includes Turkish, Azerbaijani and Turkmen; the Chagatai or Karluk group includes Uzbek and Uyghur; and the Kipchak group includes Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tatar and Bashkir. Among these, the biggest linguistic differences are between the Oghuz and Kipchak groups. Turkic peoples have long lived in the proximity of Persianate peoples, and those that lived under Iranian rule or among Iranian-speakers the longest have also been most influenced by Persian, as is the case with Azerbaijani and Uzbek.

At first sight, the differences among Turkic languages might seem large: without exposure, Turkish and Kazakh speakers may not have an easy way to understand each other. And it is a fact that while Turkic cooperation is based on linguistic and cultural affinity, there is as yet no *lingua franca* to Turkic cooperation. Even in Central Asia, very often representatives of the different Turkic countries have used Russian to communicate with each other.

This, however, is changing. At the political level recent summits of the OTS have seen leaders speaking in their native languages, with simultaneous translation into other Turkic languages made available. At the popular level, greater interaction between Turkic peoples has also helped lower language barriers. The languages are close enough that a few months of exposure and study are sufficient for most individuals to begin to converse in another Turkic language. The reach of Turkish popular culture, particularly television dramas, has ensured that essentially everyone in Azerbaijan and many in Central Asia have rudimentary understanding of Turkish. As the role of Russian fades across Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly in rural areas, Turkic languages are bound, in some form, to increasingly fill the void. A possible parallel is the Nordic countries, where Scandinavian peoples are often able to communicate with each other using their native languages.

A century ago, intellectual trends spread rapidly across the Turkic world. At the time, linguistic proximity implied that ideas printed in publications in Ottoman or Azerbaijani Turkish spread rapidly into Central Asia and vice versa. This also had important implications for the identity of Central Asian reformers of the time. As they increasingly framed their struggle in national terms, they also adopted a more Turkist ideology. Turkist ideas had a clear impact on the development of Kazakh nationalism, which was led by the Alash Orda movement. Its focus was nevertheless on uniting the three Kazakh “hordes” into one nation, while dealing with the specific needs of a largely nomadic people. Further south in Bukhara, Persian had been the language of the learned people, yet reformists that styled themselves the “Young Bukharans,” a nod to the “Young Turks,” led to a shift from Persian to Uzbek as the key language of communication.<sup>2</sup> In the years and decades

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<sup>2</sup> Hiseo Komatsu, “The Evolution of Group Identity among Bukharan Intellectuals in 1911-1928,” *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, no. 47, 1989. ([https://toyo-bunko.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/3276/files/memoirs47\\_04.pdf](https://toyo-bunko.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/3276/files/memoirs47_04.pdf))

to follow, it should be expected that a similar exchange of ideas among the Turkic nations will expand significantly.

Beyond language, there are many factors uniting Turkic nations. A striking example is the approach to religion. With some notable exceptions, Turkic states have historically had an approach to Islam that is moderate and relatively liberal compared to most of the Arab world and Asian subcontinent, in which the common thread has been to adapt Islam to Turkic culture, rather than adopt religious and cultural practices from the Arab Middle East wholesale. Even in the realm of theology, medieval Turkic rulers – whether in the Ottoman Empire or in Central Asia – endorsed the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and the Maturidi school of theology, both of which allow considerable more leeway to human reason and to customary practices than do the Shafi'i or Hanbali schools of jurisprudence or the Ashari school of theology prevalent in the Arab world.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, this allowed for a greater separation between religion and state in practice, even while public allegiances to religion remained prevalent.

The impact of this common history could be seen in the late nineteenth century, when national revival movements emerged across the Turkic world. Whether the Young Turks of the Ottoman Empire, the founders of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the Jadids in Turkistan or the Alash Orda in Kazakhstan, these movements had in common their largely secular nature and the insignificant role of religious figures. In other words, the largely secular nature of Turkic states is not an accident of history to be traced solely to Kemal Atatürk or Communist rule, but rather a feature of the region's societies that differentiates them from much of the Muslim world to its south.

It is, of course, true that this secularism has been challenged by political Islam, especially in Türkiye. President Erdogan himself comes from such an

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<sup>3</sup> Svante E. Cornell, *The New Secularism in the Muslim World: Religion and the State in Central Asia and Azerbaijan*, Boulder, CO: Armin Lear and AFPC Press, 2023.

ideological background. But even Erdogan never directly challenged Türkiye's secular constitution, instead seeking to reinterpret some of its tenets while working to spread political Islam in society. Yet in the past decade, nationalism has overtaken Islamism as the dominant ideology in Türkiye, and despite his own ideological background, Erdogan has largely accepted this shift.

Turkist nationalism is also the dominant ideology in Azerbaijan, the country with the closest linguistic and historical links to Türkiye. In Central Asia, the appeal of Turkic solidarity remains more subdued, as Central Asian states have focused on the development of their specific national identities. Yet in a sense, these are not only compatible with Turkic solidarity, but to some degree a prerequisite for it. Only if the national identities of Turkic states are emphasized, will a rallying around the commonalities between these national identities be possible. What is clear is that the ideology of Pan-Turkism has somewhat lower appeal outside Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

The ideology of Pan-Turkism emerged in the late nineteenth century, led mainly by Crimean Tatar, Turkish and Azerbaijani intellectuals. It formed part of the rise of nationalist sentiment across the Turkic world, following on the rise of nationalism in Europe during the nineteenth century which itself sparked national liberation movements among Ottoman Christian peoples. As the age of empires faded and an era of nation-states began, Turkic nations adopted these ideas earlier than most of the Muslim world, which lacked the intense contacts with Europe (including Russia) that Turkic nations did. Given the propensity toward state-building that Turkic rulers showed throughout history, moreover, the concept of the nation-state was internalized relatively rapidly across the Turkic world. The Soviet experience inadvertently strengthened this process, as a result of the Soviet process of national delimitation in the 1920s that largely determined the present-day boundaries of the Central Asian states, as well as the parallel

process of nativization or *korenizatsiia*, which helped build a native communist elite in each republic.

