

The Turkic Model of Regional Integration in Central Asia: Assessing the Role of the Organisation of Turkic States

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ABSTRACT

Regional integration efforts bear a mixed record in post-Soviet Central Asia. Several regional cooperation mechanisms have emerged in the last three decades, some from within the region but mostly from outside it. In fact, most regional cooperation frameworks are driven by major external powers, specifically Russia and China, including the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). This trend of externally driven regional cooperation largely results from the Central Asian states' limited state capacities, historical patterns of political and economic dependencies, and the region's landlocked nature, which curtails regional agency. A relatively recent model of an externally driven regional integration format is the Organisation of Turkic States. Established in 2009 as the Council of Turkic Speaking States, the OTS is driven by Türkiye's ambitious Central Asia policy. It has emerged as a Turkic model of regional integration, leveraging the Turkic countries' ethno-linguistic and socio-cultural heritage, and accelerating cooperation in cultural, economic and political spheres. This article interrogates the rise of Turkic cooperation in Central Asia and questions the extent of the Organisation of Turkic States' role as a distinct actor in regional Eurasian geopolitics. It raises important questions about the future of the OTS and Central Asian regionalism in the light of disruptive regional developments, such as the Russia-Ukraine war and China's economic rise, and probes the response of regional major powers, such as Russia and China, to expanding Turkic cooperation.

Keywords: Regional Cooperation, Central Asia, Türkiye, Organisation of Turkic States, Middle Corridor, Geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is a region of vast geographical expanse and immense natural resource endowments, and it sits at the centre of global attention. The region's five republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – have, since their independence, pursued balanced, outward-looking and multi-vector foreign policies to overcome their landlocked position and leverage their geostrategic location in the heart of Eurasia. The region's republics have pursued cooperation among themselves and with global economic centres, using adaptive development models within politically authoritarian set-ups. Most of the regional cooperation frameworks established after the demise of the Soviet Union are led by Russia and China, with Central Asian republics as co-founders. Russia built the region's security architecture through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the politically anchored Commonwealth of Independent States. China, on the other hand, has been more active since the turn of the century through its main institutional vehicle – the security-focused Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Rakhimov, 2010).

This article examines the role of another regional organisation, the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), within the broader Central Asian region, which has risen not only in normative positioning but has also registered a real presence in the Turkic core of the Eurasian heartland. However, there is a need to probe whether the Organisation of Turkic States should be taken as an alternative or a complementary regional organisation, apart from other existing externally-led regional cooperation mechanisms in Central Asia, due to two factors: it is neither backed by China nor Russia but by a middle power like Türkiye, and its main glue is the shared ethno-linguistic and cultural heritage among the Turkic-speaking populations of Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Central Asia. The following sections trace the evolution of Turkic solidarity

initiatives since the early 1990s, examine Türkiye's crucial role in fostering Turkic unity, and assess whether the Organisation of Turkic States has played an effective role in cooperation among the Turkic-speaking states in Eurasia. The second part problematises the OTS's role in regional security dynamics, economic cooperation, and trade relations among member states, as well as the challenges it faces in an evolving regional geopolitical landscape, particularly from Iran, China and Russia.

ROOTS OF TURKIC REGIONALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: FROM PRE-SOVIET TO POST-SOVIET ERA

Central Asia's overwhelming Turkic heritage serves as the glue that binds it to the Turkic world. Four of the five Central Asian republics have Turkic heritage and speak related languages (whereas Tajiks speak a Persian dialect). This region, which also includes China's Xinjiang province, has a valid claim to be treated as a distinct cultural and historical entity. Calls for pan-Turkism or pan-Islamic unity have long resonated as a potential solution to overcoming the region's colonial legacy, whereas memories of the medieval Central Asian Turkic heritage and struggles against Tsarist and Soviet rule serve as motivations to cultural nationalists in search of stable identities (Kubicek, 1997, pg. 5). The roots of Turkic solidarity, in fact, stretch back to the early days of the Russian Revolution when the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and abolition of the Caliphate system sent shock waves throughout the Muslim world. This affected the morale of pan-Turkic nationalists in Central Asia – then also known as Turkestan. Most of the region's people regarded Ottoman Türkiye as their cultural and spiritual mentor, and its downfall was a setback to the region's temporal and spiritual prestige. Fleeting attempts to counter Bolshevik forces during the Russian Civil War suffered a blow with the death of Enver Pasha near Bukhara in 1922 – the former Turkish war minister (1914- 1918), who switched allegiance to the Soviets and fought on the side of anti-Soviet Basmachi rebels. This final act of resistance sounded the death knell for pan-Turkism during the Soviet Union's existence (Wheeler, 1964 pg. 192).

