

## THE ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES: AN EMERGING ACTOR IN THE CONTEXT OF GEOPOLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS?

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### Abstract

The Organisations of Turkic States (OTS), which aims to strengthen the Turkic world's historical and cultural linkages, appears as a key regional actor candidate in the context of globalisation and regionalisation dynamics of the international system. Formed in 1991 by the Turkic-speaking states that gained their independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this organisation plays a prominent role in cooperation, defence and economic integration (such as free trade, common currency and visa liberalisation), especially in the Eurasian region. In an environment where young states in the region face security and economic risks, the OTS has a major role in providing its members with the opportunity to develop a common policy against these risks. The OTS, which is built on the axis of the common historical, socio-cultural and linguistic ties of its members and can be read as a reflection of the idea of Turkism, claims to lead the establishment of a strong solidarity platform on a regional scale. In this context, the main purpose of the present study is to investigate the role and potential of the OTS in the international system with its historical foundations and current function. Although it is seen that the integration between the OTS countries is getting better day by day in the economic field, this is not the case in the field of political cooperation and security. As a result, the pressures of other global actors in the region and the fact that the OTS countries prioritise their own national interests indicate that the Turkic world integration is still far from being a regional actor.

### Keywords

The Organisations of Turkic States (OTS), Caucasus and Central Asian (CCA), Turkic World, Rising Powers, Regional Actors.



## Resumo

A Organização dos Estados Turcos (OTS), que visa fortalecer os laços históricos e culturais do mundo turco, surge como um importante candidato a ator regional no contexto da globalização e da dinâmica de regionalização do sistema internacional. Formada em 1991 pelos Estados de língua turca que conquistaram a sua independência com a dissolução da União Soviética, esta organização desempenha um papel proeminente na cooperação, defesa e integração económica (como o comércio livre, a moeda comum e a liberalização de vistos), especialmente na região eurasiática. Num ambiente em que os jovens Estados da região enfrentam riscos económicos e de segurança, a OTS tem um papel importante ao proporcionar aos seus membros a oportunidade de desenvolver uma política comum contra esses riscos. A OTS, que se baseia nos laços históricos, socioculturais e linguísticos comuns dos seus membros e pode ser interpretada como um reflexo da ideia do turquismo, afirma liderar o estabelecimento de uma forte plataforma de solidariedade à escala regional. Neste contexto, o principal objetivo do presente estudo é investigar o papel e o potencial da OTS no sistema internacional, com as suas bases históricas e função atual. Embora se observe que a integração entre os países da OTS está a melhorar dia a dia no campo económico, o mesmo não se verifica no campo da cooperação política e da segurança. Como resultado, as pressões de outros atores globais na região e o facto de os países da OTS priorizarem os seus próprios interesses nacionais indicam que a integração do mundo turco ainda está longe de ser um ator regional.

## Palavras-chave

Organizações dos Estados Turcos (OTS), Cáucaso e Ásia Central (CCA), Mundo Turco, Potências Emergentes, Atores Regionais.

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### **Introduction**

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye, believing it had eliminated its primary security threat, soon encountered even more complex and multifaceted security challenges, including ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus; the rise of PKK terrorism; tensions with neighbouring countries; setbacks in the European Union (EU) accession process; economic crises; and political instability. Amid these difficulties, the newly independent Turkic states of the Caucasus and Central Asia (CCA), emerging from the Soviet collapse, represented a strategic and cultural opportunity for Türkiye. Seeking to recalibrate its foreign policy and reduce dependence on the Western alliance—particularly the United States and the EU—Türkiye moved swiftly to establish diplomatic and economic ties with these nascent states. Likewise, the Turkic republics, burdened by the Soviet legacy and lacking prior experience in modern state- and nation-building, were able to assert themselves in the international system with Türkiye's support and guidance. These early interactions laid the historical foundations of the Organisation of Turkic States.

The institutional foundations of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) can be traced back to the Summit of Heads of State of Turkic Speaking Countries, initiated by Turkish President Turgut Özal in 1992. Initially involving Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, these summits laid the groundwork for the institutionalisation of cooperation, culminating in the establishment of the Turkic Council through the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009. This body was rebranded as the Organisation of Turkic States in 2021, marking a shift from informal cultural and linguistic ties to structured political and economic collaboration. This development is widely regarded as the emergence of a potential regional actor in Eurasian geopolitics. However, the question remains whether the OTS can truly evolve into a significant regional power