Much has been made, and rightly so, about the elements of Soviet delimitation that complicated state-building, particularly the haphazard drawing of boundaries in the Ferghana valley. Yet at the same time, the delimitation of nations in broad lines followed tsarist-era ethnographic work. As a result, the borders between Central Asian states are more reflective of real settlement patterns than many other colonial boundaries, for example the artificial borders drawn by Western powers in much of Africa.

While this provided a solid foundation for nation-building upon independence, Türkiye got a head start of eight decades on this project. This process was solidified by Atatürk's assertive nation-building process, which sought to assimilate a highly diverse population into the burgeoning Turkish nation. Importantly, the Turkish nation was defined inclusively on the basis of citizenship, and thus accepted into its midst whoever saw themselves as Turks.

After 1991, Central Asian states and Azerbaijan adopted this civic and inclusive (rather than ethnic and exclusive) definition of the nation. For example in Kazakhstan, First President Nursultan Nazarbayev was adamant in promoting an inclusive civic national identity that was based on common citizenship – a national “Kazakhstani” identity rather than an ethnic “Kazakh” identity being the foundation of the state. Other Central Asian states have largely followed this model.

As a result, the national conceptions across the Turkic world are compatible with each other, and benefit from being inclusive and open to all their citizenry. This is a key aspect, as it means that the development of stronger national identity and Turkic cooperation are not predestined to generate tensions with ethnic minority populations.

## Development of Turkic Cooperation

The level of interest in Turkic cooperation has diverged over time and among the Turkic states. Some, like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, have consistently been enthusiastic participants. Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, on the other hand, have seen fluctuations in their enthusiasm. It is mainly in the last 7-8 years that a consensus has developed on the importance of Turkic cooperation.

Turkic cooperation got off to a rapid start following the collapse of the USSR. It was initially driven by Turkish enthusiasm for unification with Turkic brethren to the east, which was reciprocated by states in Central Asia. Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel declared in February 1992 that a large Turkic world was being created from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China.<sup>4</sup> The notion of the twenty-first century being a “century of the Turkic peoples” was also entertained by President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, leaders of Turkic states initially echoed pan-Turkic sentiments. Yet Turkish representatives tended to take on the role of an older brother: despite Turkish assurances that cooperation would be on an “equal basis,” the attitude of many Turkish policymakers hinted otherwise.<sup>6</sup>

By the mid-1990s, Turkish ambitions had confronted reality, not least Russia’s continued influence in the region, as well as the fact that Central

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<sup>4</sup> *Cumhuriyet*, February 24, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Mustafa Aydın, “Turkey and Central Asia: Challenges of Change,” *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 15 no. 2, 1996, p. 160.

<sup>6</sup> This author witnessed in late 1993 how Ambassador Umut Arik, head of Turkey’s Agency for International Development, told students of Ankara’s Middle East Technical University that “the languages of the Turkic peoples of the east are not sufficient to be state languages; they must be replaced with Istanbul Turkish.”

Asians were hardly interested in replacing one big brother with another. In addition, Türkiye in the 1990s suffered from serious domestic problems – the conflict with Kurdish separatists in the southeast and runaway inflation being the gravest. A large financial crisis in 2000-2001 led to a political upheaval that paved the way for Erdogan's AKP winning a majority in the parliament in the 2002 general elections. Erdogan's government initially showed only limited interest in the Turkic world, focusing first on relations with Europe and subsequently toward establishing itself as a leading power in the Islamic Middle East. While it continued to take part in Turkic cooperation, for a long time this was not a priority in Turkish foreign policy.

At the same time, the second-largest Turkic country by population, Uzbekistan, was also relatively skeptical toward Turkic cooperation. Uzbekistan's first president Islam Karimov was at first an enthusiastic supporter, speaking in 1991 in Ankara of his support for the "idea of unity of the Turkic people. This unity must be realized... we could call it the Turkic Common Market."<sup>7</sup> Yet political differences between Ankara and Tashkent led Uzbekistan to withdraw from much of Turkic cooperation for two decades, and maintain a bilateral approach to relations with regional states. Turkmenistan, similarly, remained largely aloof as a result of its "permanent neutrality."

As a result, the main powers that advocated for a multilateral approach to Turkic cooperation in the 2000s were Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. A decisive development took place in 2006, when leaders of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye gathered in Antalya for a summit of Turkic-speaking nations. Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev surprised the summit by proposing the establishment of a Turkic parliamentary assembly. Nazarbayev also proposed the formation of a Turkic commonwealth, something that received the enthusiastic endorsement of Azerbaijan. This

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<sup>7</sup> Seyit Ali Budulgan, "Özbekistan'ın jeopolitik önemi" [Geopolitical Importance of Uzbekistan] *Asya Araştırmaları Dergisi*, vol. 4 no. 2, 2020, pp. 167-184.

led to the 2009 summit in Nakhichevan in which an agreement was reached to create the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, also known for short as the “Turkic Council.” This organization was formally announced at the Istanbul summit in 2010.

This development allowed for the institutional development of Turkic cooperation to take additional steps. The Turkic Council’s main decision-making body was the Council of Heads of State. In addition, the organization developed a Council of Foreign Ministers and a Senior Officials Committee. A Council of Elders served as a permanent consultative body, a nod to the traditional role of elders in Turkic societies. A secretariat, based in Istanbul, was also created at this time.<sup>8</sup> Several side organizations were also connected to the Turkic Council: the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), the Parliamentary Assembly, as well as the International Turkic Academy and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation.

Concretely, the Turkic Council became active both in cultural and economic areas. Of particular importance was the issue of transportation and communication, a result of the relatively undeveloped communication links uniting Turkic countries. Obviously, the development of the Trans-Caspian corridor took center-stage in this regard, as did the development of port infrastructure on the Black and Caspian seas.