After the region's states became independent in 1991, efforts to shore up Turkic unity and cooperation began. The five new Turkic-speaking states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan - gained sovereignty, and could, theoretically, discuss how their foreign relations should develop. Early in the 1990s, the Turkish foreign policy elite recognised Central Asia and the Caucasus as a favourable geopolitical space for expanding Turkish influence. Turgut Ozal, Turkish President from 1989 to 1993, led the neo-Ottomanist intellectual group that sought a Eurasianist path for Türkiye. Influenced by pan-Turkic and pan-Islamist worldviews, the neo-Ottomanists advocated that Türkiye pursue an activist and diversified foreign policy in the region, based on its historical heritage, and called for cultivating the former Turkic-inhabited republics of the Soviet Union to help Türkiye regain great-power status (Ataman, 2002, pg. 133). In fact, among the regions susceptible to potential Turkish influence, Central Asia represented the most promising source of opportunity from Turkey's perspective. Recognising the potential benefits, Turkey was one of the first countries to acknowledge the independence of all the Central Asian republics, doing so on December 16, 1991, days before the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Pamir, 1993, pp. 49- 50).

The first formal move for cooperation among the newly independent Turkic States of Central Asia and Türkiye came in the form of the first summit of the heads of state of Turkic-speaking States held in Ankara, Türkiye, which brought together heads of state of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Türkiye. This was followed by the establishment of the International Organisation of Turkic Culture, or TURKSOY, in 1993, through an agreement signed by the culture ministers of Turkic-speaking states (see the TURKSOY website). At the Tashkent Summit in 1996, the heads of state of Turkic-speaking states recognised the need for regular multilateral consultations and decided to establish the Secretariat for formalising the summit meeting format. Further summits, although at irregular intervals, were held in Astana in 1998, in Baku in 2000, in Istanbul in 2001, and in Antalya in 2006, until 2009, when the Nakhchivan Agreement formalised the summit mechanism under

the banner of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (See Presidential Summits, Organisation of Turkic States official website).

The Turkic republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, except Azerbaijan (since both countries belong to the Oghuz sub-group of Turks), were less keen to accept Türkiye's expanding influence or follow its development model due to Türkiye's limited national capabilities. Türkiye's domestic economic woes, political turmoil, and external geopolitical situation kept it from fully committing to the region. Cooperation through the heads-of-state summit mechanism was also limited and focused on cultural aspects, as differences became apparent over time because a lack of funding limited more complex political and economic projects (Gurer, 2000, p. 13). In the years after independence from the Soviet Union, all the Central Asian republics faced periods of political instability and economic downturn due to disruptions in the Soviet-era unified labour mobility and energy-water infrastructure. This resulted in continued dependence on Moscow to meet broader needs for political legitimacy, border security with Afghanistan, and existing economic complementarities. This left little to no space for Türkiye to market its secular or Western-backed developmental model in Central Asia, which the newly independent republics viewed with apprehension (Fida, 2018, pp. 113-114).

The Turkic model of regional integration has, however, seen a revival over the last decade and a half due to a shifting regional balance of power, and has become more relevant amid new efforts to foster regional cooperation. Because of its historical role as the spiritual mentor and political fountainhead of the Turkic world, Türkiye is central to renewed efforts to build Turkic solidarity and unity on a shared ethno-linguistic heritage (Cornell, 2024, pp. 4-5). The Central Asian republics suffer from several institutional weaknesses and powerful external influences, but are no longer as unstable and vulnerable as they were in the 1990s. Long-term systemic factors such as Russia's collision course with the West, the US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, and China's economic rise in Central Asia, backed by its multi-billion-dollar Belt & Road initiative, have made the region susceptible to influence by powerful external actors.

In this context, middle powers like Türkiye and Iran - especially Türkiye - are upgrading their strategies toward the region by building new coalitions, erecting new institutions and establishing strategic partnership agreements. Analysing Türkiye's renewed efforts to solidify pan-Turkic solidarity initiatives in the region thus assumes significance in light of the "Eurasian" shift in its foreign policy and its pivotal – but disruptive – role in the second Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022). Buoyed by Türkiye's proactive diplomacy, the Organisation of Turkic States is playing an important role in advancing the Turkic model of regional cooperation alongside existing Russian, Chinese and Western frameworks. The OTS' future prospects appear bright, and it is expected to become a significant actor in Eurasia because of its member states' vast geography, extensive natural resources, and growing partnerships in connectivity and trade. However, significant challenges persist for the Turkic model of regional integration due to complex regional geopolitical challenges (Demir, 2022).

THE ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES THROUGH THE YEARS: ORIGIN AND GROWTH

Seen in the light of the cooperation process among the Turkic-speaking states that emerged after the Soviet Union's disintegration, the Organisation of Turkic States is a regional intergovernmental organisation that aims to "deepen cooperation and solidarity among Turkic states, within a multilateral framework." The OTS represents a longstanding commitment among member states to closely align their interests along ethno-linguistic and cultural lines and to promote economic integration and political cooperation. Originally proposed by longtime Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 2006, the OTS was established with the signing of the "Nakhchivan Agreement on Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States" at the Nakhchivan Summit in 2009. It became operational the following year at the annual summit in Istanbul, Türkiye, and was called the Cooperation Council of Turkic-

Speaking States, or simply the Turkic Council, until 2021. Founding members included Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and upon expansion, Uzbekistan joined as a full member at the 7th annual summit held on September 19, 2019, in Baku, Azerbaijan. Turkmenistan, Hungary and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (internationally unrecognised) have observer status in the organisation (See the Organisation of Turkic States official website).