capable of influencing its geopolitical environment amidst global actors. The underlying assumption of this study is that the OTS has not yet accomplished its objective of evolving into an organisation that facilitates collaboration between Turkish communities and global and regional actors in Eurasian geopolitics, with the aim of promoting political stability and economic cooperation. This study seeks to explore this question through the lens of neo-realism, a theory in international relations that emphasises systemic dynamics, state interests, and the distribution of power (Waltz, 1979), and which argues that identity-based policies may gain traction during periods of systemic transition. Concurrently, the present theory is regarded as conducive to delineating the approaches to be adopted in this study for the concepts of regional actors and integration. The process of political, economic and cultural rapprochement between states in the CCA is expressed by the concept of integration. According to neo-realists, the process of integration is only possible if it is compatible with the balance of power. Waltz (1979) contests the notion of international organisations or integration processes as autonomous centres of power, proposing instead that they are instruments reflecting the interests of the major powers. Indeed, this theory posits that states function as the principal agents in this process. Therefore, regional actors are congruent with the emergence of powerful states at the lower levels of the international system. Although not explicitly mentioned in Waltz's approach, this scenario, in accordance with the power distribution approach, suggests the emergence of medium-sized regional hegemonies alongside the global poles within the system. The integration process is a means to facilitate the harmonisation of interests between major powers.

The following discussion will address the OTS's efforts to achieve such harmonisation between the U.S., Russia, China and the EU in the CCA region. However, the primary concern pertains to the OTS's regional agency. The concept of a regional agency thus offers a microcosmic reflection of the systemic polarisation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The issue of whether regional multipolarity, which has been debated since the early 2000s, is represented by the OTS in the CCA geography will be examined on the basis of the organisation's political and economic integration issues. In order to establish whether the OTS can be considered a regional actor in the context of its political and economic integration within Turkish geography, it is necessary to include in the analysis the national interests of the states that constitute the OTS, the effects of the international system, and the competition between the global powers active in the region.

In this regard, the current study aims to explore the role and potential of the OTS in the international system with its historical foundations and current function, and in connection with this aim, the study was designed by adopting the single case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Within a single case study design, researchers focus on a single phenomenon, individual, group, or event, and perform a multidimensional in-depth investigation for the specified case. In this study, the OTS has been determined as the single case, and the examination and discussion were developed within the framework of it. The study also employs the historical analysis method, which seeks to uncover meaning through the systematic interrogation of 'what', 'why', and 'how' questions concerning historical events and ideas (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Sources include international academic literature, OTS summit proceedings, and regional news and analyses. The analysis first examines the historical evolution and institutional



structure of the OTS, followed by a discussion of the economic and strategic dimensions of Turkic integration, and concludes with an interpretation of the findings.

## **Organisation of the Turkic States: Historical background**

Throughout history, political unity among the Turks—who spread from the Eastern Eurasian steppes to Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Anatolia—has rarely been achieved, with the notable exceptions of the Hun and Gök-Türk Empires (Taşgil, 2018). Attempts during the final phase of the Ottoman Empire, such as the Basmachi Movement, ultimately failed. Following these developments, the Republic of Türkiye emerged as the only independent Turkic state, while most other Turkic communities remained under Soviet, Chinese, or Iranian rule. Due to the Soviet threat, identity-based foreign policy constraints, and internal weaknesses, Türkiye was compelled to limit its engagement with the broader Turkic world. However, the independence of the Turkic republics following the Soviet collapse was seen as a historic opportunity. President Turgut Özal declared that Türkiye could regain its global influence after 400 years, emphasising the strategic importance of Turkic independence (Aydın, 2010). Several factors contributed to Türkiye's proactive engagement with the newly independent Caucasus and Central Asian (CCA) states, including the crisis in Turkish foreign policy, the rising use of identity as a diplomatic tool, the regional power vacuum, and Türkiye's aspiration to serve as a model state (Böyükbaşı, 2023; Ayata, 2010; Sander, 2006). Accordingly, Türkiye was among the first to recognise the independence of these states and swiftly established diplomatic relations. High-level visits by President Özal and Prime Minister Demirel resulted in the signing of 140 bilateral agreements (Yalçınkaya, 2013), and Demirel's slogan "From the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China" came to symbolise the foreign policy vision of the era. During his time as Prime Minister and subsequently as President, Demirel did not merely produce chauvinistic rhetoric; he also pursued a rational strategy. The basis of this strategy was the maintenance of Türkiye's position, whilst also ensuring the continued provision of aid to Azerbaijan. This was achieved by engaging in shuttle diplomacy between Moscow and Washington during the First Karabakh War (Kürkü, 2019). Meanwhile, the newly independent CCA countries—characterised by fragmented ethnic structures, weak economies, limited state traditions, landlocked geographies, and rigid bureaucracies—faced significant internal and external pressures. In need of support to ensure their security, build state institutions, and maintain sovereignty, these countries turned to international cooperation. In this context, the foundations of a regional organisation to serve the mutual interests of Türkiye and the CCA states were laid in 1992.