The council also worked in the field of education and culture, to remove boundaries dividing Turkic countries. For example, the Council worked to adopt a joint terminology among member countries, and to promote a common Turkic alphabet based on a modified Latin alphabet, to accommodate the differences in the alphabets used by the various Turkic countries. This process, in turn, directly influenced Kazakhstan’s 2023

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<sup>8</sup> Gülperi Güngör, “Turkic Cooperation in the Center of Eurasia: The Turkic Council,” AVIM Analysis no. 6, 2021. (<https://avim.org.tr/en/Pdf/Analiz/593>)

decision to transition from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. Kazakhstan had introduced the plan of shifting to Latin in 2017, but several iterations of the alphabet to be used were presented, leading to considerable public debate. Kazakhstan gradually discarded a proposed alphabet that included apostrophes, adopting an alphabet derived from the common Turkic alphabet developed in the Turkic Council.<sup>9</sup> In parallel, Uzbekistan is also in the process of reforming the Latin-based alphabet it adopted in the early 1990s, which also relies on apostrophes, to streamline it with the common Turkic alphabet.<sup>10</sup> Turkmenistan adopted the Latin alphabet in the early 1990s. Only Kyrgyzstan has thus far stuck to Cyrillic, partly a result of continued Russian pressure to maintain the Cyrillic alphabet.<sup>11</sup>

The Turkic Council expanded its reach into education and sports as well. A Turkic University Union was founded in 2012, which foresaw the harmonization of education systems, including exchange programs, credit transfer programs and diploma equivalence recognition, among other. Following evaluations of European and other exchange programs such as Erasmus, the Turkic states launched an exchange program called “Orkhun” (named for the ancient Turkic script) in 2017, which has grown rapidly in scope. As of late 2025, 109 universities were part of TURKUNIB, with over 60 more applying to join.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Nagima Abuova, “Turkic States Revive Latin-Based Alphabet to Preserve Linguistic Heritage,” *Astana Times*, September 23, 2024. (<https://astanatimes.com/2024/09/turkic-states-revive-latin-based-alphabet-to-preserve-linguistic-heritage/>)

<sup>10</sup> “Uzbekistan unveils its latest bash at Latin alphabet,” *Eurasianet*, May 22, 2019. (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-unveils-its-latest-bash-at-latin-alphabet>)

<sup>11</sup> “Turkic States Agree On Common Latin Alphabet, But Kyrgyzstan Happy With Its Cyrillic Script,” *RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service*, October 3, 2024. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/common-turkic-alphabet-kyrgyz-kazakh-uzbek-turkmen-latin-cyrillic/33137392.html>)

<sup>12</sup> “Opening of the 8th General Assembly of the Turkic Universities Union convened in Tashkent,” Organization of Turkic States, October 15, 2025. (<https://www.turkicstates.org/en/news/opening-of-the-8th-general-assembly-of-the-turkic-universities-union-convened-in-tashkent>)

In the field of sports, the Turkic Council pioneered the World Nomad Games, first held in Kyrgyzstan in 2014. These games are held every two years and have mushroomed from involving 400 athletes from 19 countries to 2,500 athletes from 89 countries in the most recent games, the 2024 World Nomad Games held in Astana, Kazakhstan.<sup>13</sup> This provided an opportunity not only to develop cooperation among Turkic states but to strengthen the global reach of the Turkic world and to project the convening power of Turkic states.

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<sup>13</sup> Chris Rickleton, "The Making of the World Nomad Games." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 12, 2024. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-kyrgyzstan-nomad-games-sport/33116151.html>)

# The Organization of Turkic States: From Talking Shop to Geopolitical Player

In the 2021 summit of Turkic states, the Heads of State resolved to rename the Turkic Council the “Organization of Turkic States.” Since then, Turkic cooperation has intensified and expanded into new sectors.

This development was made possible by several factors. As noted above, Turkic cooperation in the past suffered from the diverging levels of interest among Turkic states. In particular, Türkiye’s preoccupation with other matters in the 2000s and Uzbekistan skepticism made it difficult for Turkic cooperation to expand. These two factors nevertheless changed considerably in the 2010s.

In the mid-2010s, Türkiye went through a series of domestic changes that lessened the influence of Islamism in society and boosted the strength of nationalism as a dominant ideology.<sup>14</sup> Developments surrounding the country, not least the civil war in Syria and the confrontation with Kurdish separatists, converged with domestic shifts such as a deep conflict within Türkiye’s Islamist movement pitting Erdogan’s government against followers of the late self-exiled preacher Fethullah Gülen. The external developments raised nationalist sentiments among Turks, while internal shifts led to a rapid weakening of political Islam in Turkish society. Taken together, this led to a rapid intensification of nationalist agendas in Turkish politics and foreign policy. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) became a

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<sup>14</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Türkiye’s Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus: Domestic Determinants,” in Cornell, ed., *Türkiye’s Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, June 2024, pp. 7-14. ([https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/240622TRCA\\_merged.pdf](https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/240622TRCA_merged.pdf))

key pillar of President Erdogan's governing coalition, while the influence of nationalist-minded bureaucrats on foreign and security policy increased dramatically following the purge of Gülen followers in the state bureaucracy. This predisposed Türkiye to take a much stronger role in Turkic cooperation.

Meanwhile, Uzbekistan's new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev led a drastic shift in the country's foreign policy. Key among his priorities were an embrace of Uzbekistan's Central Asian neighbors, as well as an outreach to Türkiye and to Azerbaijan, with which bilateral relations blossomed in record time. Uzbekistan joined the Turkic Council in 2019, and Turkmenistan indicated its intention to join as an observer in 2021.

This laid the ground for the creation of the OTS in 2021. Since this time, there has been a rapid intensification of Turkic cooperation in a variety of spheres. Activities in cultural and educational areas have intensified, but the organization now claims to have active cooperation in over 35 fields, including space research.