The main institutional framework of OTS comprises five bodies: the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Senior Officials Committee, the Council of Aksakals (Elders), and a Secretariat. The Council of Heads of State is the supreme decision-making body that oversees the OTS' agenda, goals, and operations. The Council of Elders serves as the permanent consultative body, reflecting a revered tradition of seeking counsel and wisdom from elders. Headed by a Secretary General, the permanent Secretariat is located in Istanbul, Türkiye and provides administrative support to OTS activities and annual summits. Apart from its own institutional structures, OTS also functions as an umbrella body for a number of Turkic institutions (some of them predate OTS), including the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries (TURKPA), the International Turkic Academy, the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, the Turkic Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Turkic Investment Fund (Organization Chart, Organization of Turkic States website).

Annual presidential summits among the heads of state of member countries serve as the primary mechanism for cooperation and decision-making within the OTS. Regular annual summits have been held since 2011 on specific themes, where the heads of state of the member states evaluate past progress and set goals for the upcoming year. A total of twelve such annual summits have been held, including two extraordinary summits (in April 2020 and March 2023) and two informal summits (in July 2024 and in May 2025). A list of annual summits held since formalised cooperation in 2011 is given in the table below:

List of OTS (erstwhile Turkic Council) Summits held till now:

	Year	Summit Theme	Host Country
1	2011	Cooperation in Economic Area and Trade Area	Almaty, Kazakhstan
2	2012	Cooperation in Education, Science and Culture	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
3	2013	Cooperation in Transportation	Qabala, Azerbaijan
4	2014	Cooperation in Tourism	Bodrum, Türkiye
5	2015	Cooperation in Media and Information	Astana, Kazakhstan
6	2018	Youth and National Sports	Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan
7	2019	Supporting the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)	Baku, Azerbaijan
8	2021	Green Technologies and Smart Cities in the Digital Age	Istanbul, Türkiye
9	2022	New Era for Turkic Civilisation: Towards Common Development and Prosperity	Samarkand, Uzbekistan
10	2023	TURKTIME: Traditions, Unification, Reforms, Knowledge, Trust, Investments, Mediation, Energy	Astana, Kazakhstan
11	2024	Empowering the Turkic World: Economic Integration, Sustainable Development, Digital Future, and Security for All	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
12.	2025	Regional Peace and Security	Gabala, Azerbaijan

Source: self-compiled from publicly available data

The 8th Annual Summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, held on November 12, 2021, in Istanbul, Türkiye, was a landmark event in which the annual summit

format was renamed as the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). The name change was significant, coming on the heels of 30 years of independence for the Turkic-speaking states, and it culminated in institutionalised cooperation among member states by defining their grouping as a regional intergovernmental organisation for the first time (Information on OTS, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye). The Istanbul summit was also marked by several important decisions which have outlined OTS' vision for the next decade, such as granting observing status to Turkmenistan, adoption of the Turkic World Vision 2040, and the creation of the Turkic Investment Fund, among others (Eighth Summit of Turkic Council, TURKPRA, 2021).

Concurrently, the range of issues taken up and the scope of cooperation within the organisation's multilateral setup has expanded to encompass over 30 different areas, which include cooperation in political, economic, education, transport and customs, tourism, health and disaster management, and information and communication technology, among others (See Areas of Cooperation section, Organisation of Turkic States website). While the initial focus was on cultural integration, trade, and economic cooperation, the focus areas now also include military-defence cooperation, energy and connectivity issues, and streamlining the foreign policy of Turkic states to articulate shared positions on regional and global issues important to the Turkic world. The 12th OTS Summit last year in Azerbaijan consolidated the organisational developments of the last decade by officially establishing an "OTS+" framework to include non-Turkic countries and global organisations (see the Gabala Declaration of the OTS Summit in Azerbaijan, 2025). Another critical initiative was the Kazakh President's proposal to establish an OTS Cybersecurity Council to counter digital threats and misinformation in the Turkic space (Yan & Sabirova, 2025). Cooperation initiatives within the OTS thus continue to multiply amid shifting regional balance of power and changing geopolitical alliances in wider Eurasia.

TURKIC WORLD VISION (2040): OTS' VISION OF A UNITED AND INTEGRATED TURKIC WORLD

Adopted at the 8th OTS Annual Summit in Istanbul, Türkiye, the Turkic World Vision 2040 is a strategic document that outlines the organisation's medium- and long-term goals. As the OTS's first strategic document since its founding in 2009, the 17-page Turkic World Vision 2040 summarises the OTS's past achievements, commitments, and directives, and outlines the organisation's long-term vision for continued Turkic cooperation. The document is structured into four sections, or pillars, based on the existing cooperation mechanisms within the OTS: (1) political and security cooperation; (2) economic and sectoral cooperation, covering areas like economics, transport, customs, ICT, energy, tourism, health, environment, and agriculture; (3) people-to-people engagement, which encompasses culture, education, science, youth and sports, diaspora, media, and civil society collaboration; and (4) external cooperation, involving partnerships with international organizations, as well as humanitarian and development efforts (Baki, 2022, pg. 34-35).