Prior to deliberating on the establishment of an organisation among the countries of the Turkic world and the process of its formation, it would be beneficial to examine Türkiye's initial hegemonic approach and the consequences it engendered. The relations that began between Türkiye and the Turkic states that gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union essentially represented a unilateral process. Within the framework of the aforementioned reasons, Türkiye initiated the establishment of relations with regional countries and laid the foundations for institutional structures. It is evident that during this process, relations between Türkiye and the states in the CCA manifested a



hegemonic-hierarchical character. However, it should be noted that this situation may be misleading. The absence of modern state experience in these societies, coupled with Türkiye's inherent need for greater openness towards the region, naturally resulted in relations commencing under Türkiye's patronage. The fundamental reason for the failure of the CCA policy was our attempt to adopt a big brother role in the region and our condescending attitude towards other countries (Aydın, 2010). The CCA countries would react to this situation in a short time and, in subsequent processes, begin to pursue independent policies, influenced both by their relations with global powers and their own local nationalism.

The First Summit of the Heads of Turkic Speaking States, held in Ankara on 30–31 October 1992, marked the initial step toward the integration of the Turkic world. These summits, later formalised under the title "Heads of State of Turkic Speaking Countries" in 1998, evolved into a structured organisation with the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009, leading to the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking Countries, commonly known as the Turkic Council. Since 2010, summits have been conducted under this framework. Uzbekistan officially joined the Council—comprising Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan—at the Bishkek Summit in 2019. At the 8th Summit held in Istanbul, the organisation was renamed the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), and its institutional structure was significantly revised. Turkmenistan and Hungary participated in this Summit as observer members (turkicstates.org, 25.04.2025). The declaration issued after the Istanbul Summit emphasised preserving the principles of the Nakhchivan Agreement, expanding and institutionalising the OTS, advancing the Turkic World 2040 Vision, congratulating Azerbaijan on its Karabakh victory, and expressing support for both Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan in their respective regional conflicts. It also highlighted the revival of economic ties, increased diplomatic engagement, and coordinated responses to shared challenges (turkicstates.org, 26.05.2025). The Istanbul Summit produced three key outcomes: (1) the Turkic Council was restructured into the OTS, (2) the unification of Turkic states under a single organisational framework was effectively completed, and (3) a long-term development strategy was formalised through the "2040 Turkic World Vision" document (Mustofaev, 2022, pp. 107–109). This strategic document outlines four primary areas of cooperation: political-security, economic-sectoral, public, and external relations. More importantly, it aims to enhance the OTS's regional and international influence through concrete projects and policies responsive to geopolitical dynamics (Baki, 2022). Notably, the vision foresees deeper engagement with the European Union via Hungary's observer status and proposes strengthening the OTS's representation in Budapest as a hub for multi-layered cooperation with European institutions, including the Visegrád Group (Mustofaev, 2022).

The new institutional structure of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) comprises the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Committee of Senior Officials, the Committee of Elders, and the General Secretariat. Member states include Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, while Hungary, Turkmenistan, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus hold observer status. The Council of Heads of State, chaired by the rotating Chairmanship-in-Office, serves as the primary decision-making body. The General Secretariat, based in Istanbul, coordinates



and supports OTS activities. Subsidiary bodies include the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), the International Turkic Academy, the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking States (TURKPA), the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, the Turkic Business Council (established in 2011), and the Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (established in 2019 at the Astana Economic Forum). Among these, TURKSOY is headquartered in Ankara, the International Turkic Academy in Nur-Sultan, and both TURKPA and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation in Baku (turkicstates.org; Sarıkaya, 2021). Consolidating these bodies under the OTS framework enhances institutional integration and cooperation within the Turkic world, especially given that not all OTS members participate in every sub-organisation (Mustofaev, 2022). While institutional integration has been achieved, its political and economic implications raise ongoing debates about the OTS's potential as a regional actor.

### **The 'Big Game' again: The OTS in the face of the clash of power between global and regional actors**

Turkestan and the Caucasus have long been arenas of great power rivalry, a pattern that continues today. In the Caucasus, the struggle for dominance between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid–Qajar dynasties was joined by Tsarist Russia in the early 19th century, which, within a century, established control over the region—an extension of the broader power struggle in Turkestan. Located between British-controlled India and Russia, Turkestan was politically fragmented and governed by weak dynasties, making it vulnerable to colonisation. The Anglo-Afghan Wars and Russia's occupation of Turkestan exemplified this rivalry, famously termed the "Great Game" by Hopkirk (2021). Although Central Asian societies briefly gained independence following the fall of the Tsarist regime, they were soon absorbed into the Soviet Union and subsequently became a "forgotten region" (Zabortseva, 2012) until the USSR's collapse. With the end of the Cold War, the region once again drew the attention of global powers due to its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and market potential. While Russia's post-Soviet dominance initially prevented the kind of violent rivalries seen in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, recent developments—such as intensified global economic competition, China's expanding influence, the Taliban's full control of Afghanistan, and the erosion of Russian power—have re-positioned the region at the centre of international geopolitical competition (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022).