## Initiatives in Digitalization and Sustainability\*

The OTS has in recent years seen the rapid development of initiatives in the fields of finance, digitalization and green energy. One important initiative is the creation of a Turkic Investment Fund, an idea presented by Kazakhstan's President Tokayev in 2021,<sup>15</sup> which was subsequently taken up among other by Turkish President Erdogan the following year and approved at the 2023 summit. President Tokayev also recently suggested establishing a Turkic States Digital Innovation Center and proposed dedicating the upcoming informal OTS summit in Kazakhstan to the theme of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Development.<sup>16</sup>

The OTS has also recently pushed, with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan leading the charge, for greater collaboration and integration in response to challenges in the fields of green energy, digital transformation, and smart innovation.<sup>17</sup> After the recent Gabala Summit of 2025, the leaders emphasized the importance of "cooperation in the field of artificial intelligence and promote the integration of AI, green and digital

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\* The author would like to express his gratitude to Lindsey Cliff at the American Foreign Policy Council for research assistance particularly relevant to this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Dana Omirgazy, "Turkic Investment Fund Holds its Inaugural Board of Governors Meeting in Istanbul," *Astana Times*, May 22, 2024. (<https://astanatimes.com/2024/05/turkic-investment-fund-holds-its-inaugural-board-of-governors-meeting-in-istanbul/>)

<sup>16</sup> Ayana Birbayeva, "President Tokayev Proposes Expanding Integration at OTS Summit," *Astana Times*, October 7, 2025. (<https://astanatimes.com/2025/10/president-tokayev-proposes-expanding-integration-at-ots-summit/>)

<sup>17</sup> Organization of Turkic States, "Turkic Green Vision: Unity for a Sustainable Future," November 6, 2024.

([https://turkicstates.org/u/2\\_Decision%20on%20the%20Turkic%20Green%20Vision-2-6.pdf](https://turkicstates.org/u/2_Decision%20on%20the%20Turkic%20Green%20Vision-2-6.pdf))

technologies, and smart manufacturing systems” with a view to “enhancing productivity, sustainability, and regional competitiveness through coordinated innovation and capacity-building efforts.”<sup>18</sup>

The organization has taken concrete steps in green finance and sustainability. At the 2024 Bishkek summit, a “Turkic Green Finance Council” was established, with Kazakhstan’s Astana International Finance Centre taking the lead. The Council’s task is to boosting member states’ efforts to develop green finance and attracting sustainable investments.<sup>19</sup> In September 2025, the Council held its inaugural meeting, attended by representatives from financial regulators, ministries of economy and finance, and stock exchanges. This suggests the OTS is moving from broad declarations toward institutional mechanisms for sustainable finance. The Turkic Green Vision proposes the creation of several groups to work towards these goals. The Turkic Renewable Energy Alliance would promote “renewable energy development;” the Green Middle Corridor would create a “sustainable transport route;” the Turkic Biodiversity and Ecosystem would promote collaboration in environmental protection; the Climate Change and Educational Awareness Program would promote the study of climate issues and community disaster resilience.

Artificial intelligence and digitalization have also become main focuses of OTS integration. At the 2024 Bishkek Summit, General Secretary Kubanychbek Omuraliev highlighted initiatives in “e-commerce, technoparks, digital infrastructure development and cybersecurity” and suggested the creation of a Turkic AI network and further investment in AI

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<sup>18</sup> Organization of Turkic States, “Gabala Declaration of the Twelfth Summit of the Organization of Turkic States,” October 7, 2025. (<https://turkicstates.org/u/gabala-declaration-.pdf>)

<sup>19</sup> Astana International Financial Center, “Memorandum signed in Bishkek on the establishment of the Turkic Green Finance Council with the Secretariat based at AIFC,” November 6, 2024. (<https://aifc.kz/news/memorandum-signed-in-bishkek-on-the-establishment-of-the-turkic-green-finance-council-with-the-secretariat-based-at-aifc/>)

innovation and education.<sup>20</sup> Crucially, the OTS is working toward the development of the Trans-Caspian corridor with the aid of digitalization and AI.<sup>21</sup> The organization aims to streamline trade through digitized customs procedures, enabling more efficient transportation of goods.

In these areas, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have taken the lead. Kazakhstan's President Tokayev made digitalization and AI the centerpiece of Kazakhstan's national strategy in a September 2025 public address. The aim is to set up Kazakhstan as a "fully digital country" within three years. To realize this goal, Kazakhstan is establishing a dedicated ministry for digitalization and AI, developing legal codes for the governance of AI, and developing digital currencies, such as the digital version of the national currency, the tenge, which has the benefit of making payments "transparent, traceable, and efficient," also fulfilling an anti-corruption agenda by ensuring funds earmarked for a certain purpose are not diverted.<sup>22</sup> In parallel, the government is investing in integrating digitalization and AI into the country's education system.<sup>23</sup>

Uzbekistan has also made digitalization and AI part of the reform agenda in the country. Uzbekistan has been investing within the framework of its

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<sup>20</sup> Organization of Turkic States, "Turkic States Artificial Intelligence Forum launched in Bishkek," October 9, 2024. (<https://www.turkicstates.org/en/news/turkic-states-artificial-intelligence-forum-launched-in-bishkek-1>)

<sup>21</sup> "Turkic States Advance Regional Integration and Digital Connectivity at Bishkek Meeting," *Astana Times*, September 19, 2025. (<https://astanatimes.com/2025/09/turkic-states-advance-regional-integration-and-digital-connectivity-at-bishkek-meeting/>)

<sup>22</sup> "How Digital Tenge Could Start Changing Life in Kazakhstan Next Year," *Astana Times*, October 8, 2025.

(<https://astanatimes.com/2025/10/how-digital-tenge-could-start-changing-life-in-kazakhstan-next-year/>)

<sup>23</sup> "Kazakhstan's quiet revolution: Crypto, AI, and a tech transformation," *Euronews*, October 7, 2025. (<https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/10/07/kazakhstans-quiet-revolution-crypto-ai-and-a-tech-transformation>)

“Digital Uzbekistan 2030” program, which is transferring government services online, and aims to train up to a million specialists by 2027.<sup>24</sup>

Kazakhstan not only hosted the OTS’ inaugural Green Finance Council but also suggested its creation. Kazakhstan is also attempting to lead in areas of AI and digital innovation, suggesting an intra-OTS Digital Monitoring Center. OTS summits will likely have continued focus on AI, digital innovation, and sustainable development for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>24</sup> Shavkat Alimbekov, “Integration through Technology: Uzbekistan’s Digital Agenda within the OTS Framework,” *Hungarian Conservative*, October 22, 2025. (<https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/integration-digital-technology-uzbekistan-ots/>)

## A Security Actor

A most significant development has been the OTS venture into security cooperation. In this, the OTS has worked both indirectly and directly. The intensification of cooperation was long focused on non-security areas, but nevertheless the OTS provided a platform where individual member states could develop dialogue on security issues in both bilateral and trilateral formats. Thus, in parallel with the intensification of OTS activities, there is a parallel rise in security, intelligence and defense agreements among members of the organization.