Turkic World Vision 2040 marks a turning point in integrating the Turkic World, confirming the expansion and deepening of cooperation and solidarity among Turkic peoples. The vision document qualitatively redefines its role by stating that the OTS would endeavour to ensure "effective cooperation and coordination with Turkic organisations like the TURKSOY, the Turkic Academy, TURKPRA, and the Turkish Culture and Heritage Foundation." The document emphasises areas of strategic significance to member countries, including reviving the Middle Corridor to foster East-West connectivity, greater harmonisation of transportation and customs regulations, introducing the Zangezur Corridor to link Türkiye with Central Asia, and greater cooperation in Agriculture and food security. For the first time, the vision document characterises the Turkic States as the "Turkic World" and the "Turkic People", setting the tone for broader Turkic unity and placing it on a higher pedestal (Beylur, 2021).

By emphasising cooperation and close contact with other international bodies like the United Nations, the European Union, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the Organisation

for Security and Cooperation in Europe under “external cooperation,” the Turkic World Vision 2040 intends to portray the OTS as a reliable, predictable and positive normative actor in world affairs. The document also assigns the OTS a special task: to strengthen both the member states and the Turkic World as a family by pursuing intra-regional and inter-regional integration. Yet, frequent but vague reference to universal values as suitable to the Turkic World falls short of commitment to the practice of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, gender equality, environmental rights, etc (Yaldiz, 2023, pg. 74-76). Nonetheless, the Turkic World Vision 2040 is a strategic document that presents a bold vision of Turkic regional integration and demonstrates that member states remain committed to fulfilling their stated objectives within the OTS.

TRADE AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS AMONG TURKIC STATES SINCE OTS FORMATION

A key pillar of cooperation within the Organisation of Turkic States is promoting trade relations and economic integration among members. With a population of 160 million and the world's seventh-largest area, the OTS is the 14th-largest global economy, with a combined GDP of member states of \$1.5 trillion in 2022. Trade relations have expanded significantly over the last decade, with the total trade turnover of the Turkic states reaching approximately \$1.2 trillion in 2023 and trade turnover among member states increasing to \$42.3 billion that year (Shayakhmetova, 2024). Analysis of bilateral trade figures among founding OTS member states (Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) between 2000 and 2019 shows that bilateral trade increased after the organisation's establishment in 2009, with Türkiye the largest beneficiary, followed by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan. However, further measures are needed to reduce trade barriers, harmonise customs regulations, and establish preferential trade agreements to facilitate intra-regional trade and make the organisation an attractive market for non-Turkic countries (Cetinkaya & Demirel, 2023).

In line with its stated commitments, the OTS has established several mechanisms to ensure mutually beneficial economic cooperation and accelerate member states' economic diversification through SME development. In collaboration with the ministries responsible for the economy and private business groups, the OTS Secretariat has organised 12 ministerial and 14 working group meetings to foster economic cooperation in line with key strategic documents such as the “Turkic World Vision 2024” and the “OTS Strategy for 2022-2026”. Important institutional mechanisms formed under the aegis of OTS include the Turkic Chamber of Commerce and Industry – based in Istanbul and assigned the task of developing sustainable business programs, Turkic Investment and Development Fund – with an initial outlay of \$500 million to increase mutual investment opportunities among member states, and the Trade Facilitation Committee – tasked with implementing the strategies outlined in the OTS trade facilitation strategy adopted at the 9th OTS Summit held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan on November 11, 2022 (Economic Cooperation, Organisation of Turkic States).

Other recent key projects aimed at strengthening economic ties among members include a Digital Economy Partnership Agreement signed during the 11th OTS Summit in November 2024 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the setting up of TURANSEZ - a special economic in Turkestan, Kazakhstan, and the establishment of a Research Centre for Trade Cooperation of Turkic States to develop concrete proposals and a joint action plan on the elimination of trade barriers and increase the volume of trade in the region. A memorandum of understanding for the creation of the Council of Central(National) Banks was adopted during the last OTS Summit in November in Bishkek to strengthen cooperation among the central banks of member states and promote joint consultations and research in the field of monetary policy, digital payment systems, financial stability and other areas of shared interest (ibid.).

OTS' CONNECTIVITY PUSH AND CHANGING REGIONAL TRADE DYNAMICS

A central pillar of economic integration in the Turkic world is enhancing connectivity through multimodal transit corridors. As part of plans to deepen economic integration across the Caspian, OTS member states have focused on strengthening cooperation in strategic areas,

such as connectivity, energy, and the sharing of good sustainability practices. The OTS has adopted several initiatives to facilitate cross-border trade in the Turkic region, including the Agreement on the Establishment of a Simplified Customs Corridor and the International Combined Freight Transport Agreement, to streamline customs procedures and enhance digital information exchange. Adopted at the 9th Organisation of Turkic States Summit in Samarkand on November 11, 2022, the Agreement on the Establishment of a Simplified Customs Corridor establishes a Simplified Customs Corridor for advance information exchange among customs authorities, reduces transit times, and ensures faster processing of goods at borders. This aims to enhance the competitiveness of the region's trade corridors, build resilient energy and food supply chains, and strengthen trade links among member states and with European markets (Press Release of the 9th OTS Annual Summit, Organisation of Turkic States, 2022).

These initiatives come amid shifting regional alliances and changing trade dynamics in the wider Eurasian region characterised by an uptick in connectivity projects following the Russia-Ukraine war and non-UN-designated trade sanctions. In recent years, OTS members have prioritised building and operating multimodal transit corridors to improve connectivity, increase trade flows, and boost customs revenue, adopting a multi-vector approach to de-risk logistics and supply chains by expanding their partnership network. This forms part of attempts to hedge against the Russia-oriented Northern Corridor and associated oil and gas pipelines, which handle most of the region's supply to European markets. A prominent alternative route which has emerged is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TTIR), also known as the Middle Corridor. Originally proposed by Türkiye and backed by international funding partners from the EU and the US, the Middle Corridor is seen by many as a visible mechanism of Turkic trade integration that connects natural resource grids of Turkic states such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan across the Caspian Sea (Dupuy, 2024).

Data show that trade flows and economic integration, especially in energy markets, have increased since the Russia-Ukraine war disrupted secure trade routes along the Northern Corridor that connects Europe and Asia through Russia. The Middle Corridor has seen a significant surge in cargo transit volume, reaching 1.9 million tonnes in the first nine months of 2023, representing an 89% increase over the same period in 2022 (Mami, 2024). According to a World Bank report titled "Middle Trade and Transport Corridor—Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030", the Middle Corridor, which connects Chinese and European markets through Central Asia and the Caucasus, has the potential to enhance regional trade, improve connectivity for countries along its path, and protect countries and supply chains from geopolitical disruptions (World Bank Press Release on Middle Corridor, 2023).

Building on this enthusiasm, OTS members have expressed greater confidence in the Middle Corridor during the informal Shusha Summit in July last year, including optimising and digitising the corridor, aligning it with climate action goals, and developing a green energy corridor along the existing Middle Corridor routes (Shifman & Ali, 2024). When fully utilised, the Middle Corridor could increase trade not only in oil and natural gas but also in critical minerals, green energy, and electricity from Central Asia to Europe. However, the Middle Corridor remains more costly than the Northern Corridor, and further infrastructure development across the Caspian Sea may require legal cooperation from Iran and Russia, both Caspian littoral states and generally averse to Turkic-led cooperation. Moreover, since China is the easternmost node for the Middle Corridor, framing it through OTS language might require its cooperation.

SECURITY AND DEFENCE COOPERATION UNDER OTS UMBRELLA

In recent years, the OTS has expanded its agenda from cultural integration and economic cooperation to closer defence and security ties with the Turkic states of Central Asia. Security and defence partnerships among the Turkic states have accelerated amid the Russia-Ukraine war and the evolving security landscape in the South Caucasus following the Armenia-

Azerbaijan war. Türkiye and Azerbaijan have emerged as the strongest supporters of defence and security cooperation within the OTS. Following the 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, also known as the second Karabakh war, in 2020, Azerbaijan wrested control of the contested Karabakh territory with Türkiye's military and diplomatic support. Türkiye and Azerbaijan then signed the Shusha Declaration in Karabakh in June 2021, solidifying their security and defence partnership through mutual defence clauses and fundamentally altering the geopolitical balance in the South Caucasus (See full text of Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations, 2021). This was seen as a clear template for greater alignment among Turkic states on defence and security issues, with Türkiye and the OTS as new partners that could fulfil at least some security needs in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have inked defence partnerships with Türkiye that include joint production of weapons systems and heightened diplomatic support for each other's foreign policy directions.

Türkiye's and the OTS's support was also instrumental in Kyrgyzstan's victory over Tajikistan during the border clashes in September 2022. Although the OTS did not specifically back Kyrgyzstan with material help and called for a peaceful settlement on both sides, its Secretary General "expressed support to Kyrgyzstan" by "condemning the aggression with the use of heavy weapons against civilian targets" in an indirect reference to Tajikistan (OTS Secretary General's statement on the situation at the Tajik-Kyrgyz state border, 2022). OTS members Türkiye and Azerbaijan were more direct in their support, with Türkiye supplying weapons to Kyrgyzstan in the build-up to border hostilities and helping it repel Tajik forces. In July 2023, the head of Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security (SCNS), Kamchybek Tashiev, reported that Kyrgyzstan had spent nearly \$1.3 billion on weapons purchases and logistical support for the country's armed forces. This marked a major increase in defence spending compared to the 2015-2020 period, and Kyrgyzstan became the first CSTO member state to purchase advanced Turkish defence systems, including armed and reconnaissance UAVs such as the battle-tested Bayraktar TB2, Anka, and Aksungur drones (Imanaliyeva, 2023).