Key was the formation of a defense treaty between Türkiye and Azerbaijan in the shape of the June 2021 Shusha Declaration, the same year as the OTS was created. The Shusha Declaration followed on the decisive role of Türkiye in supporting Azerbaijan in the 2020 second Karabakh war. This in turn followed upon Türkiye's active involvement in conflicts in Syria and Libya. In all three cases, Türkiye actively sided against Russian-supported proxy forces, had a decisive impact on the outcome of the conflict, and managed to do so while maintaining a functional, if transactional, relationship with Moscow. There is no question that this was duly noted in Central Asian capitals and made a security and defense relationship with Türkiye increasingly attractive for the Turkic states of Central Asia.

Türkiye stands out among external powers in the region as it has shown a willingness and ability to engage in security, intelligence, and defense areas – an area where Europe and the U.S. have generally been absent, with the notable exception of NATO's Partnership for Peace program. As security analyst Richard Outzen has put it, all Turkic states of Central Asia are at one

or another point in a process of developing with Türkiye “military education exchanges, training and exercises, a broader range of equipment and defense technologies, and perhaps most importantly, development of common doctrine and operational approaches.”<sup>25</sup> Azerbaijan has reached the level of near-complete integration; the other states lag behind, but are seeing an intensified exchange with Türkiye. Kazakhstan expanded military ties from 2020 onward, when it signed an agreement for joint defense and industrial projects. This was followed by a protocol for intelligence cooperation in 2022, as well as an enhanced strategic partnership. Kazakhstan not only purchased Turkish UAVs, but now produce them in Kazakhstan under license.<sup>26</sup>

Uzbekistan also started its process of deepening military ties with Türkiye. In 2022 the two countries signed a defense cooperation agreement that features intelligence cooperation, as well as training and logistics.<sup>27</sup> In November that year, a further agreement included military education and defense industrial cooperation.<sup>28</sup> As for Kyrgyzstan, it has purchased several types of Turkish UAVs, including TB-2 Bayraktar drones.<sup>29</sup> Turkmenistan

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Outzen, “Security and Military Cooperation Among the Turkic States in the 2020s,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, December 8, 2023.

([https://cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/231208\\_FT\\_Outzen.pdf](https://cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/231208_FT_Outzen.pdf))

<sup>26</sup> “Kazakhstan seals deal to produce Turkish drones under license,” *Eurasianet*, May 13, 2022.

(<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license>)

<sup>27</sup> “Türkiye-Özbekistan Askeri İşbirliği Çerçeve Anlaşması, TBMM’de,” *Merh News*, July 9, 2022.

(<https://tr.mehrnews.com/news/1903377/>) Text of agreement available at

<https://nordicmonitor.com/2022/07/turkey-uzbekistan-set-for-intelligence-sharing-joint-military-drills-defense-cooperation/>

<sup>28</sup> “Uzbekistan, Turkey sign agreement on military cooperation,” *Tashkent Times*, November 25, 2022. (<http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/10064-uzbekistan-tur-key-sign-agreement-on-military-cooperation.>)

<sup>29</sup> Svenja Petersen, “Perspectives: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan building up for another potential round of fighting,” *Eurasianet*, August 28, 2023. (<https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-building-up-for-another-potential-round-of-fighting>)

has also purchased Bayraktar drones.<sup>30</sup> In late December 2023, Turkmenistan's top leadership welcomed leaders of Türkiye's largest defense industrial companies, and publicly spoke of the potential role of these firms – and Türkiye – in allowing Turkmenistan to strengthen its defense capabilities.<sup>31</sup>

All security and defense cooperation does not involve Türkiye. On a bilateral level, security and defense cooperation has grown rapidly involving Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, as well as most recently Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. The three countries all have raised their bilateral relations to the level of allied relations, including the formation of "Supreme Interstate Councils" for the coordination on a government level between the states. In the defense sphere, cooperation has developed in military exchanges, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, as well as the development of defense industry.<sup>32</sup>

Until recently, it was obvious that the development of Turkic Cooperation under the OTS served as a catalyst for the myriad of bilateral agreements in the security and military field. Yet formally, while OTS member states have spoken of holding security consultations and developing a common stance on security issues since the Turkic Council's Almaty Summit in 2011, defense and security cooperation was not under the remit of the OTS. This has nevertheless changed, as the OTS has more recently taken steps to expand into the security field.

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<sup>30</sup> Tayfun Özberk, "In first, Turkmenistan shows off Bayraktar TB2 drone," *Defense News*, October 1, 2021.