Apart from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – two of the strongest Central Asian republics - now also serve as regional destinations for Türkiye's weapons systems, including sophisticated long-range strike drones. In May 2022, Kazakhstan and Türkiye agreed to jointly produce Turkish drones as part of the newly established "enhanced strategic partnership." This was followed by a "Treaty on Allied Relations" between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, signed in December 2022 (ratified by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2024 and 2023, respectively), which elevated relations to a strategic partnership. Under the treaty, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will coordinate joint responses to regional security matters. According to Article 2 of the treaty, both countries will hold bilateral and multilateral consultations in the event of aggression by a third country (Zhailin & Khakberdiev, 2024, p. 32).

The growth of defence collaboration within the OTS thus marks a significant shift in regional security architecture, as Turkic states focus more on shared security, strategic alignment, and a unified foreign policy agenda (Huseynov, 2024). Although Russia and China remain the largest sources of defence imports in the region, Türkiye's presence in the region's security landscape often goes unnoticed. Overall, Türkiye uses the OTS as the anchor of security-related cooperation within the Turkic space in Eurasia. In 2025, Ankara hosted the OTS' first Meeting of the Heads of Defence Industry Institutions in Istanbul, paving the way for deeper defence ties. The Turkish defence industry's penetration of Central Asian republics' security ecosystems will thus have long-term consequences for the region's nascent military-industrial complex and the security influence of other regional actors.

OTS BACKED CULTURAL INTEGRATION OF THE TURKIC WORLD

Despite widening cooperation along political and economic vectors, cultural integration of the Turkic world remains the OTS's foremost priority and a primary foreign policy instrument for Türkiye. Outlining the achievements of the OTS and its emerging role as a stabilising actor in the region, former Secretary General Baghdad Amreyev (2022) believes the goal of a united Turkic world remains unrealised. According to Amreyev, Turkic integration efforts should not

be considered solely in economic terms but should encompass promotion of joint cultural initiatives, values, and principles, with the ultimate aim of establishing Turkic geography as the global centre of attraction. Beyond progress in economic integration, streamlining foreign policy agendas, and expanding infrastructure and transport corridors, three decades of cooperation among Turkic states have produced substantial developments in education, culture, and the diaspora.

Through initiatives such as the Turkic University Union (TURKUNIB), OTS encourages academic cooperation and mobility among students, teachers, and researchers across member states. The goals include training for a common identity, developing consciousness among future generations, encouraging training for teaching staff, and providing scholarships to promote studies in Turkic culture (See Goals, Turkic Universities Union website). The TURKUNIB has also implemented the Orhun Exchange program - modelled along similar lines as the Bologna Process, which creates a common framework for higher education in Europe – to integrate higher education systems of Turkic states for the renaissance of Turkic civilisation (Balci et al. al, 2020). Umbrella organisations, like TURKSOY and the International Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, promote Turkic culture, language learning, and the preservation of common heritage. The OTS has also invested substantially to improve cooperation with and coordination among Turkic diaspora communities in education, culture and sport. These initiatives are increasing societal contacts among Turkic states and instilling a collective conscience in the Turkic world.

What stands out, however, is the promotion of an ethno-linguistic model of cultural integration by casting Central Asia in a pan-Turkic identity through linguistic remodelling. At the Turkic World Common Alphabet Commission's third meeting held in Baku in September 2024, the Turkic Academy – an international organisation established under the OTS – announced the adoption of a Latin-based Turkic Alphabet consisting of 34 letters. The decision came after the Commission finalised its two-year development of a proposed Turkic Alphabet, in which each letter represents the phonetic variety of Turkic languages. Originally, scientists first proposed adopting a common Latin-based Turkic alphabet in the early 1990s to promote mutual understanding, cultural integration, and the preservation of the linguistic heritage of Turkic countries, but it did not gain universal support until recently. (Kwan, 2024). However, with consistent organisational support and ideological push from Türkiye and the OTS' umbrella organisations over the last decade, as well as internal nation-building processes, Kazakhstan and, to some extent, Kyrgyzstan have agreed to transition to a Latin-based script in the future.

CAN THE ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES ACT AS THE NEW ANCHOR OF TURKIC COOPERATION IN EURASIA?

The growing cooperation among Turkic states within the multilateral framework of the Organisation of Turkic States should be understood as a strategic regional response to intensifying competition among major powers in Eurasia's changing geopolitical landscape. Amid the intensifying great-power rivalry and scramble among Russia, China, and the West, regional multilateral actors such as the Organisation of Turkic States have emerged as increasingly influential cooperation frameworks, expanding vertical and horizontal cooperation among Turkic states in response to shifting geopolitical equations in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Acar, 2024). Disruptive events such as the Russia-Ukraine war and China's dominant economic position in Central Asia further incentivise OTS members to deepen cooperation, at least in select sectors, such as multimodal corridors, energy, and trade. This aligns well with Central Asian republics' efforts toward a balanced, multi-vector foreign policy to hedge against great powers, derisk dependence on single partners, distribute influence, and build multiple strategic partnerships.