(<https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2021/10/01/in-first-turkmenistan-shows-off-bayraktar-tb2-drone/>)

<sup>31</sup> "Turkmenistan to advance defence ties with Türkiye," *TRT World*, December 27, 2023. (<https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkmenistan-to-advance-defence-ties-with-turkiye-16411663>)

<sup>32</sup> Teymur Atayev, "From Budapest to Konya: Turkic States Strengthen Military Ties," *Caspian Post*, May 26, 2025. (<https://caspiantpost.com/opinion/from-budapest-to-konya-turkic-states-strengthen-military-ties>)

The OTS's organizational move into the field of security and defense dates to the summit in Samarkand in 2022. The member states "went beyond consultations by adding a new dimension to their security cooperation ... they called for closer cooperation and military collaboration in the defense industry."<sup>33</sup> Similarly at the following summit in Astana in November 2023, the final communiqué called for "closer cooperation in the field of defense industry and military collaboration."<sup>34</sup> At the summit, a key advocate for the intensification of military cooperation was Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who during his speech stressed that in the developing security situation, "the main guarantor of security becomes defense potential ... I believe that cooperation between the member states in areas such as security, defense, and the defense industry should be further increased."<sup>35</sup> Following his re-election in 2024, Aliyev subsequently declared that the OTS as the main vector in Azerbaijani foreign policy.<sup>36</sup>

The 11th summit in Kyrgyzstan in 2024 focused on the adoption of a "Charter for the Turkic World" which did not specifically go into matters relating to security and defense. Still, a seed was planted: the charter includes language that "the Turkic people will strive together to prevent any actions and threats aimed at undermining their unity, solidarity and

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<sup>33</sup> Bugra Sari, "Security Aspect of the Integration in Turkic World under the Organization of Turkic States,"

*Insight Turkey*, vol. 25 no. 4, Fall 2023. (<https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/security-aspect-of-the-integration-in-turkic-world-under-the-organization-of-turkic-states>)

<sup>34</sup> "Declaration of the Tenth Summit of the Organization of Turkic States,"

(<https://www.turkicstates.org/u/d/basic-documents/tenth-summit-declaration-2023-21-en.pdf>)

<sup>35</sup> Elena Teslova, "Azerbaijani president urges Turkic states to strengthen defense cooperation," *Anadolu Agency*, November 11, 2023.

(<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbaijani-president-urges-turkic-states-to-strengthen-defense-cooperation/3042257>)

<sup>36</sup> Vasif Huseynov, "The Organization of Turkic States Seeks Defense Cooperation," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 6, 2024. (<https://jamestown.org/program/the-organization-of-turkic-states-seeks-defense-cooperation/>)

dignity.” While far from a mutual defense clause, it is reminiscent of how the EU adopted a solidarity clause before moving to the mutual defense clause adopted with the EU’s Lisbon treaty. At this summit as well, Aliyev repeated his earlier call: “Given the growing global threats, our cooperation in defense, security, and the defense industry is of tremendous importance.”<sup>37</sup>

In July 2025, the first meeting of heads of defense industries of the Turkic states was held in Istanbul, under the banner of the OTS. The meeting mainly served to take stock of existing bilateral cooperation programs and to plan for multilateral cooperation in the future.<sup>38</sup> Azerbaijan has offered to host a second meeting in 2026.<sup>39</sup>

The theme for the 2025 OTS summit in Gabala, Azerbaijan, was “Regional Peace and Security,” indicating the organization’s more open embrace of security issues. The leading section of the summit’s declaration focused on security issues, and particularly raised the objective of signing a “Treaty on Strategic Partnership, Eternal Friendship and Brotherhood of Turkic States.”<sup>40</sup> While not included in the formal communiqué of the summit, Azerbaijan offered to host the first military exercises under the banner of the OTS.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Ilham Aliyev participated in the 11th Summit of the Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States in Bishkek,” *President.az*, November 6, 2024. (<https://president.az/en/articles/view/67211>)

<sup>38</sup> Organization of Turkic States, “The 1st Meeting of the Heads of Defense Industry Institutions of the OTS was held in Istanbul,” July 23, 2025. (<https://www.turkicstates.org/en/news/the-1st-meeting-of-the-heads-of-defense-industry-institutions-of-the-ots-was-held-in-istanbul>)

<sup>39</sup> “Baku to host second meeting of heads of OTS defense industry departments,” *Report.az*, October 8, 2025. (<https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/baku-to-host-second-meeting-of-heads-of-ots-defense-industry-departments>)

<sup>40</sup> “Uzbekistan calls for signing treaty on partnership and eternal friendship of Turkic states,” *Trend*, November 26, 2024. (<https://www.trend.az/casia/uzbekistan/3966001.html>)

<sup>41</sup> “Azerbaijan proposes joint military drills among members of Organization of Turkic States in 2026,” *Andaolu Agency*, October 7, 2025. (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/azerbaijan-proposes-joint-military-drills-among-members-of-organization-of-turkic-states-in-2026/3710308>)

It is clear that in the past few years, the OTS has been rapidly expanding its remit into the security area, involving defense industrial cooperation as well as greater coordination in the military area as well. It remains to be seen whether the OTS will transform into a formal alliance, as seems to be the intent of at least several of the member states. What is clear is that the OTS is rapidly working to fill the security vacuum that has plagued the heart of Eurasia in the past three decades.

# The Role of Türkiye

The rise of the OTS has frequently been viewed as a reflection of Turkish foreign policy ambitions, and even more specifically an initiative of President Erdogan himself.<sup>42</sup> However, this is less a reflection of reality than a function of how outside observers frequently view regional politics: Central Asian states as objects rather than subjects of international politics, as the proverbial “pawns on the chessboard,” lacking agency in a world where decisions are supposedly made by larger, outside powers.<sup>43</sup> This perception may be widespread, but it ignores the fact that regional states not only have strengthened their agency in international affairs: several have gradually emerged as middle powers, able to set the agenda not only for their own country but for the region around them.<sup>44</sup> Kazakhstan was the first country in the region to emerge as a middle power, on the basis of its economic development and diplomatic clout.<sup>45</sup> The country’s GDP of almost \$300 billion is considerably larger than Uzbekistan’s \$115 billion and

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example Karam Saeed, “Why Erdogan Turned the Turkic Council into the Organization of Turkic States,” *Arab Wall*, November 29, 2021. (<https://arabwall.com/en/why-erdogan-turned-the-turkic-council-into-the-organization-of-turkic-states/>)

<sup>43</sup> S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Stepping up to the “Agency Challenge”: Central Asian Diplomacy in a Time of Troubles*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, July 2023. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13487>)

<sup>44</sup> Svante E. Cornell, *Centripetal vs Centrifugal Forces and Emergence of Middle Powers in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, July 2023. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13484>)

<sup>45</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Kazakhstan and the Rise of Middle Powers in Central Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 31, 2024. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13808>)

Azerbaijan's \$75 billion, while lagging behind Türkiye's \$1.3 trillion.<sup>46</sup> In recent years, Azerbaijan has emerged as a middle power on the basis of its military power, and Uzbekistan is doing so to with its significant population and economic transformation.<sup>47</sup>

As stated previously, the evolution of Turkic cooperation makes it clear that Türkiye has played a significant role as the largest and most powerful Turkic country – but likewise that it is far from the only power setting the agenda of Turkic cooperation. Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and more recently Uzbekistan have played important roles in their own right. Kazakhstan was the architect of several of the main initiatives that led to the institutionalization of Turkic cooperation, and is driving the expansion of the OTS activities in cutting-edge economic and technological areas. Similarly, Azerbaijan is taking the lead in the OTS's expansion into the security and military area, while Uzbekistan has taken initiatives in the strengthening of an OTS development strategy and in the agricultural area.<sup>48</sup>

A look at the functioning of the OTS similarly suggests it is far from a Turkish-controlled organization. Quite to the contrary, just like the EU the OTS has adopted a rotational system for the functioning of the organization, with a secretariat consisting of representatives from all member states. In this sense, the OTS diverges dramatically from the more prominent regional organizations like the CSTO, SCO or Eurasian Union, which have a much stronger imprint of their leading powers, be it Russia or China. By contrast,

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<sup>46</sup> World Bank sources.

<sup>47</sup> Azerbaijan's military expenditure in 2020 stood at \$2.2 billion, exceeding Kazakhstan's \$1.7 billion and Uzbekistan's \$1.4 billion. Its 66,000 active duty personnel was similarly the largest among the Turkic countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, while obviously lagging behind Türkiye's 355,000 and \$17 billion military expenditure. See <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/security-aspect-of-the-integration-in-turkic-world-under-the-organization-of-turkic-states>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.eurasianstar.com/uzbekistan-president-puts-forward-key-initiatives-at-ots-summit/>

the OTS appears to be driven by equal amounts of enthusiasm of its member states.

The relationship of equals among the leaders of the organization can also be seen in the divergences that exist within the group. For example, Türkiye would like the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus to take on a more prominent role in the organization, and would have preferred a much stronger condemnation of Israel over the Gaza war. Yet because Central Asian states and Azerbaijan do not share this view, the OTS has taken more measured approaches to these matters.

## What About the Non-Turks?

One key criticism of the OTS, and Turkic cooperation in general, lies in its ethnic-based nature. The emphasis on Turkic language and heritage, by definition, risks excluding key states in the region and trigger suspicions among those in the region that are not Turkic. This is all the more significant as the OTS is not territorially unified. Communication between Türkiye and the rest of the Turkic world by default relies on transit through Georgian or Armenian territory. Similarly, in Central Asia, Turkic cooperation includes the vast majority of the region's territory, but glaringly excludes Tajikistan from its midst.

As for external powers, there are clear indications that the emphasis on Turkic cooperation is perceived as threatening in Iran, which has long sought to counter the rise of "pan-Turkism" on its northern border – not least as a result of its large ethnic Turkic populations. Russia, likewise, would likely be concerned of the implications of the spread of Turkic nationalism on its southern border for its Turkic-majority republics, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan.

All of this raises the question whether the emphasis on Turkic unity, and the references to past glory and present brotherhood among the Turkic states, may prove counter-productive – whether among non-Turkic populations within the OTS member states, in the non-Turkic states of the region, or non-Turkic neighbors. This is certainly a reality that leaders of the OTS must contend with. Fortunately, it appears that they have increasingly done so.

Non-Turkic states have already been involved in various ways in the OTS. To begin with, Hungary's observer status is noteworthy, given that

Hungarian – whatever the historical arguments made of a common, Hunnic origin – is not normally seen as a Turkic language. Furthermore, Georgia has expressed interest in cooperation with the OTS, and recently Georgian representatives took part in a meeting of the heads of customs administrations of OTS member states in Baku.<sup>49</sup> Georgia is, of course, included in a myriad of cooperation mechanisms involving Turkic states that are not formally part of the OTS, but its inclusion shows the necessity for practical purposes regarding trade to recognize the role of non-Turkic countries in the midst of the OTS. Tajikistan, similarly, is part of the rapidly developing cooperation among Central Asian states. It is also included in cooperative ventures involving mainly Turkic states, such as the recent military exercises BIRLIK-2025 in Uzbekistan, in which Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also participated.<sup>50</sup>

With the rapid rise of the OTS, the organization's approach to non-Turkic regional states is a pressing matter. At the Gabala summit, a solution was proposed in the instrument of "OTS plus," a new partnership format designed for the organization's relationship with non-Turkic countries. It is to be assumed that Georgia and Tajikistan, and possibly in time Armenia, are the main targets of this program, along with countries that have intensified partnership with member states, such as Pakistan.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Nargiz Mammadova, "Bigger Ambitions: Strategic Vision Behind OTS+ Expansion," *Astana Times*, October 10, 2025. (<https://astanatimes.com/2025/10/bigger-ambitions-strategic-vision-behind-ots-expansion/>)

<sup>50</sup> Vagit Ismailov, "Five Countries Complete Large-Scale 'Birlik-2025' Military Exercises in Uzbekistan," *Times of Central Asia*, October 22, 2025. (<https://timesca.com/five-countries-complete-large-scale-birlik-2025-military-exercises-in-uzbekistan/>)

<sup>51</sup> Mammadova, "Bigger Ambitions."

## **Looking Ahead: the Role of Turkic Cooperation**

The most obvious implication of the analysis above is that Turkic cooperation is expanding and intensifying so rapidly that it can no longer be ignored. In many ways, the expansion of Turkic cooperation is directly in line with American and European policy objectives in Central Asia and the Caucasus. OTS activities are largely complementary to Western policies, while also filling voids that Western powers themselves have proven unwilling or unable to fill.