TÜRKIYE-AZERBAIJAN-KAZAKHSTAN TRILATERAL AS THE FOUNDATION OF OTS' FUNCTIONING

In recent years, much of the OTS' coherence and geopolitical positioning in foreign policy and security posturing has come from solid backing among its founding members. Among the founding members, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan are pivotal in driving the OTS and have led efforts to deepen cooperation in strategic areas, including connectivity, energy, and military and defence cooperation (Wani, 2024). The OTS's institutional structures and ideological moorings support this claim. Türkiye is the largest economy of the OTS, its main political backer, and hosts the OTS permanent Secretariat in Istanbul, while the idea was itself mooted by ex-Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev – a vocal proponent of Turkic unity and Eurasian integration - on March 1, 2006 during his address to the nation (See full text of Nazarbayev's address to the nation, Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2006).

The organization's founding agreement was signed in Nakhchivan - an Azerbaijani exclave located inside Armenia that borders Türkiye – which signals Turkic solidarity and unity on issues of core interest to the Turkic world. Understandably, Azerbaijan has emerged as one of the most vocal supporters of the organisation, with President Ilham Aliyev terming the OTS as “the main international organisation for us Azerbaijan. We have no other family. Our family is the Turkic World” during his swearing-in ceremony in February last year (Azerbaijan State News Agency, 2024). Although President Aliyev's comments were directed at Azerbaijani society, they hold significant relevance for the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). President Aliyev emphasised the organisation's significant military, economic, and transportation potential, noting the growing role of the young population within the OTS.

Kazakhstan also offered strong support for the OTS and expressed confidence in its international profile. Speaking at the 10th OTS Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said that “the Turkic World interacts with global powers on an equal footing” and that “other nations are reckoning with the key stances of our organisation” (see Tokayev's Address at the 10th OTS Summit, Office of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan). President Tokayev has proposed appointing permanent representatives to the organisation and has supported increasing staffing in the Secretary General's office to improve its functioning amid a rising number of initiatives. Following the Karabakh Declaration at the informal Shusha Summit in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tokayev reiterated the need for “modernisation of Turkic Civilisation” through enhancing cooperation within the multilateral framework of the OTS (Atayev, 2024).

WHAT ROLE FOR ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES: RESPONSE OF EXTERNAL POWERS TO TURKIC SOLIDARITY AND OTS-BACKED INITIATIVES

Several questions remain about the Organisation of Turkic States' role and utility in the broader Eurasian region, which remains key to its growth prospects but depends on several exogenous factors outside the OTS' control. Some of the core concerns related to its function in Central Asian integration are whether the OTS is truly a Central Asia-wide regional organisation, what place it offers to non-Turkic states in its area of influence, and what could be the regional response – primarily from Russia and China – to its functioning and expansion, especially in the political and security-defence domains. Türkiye's oversized influence also casts doubt on the stated quality among member states and threatens to pull the OTS into its assertive foreign-policy posturing rooted in an ideology of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism. As a result, member states must balance internal interests and keep the organisation free of ideological maximalism, while remaining open to the inclusive values enshrined in the UN framework.

The Organisation of Turkic States' adherence to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and other universally recognised values offers some hope (See text of 46th General Assembly Session, United Nations Digital Library, 2009). However, paradoxically, the OTS remains ethno-linguistic in its membership. It excludes Tajikistan, although Hungary – a European Union member - is an observer state. This selective inclusion may portray the OTS

as exclusionary, given that other regional cooperation formats are non-ethnicity-based and, in theory, open to all Central Asian republics. Although the OTS did not take sides during the 2022 border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Türkiye and Azerbaijan were bolder in supporting Kyrgyzstan, extending diplomatic backing and providing weapons. Therefore, excluding Tajikistan, culturally Iranian, from the OTS could act as an irritant for Central Asian regionalism in the long run, given how closely Central Asian republics' economic, political and cultural histories are enmeshed. This could also later draw in Iran in support of Tajikistan, with which it shares ethno-linguistic ties. Moreover, Russia's and China's response to the OTS member base and activities could be important in determining the organisation's further expansion.

Another factor that could trigger a regional response, particularly from Russia, is the OTS-backed plan to transition away from the Cyrillic alphabet to a common Latin-based script in Central Asia. While the decision may seem innocuous and fully within each republic's sovereign authority, it could attract disapproval and pushback from Russia. Kazakhstan uses the Cyrillic script to write Kazakh and also gives Russian official status. Kazakhstan's decision to fully transition from Cyrillic to a Latin-based script can have serious implications for the country's language policy, education and communication, and social cohesion. Large sections of the Russian minority in Northern Kazakhstan may find it difficult to accept the Latin-based script for writing Kazakh, which they rightly fear could eventually erode the popularity of the Russian language and the Cyrillic alphabet in Kazakhstan. This can affect the overall delicate multi-ethnic balance in Kazakhstan and may lead to polarisation among different language groups, with particularly grave implications for Russian-speaking communities (Bekzhanova & Makoele, 2022, p. 12-13).