The OTS is emerging as a leading force advancing the east-west transportation corridor, which has been a key Western policy objective since the early 1990s – a time when the EU and the Clinton Administration embraced efforts to connect Central Asia to the world through the Caspian Sea and South Caucasus. Then as now, Türkiye is the key western anchor to the corridor, helping connect Central Asia to international markets and boosting the ability of these landlocked states to strengthen their sovereignty and independence.

In parallel to this, the OTS has been a singularly effective platform for the extension of security, military and intelligence cooperation between a NATO member state and Central Asian states – at first informally, and now increasingly in a formal manner. Simply put, the OTS' emergence as a platform for defense and defense industrial cooperation is responding rapidly to the security needs of regional states in the light of developing global insecurity. Western powers have shown neither the willingness of ability to step into this void, whereas the OTS enables both Türkiye's expanded role in this sector as well as greater cooperation among the other

member states as well. While this is unlikely to be welcomed by either Russia or China, thus far the importance Russia assigns to its relationship with Türkiye has implied that Moscow is willing to tolerate the expansion of Türkiye's presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This is a major development that strengthens the security of Central Asian states.

Against this background, there would seem to be much that Western powers should welcome in the rapid expansion of the OTS. Yet thus far, America and Europe have largely failed to account for this rapid development in their own approaches to the broader region.

One reason for this is the bureaucratic limitations mentioned at the beginning of this study. Because different offices tend to be responsible for Türkiye and Central Asia in Western government bureaucracies, there is no natural coordination between units covering the different parts of the OTS. Put differently, officials focusing on Türkiye have normally viewed that country in the context of European or Middle Eastern affairs, but rarely in the context of Central Asian affairs. But as noted previously, this trans-regional aspect to Turkic cooperation is one key reason for the importance of the OTS and its rapid rise in prominence.

A second reason is the OTS emphasis on common ethnicity as the basis of cooperation, and the concomitant exclusion of non-Turkic states. This aspect has led to concern whether the OTS can serve as a positive force in the region, as the risk of alienating non-Turkic states is seen as an important liability. Yet the OTS's launch of the "OTS plus" format, if implemented, would go a long way toward accommodating the concerns of states such as Tajikistan and Georgia, and possibly down the road even Armenia.

A third reason is likely the ambivalence felt in Europe and America to the rise of Turkish influence, and the perception of the OTS as an "Erdogan project." While few would see Turkish influence in Central Asia as a negative factor *per se*, it is a reality that perceptions of Türkiye – and especially President Erdogan – in America and Europe are generally very

unfavorable. To the extent that Turkic cooperation is perceived as an extension of Erdogan's influence, this will undermine support for the OTS. Disputes between President Erdogan's government and its European and American counterparts have grown infected over issues ranging from Middle Eastern conflicts to Türkiye's own domestic trajectory. The frequent anti-Western statements issued by Erdogan and some of his closest associates have not helped, either. Yet while there have been clear disagreements between Western powers and Türkiye in the Middle East, this is not the case in Central Asia. Quite to the contrary, the alignment of Turkish and Western policy objectives in Central Asia and the Caucasus could provide an important opportunity for rebuilding trust between Ankara and its traditional Western allies. Meanwhile, the perceptions of the OTS as an "Erdogan project" are simply misguided, and it is likely that in time, such perceptions will dissipate as the value of the organization to its other members become more apparent.

A fourth reason, particularly for the EU, has been the issue of Northern Cyprus as an irritant between Brussels and the OTS. Türkiye's insistence on the participation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as an Observer state in the OTS has created substantial friction, and put Central Asian states in a precarious position. The TRNC is recognized diplomatically only by Türkiye, not by any other OTS member, something that makes its participation in OTS meetings as an Observer an oddity. From the perspective of Central Asian states and Azerbaijan, their priority is to adhere to the principle of territorial integrity, which is crucial to their standing in the world. This, as well as the importance of the EU for the region, implies that recognition of the TRNC is a non-starter. Yet they must also manage the Turkish position on the Cyprus dispute, while also recognizing that the EU contributed to the current deadlock when it accepted the EU membership of Cyprus in spite of the refusal of the Greek Cypriot government to accept a UN-mediated solution in 2004. Following harshly worded EU warning

against the OTS inclusion of the TRNC,<sup>52</sup> Central Asian states have sought to square the circle by expanding their diplomatic and economic relations with the Greek Cypriot-controlled government of Cyprus. Furthermore, the Samarkand declaration of April 2025, Central Asian states and the EU reaffirmed their support for the territorial integrity of Cyprus.<sup>53</sup>

These moves on the part of Central Asian states should assuage EU concerns, as they indicate that northern Cypriot representation in the OTS will remain a largely symbolic matter – and that Central Asian states could in the future serve as a mediator in the Cyprus dispute. Against this background, there is a way forward for the EU to find a *modus vivendi* with the OTS.

For both the EU and the United States, the role of the OTS in maintaining a balanced international environment in Greater Central Asia has become significant enough that the factors limiting Western engagement with the OTS should not obscure the clear alignment of interests that is at play.

Western powers are intensifying their engagement with Central Asia and Azerbaijan, as evidenced by the EU-Central Asia summit in Samarkand and President Trump's summit with Central Asian states. As this process continues, Western powers would do well to recognize the role of Turkic cooperation in strengthening the geopolitical environment in the broader region connecting the Mediterranean to Central Asia. This will also mean finding ways to engage the OTS as an organization.

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<sup>52</sup> European External Action Service, "OTS: Statement by HR/VP Josep Borrell on attempts to legitimise the Turkish Cypriot secessionist entity," November 7, 2024. ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ots-statement-hrvp-josep-borrell-attempts-legitimise-turkish-cypriot-secessionist-entity\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ots-statement-hrvp-josep-borrell-attempts-legitimise-turkish-cypriot-secessionist-entity_en))

<sup>53</sup> Iqboljon Qoraboyev, "Understanding Central Asia's Position on Northern Cyprus: Between Principles, Pressures, and Pragmatism," Hague Research Institute, May 2025. (<https://hagueresearch.org/understanding-central-asias-position-on-northern-cyprus-between-principles-pressures-and-pragmatism/>)

## Author's Bio

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