Regional concerns over the spread of Pan-Turkism in Central Asia can attract the attention of China and Russia, which have significant Turkic populations in their frontier regions. Türkiye's rising influence in Central Asia, or the Turkish Challenge, as one Valdai Club discussion analysis defines it, presents a clear counterweight to Russia, which views the region as its strategic backyard. Türkiye is leveraging "kinship ties" with the region's states and the Organisation of Turkic States to continue its project of creating a Turkic-speaking analogue of the European Union. Its penetration into defence, energy and culture has reaped rich economic and political dividends and could undermine Russian influence in several hitherto unchallenged domains (Machina, 2024). China, meanwhile, remains sensitive to even the slightest signs of Turkic solidarity, due to the ripple effects in its volatile Xinjiang region, where any rise of Turkic sentiments can disturb political stability in China's Westernmost province. Thus, the manner in which Beijing and Moscow perceive OTS' and Türkiye's approach towards Central Asia, considering the region's geostrategic importance and the interdependence of the OTS member states' economies through the Middle Corridor, will likely shape the group's long-term growth prospects (Akçay, 2022).

Türkiye's oversized role and presence in the organisation's staffing and administration also meddle in the OTS' functioning. Its push to adopt a common alphabet or to adopt *Turkestan* as a name for Central Asia has opened a Pandora's box about its historical proclivity for pan-Turkism. Under President Erdogan, Türkiye has increasingly equated the "Vision of Greater Turkey" with the "Greater Turkic World" and blurred the lines between expressions of solidarity and cultural maximalism (see TURKSOY panel on The Vision of Greater Türkiye, 2023). Moreover, Türkiye's democratic backsliding and increasing Islamist tendencies under President Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) have blended pan-Turkism with pan-Islamism. Following recent trends in Turkish foreign policy, whereby Türkiye has colluded with elements of the Muslim Brotherhood and used its religious and cultural endowments to spread Islamist ideology in West Asia, there are justified fears that Turkic solidarity might be just another facade to disseminate Islamist tendencies in otherwise secular Central Asian republics (Keskin & Debata, 2024).

Those who believe otherwise argue that Turkish maximalism and ideological proselytisation in Central Asia are overstated due to a strong legacy of state secularism and growing

nationalist sentiment in Central Asian republics. Moreover, Türkiye's potential to play a larger role in the region is constrained by its limited economic means and difficult security situation in its West Asian neighbourhood. Trade figures between major Eurasian powers and Central Asia present this case well. While Türkiye's total trade with all the Central Asian republics combined was less than \$15 billion in 2025, China and Russia's total trade with Central Asia was over \$100 billion and \$45 billion, respectively. This demonstrates Türkiye's limited economic role in the region, which depends overwhelmingly on others. Moreover, while Türkiye highlights shared ethnic and cultural ties with Central Asian republics, the OTS is only one option among many existing regional cooperation platforms. By contrast, Central Asian states' growing regional agency is leading them to diversify their foreign policy options through portfolio management of regional cooperation mechanisms rather than a zero-sum game. However, closer political-economic relations and defence ties among Turkic states, within the multilateral framework of OTS, could be a stabilising force in the Eurasian heartland and a significant strategic advantage in the era of Great Power Competition, if recognised and engaged with, rather than ignored or sidelined (Outzen, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The regional cooperation and integration process in Central Asia has been marked by the pulls and pushes of powerful endogenous and exogenous forces. The region's own inability, barring a few notable exceptions, to coalesce as a common grouping incentivises regional integration frameworks sponsored by neighbouring powers. Internal factors such as differing national development paths, political systems, and national ideologies also hinder a unified approach to cooperation. Under these circumstances, alignment around common culture and shared ethno-linguistic heritage is one of several pathways to cooperation and regional integration in an otherwise fractured region. The Turkic model of regionalism in Central Asia rests on shared linguistic, cultural, and historical bonds among Turkic-speaking states. Over the last decade and a half, the Organisation of Turkic States has become the main instrument for advancing this Turkic model of regional integration. Redesignated and redefined in 2021, the Organisation of Turkic States has become a full-fledged intergovernmental organisation in the heart of Eurasia and reflects the common political will of Turkic-speaking states.

As a relatively recent but successful model of regional cooperation, the OTS offers an alternative to regional integration models already in place, led by China, Russia, or the domestic C5+1 framework. Although Türkiye has positioned itself as a key force in the region's geopolitical dynamics, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have followed closely, sharing decision-making and agenda-setting within the organisation. This has led to rapid expansion of cooperation across political and security-defence fields, previously limited to economic cooperation and cultural integration. This has embedded the OTS, and by default Türkiye, in Central Asia's complex security architecture with long-term consequences for regional stability. However, the future of both the OTS and broader Central Asian Regionalism remains uncertain, particularly due to disruptive geopolitical events. As major regional partners, Russia and China have, until now, been largely indifferent toward OTS activities and expansion bids. Both, however, remain sensitive to any ideological push from it, and their responses to OTS initiatives will shape the organisation's growth prospects. For the Central Asian states, OTS is just one of many multilateral platforms to help overcome their geographic isolation. Disruptive geopolitics, great-power sensitivities, and local agency therefore raise doubts about OTS' effectiveness and sustainability as a regional organisation, and its ability to adapt to Eurasia's evolving political and security landscape.

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