The main global and regional actors competing for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia (CCA) region are Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and Türkiye. The dynamics of competition and distribution of power among these actors exert a significant influence on the policies of the countries within the CCA, as well as on the role of the OTS as a regional actor. Among these, Russia stands as the most dominant power, having historically ruled the region during both the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Post-Cold War, Russia has sought to reassert its influence through institutional and socio-cultural channels, particularly in shaping identity. The Eurasianist perspective advanced by Dugin (2014) underpins the "Near Periphery Doctrine," asserting that control over the Eurasian heartland is essential for Russia to remain a great power. Politically and militarily, Russia has leveraged the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, 1991), the Collective



Security Treaty (1994), and its successor, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO, 2002); economically, it has utilised platforms such as the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (joined in 2004) and the Eurasian Economic Community (2000) (Ari, 2010). Russia's position with respect to the OTS can, on occasion, be said to manifest a paradoxical structure, while at other times this can be considered complementary, in regard to its historical foundations and strategic orientations. Historically, the propensity of Turkish communities to unite has invariably provoked concern on the part of Russia, compelling it to adopt an assertive stance. The stance adopted by Tsarist Russia towards the rising Turkish nationalist movement in the Ottoman Empire and the uprisings beginning in Turkestan became even more severe after the Bolshevik Revolution. During the Soviet era, Turkic communities were kept distant from Ankara. At the time, Türkiye adopted a policy of maintaining the status quo in the face of pressure from the Soviet Union regarding this issue. Following the termination of the Cold War, the Russian Federation initially adopted a reserved stance with regard to the process of rapprochement that commenced among the Turkic states. Indeed, the failure to achieve the desired integration over time and the resulting weakness led to the OTS being seen in the region as a complementary element rather than a formation against Russia (Ongun, 2022). Nevertheless, Russia continues to adopt a cautious and controlled stance towards the OTS. Alongside Russia, China has emerged as a rising regional actor with a strategy built on three pillars: security, energy, and trade. From a security standpoint, China is sensitive about East Turkestan and is cautious not to encourage pan-Turkic sentiments among Central Asian states due to their ethnic ties with the Uighurs. On energy, China's agreements with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are vital to meeting the resource demands of its growing economy. In trade, the region is central to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which envisions a continuous trade route from China to Europe. To realise its goals, China utilises the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in which Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan hold full membership, to secure and expand its interests across the region (Clarke, 2013; Yujin, 2019; Swanström, 2011). A close examination of China's comprehensive strategy concerning the OTS reveals a transition in its approach, initially marked by caution but subsequently evolving into a security-centric and ideological stance, particularly following its institutionalisation in 2021. Despite the emergence of pan-Turkism in the region and the enhancement of collaboration among Turkic states being perceived as potential challenges, it can be posited that China is strategically leveraging the economic prospects engendered by the OTS (Aghjeh, 2022; Mai, 2021).

As in other regions, the United States and the European Union have pursued distinct strategies in the Caucasus and Central Asia (CCA) region to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence. The U.S. approach revolves around two core objectives: securing control over energy resources and their transportation routes to Western markets, and reducing the strategic influence of Russia and China (Kireçci, 2011). In essence, American foreign policy in the region seeks to curb Russian and Chinese dominance by leveraging control over energy (İşeri, 2009). This emphasis on energy became a central pillar of U.S. strategy after the Cold War, particularly as the country's share in global energy production dropped from nearly 50% in 1945 to around 20% today, intensifying the need to access alternative sources (Faulkner, 2021). Similarly, the EU's policy towards the CCA



region highlights energy security as a strategic priority, particularly in ensuring diversified supply routes to Western markets. While promoting democratic governance and universal norms is a stated aim of EU foreign policy, the prevalence of authoritarian regimes and weak human rights standards in the region creates a normative dilemma. In practice, the EU tends to prioritise its political and economic interests, with energy considerations taking precedence (Asma & Koca, 2021).

The CCA policies of global powers have been briefly reviewed; however, to assess the economic, political, and military strategies of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) in response, it is essential to examine the role of Türkiye—arguably the most influential actor shaping the OTS. As previously noted, the OTS has developed largely under Türkiye's patronage and reflects Ankara's broader regional vision. Following the Syrian conflict and the war in Ukraine, a growing body of analysis identifies Türkiye as a pivotal actor in five key geopolitical regions, with the CCA standing out through the OTS, whose institutional architecture Türkiye has helped to establish. Economically, Türkiye's strategic partnerships in the region pose a potential challenge to Russian dominance (Furlong et al., 2025), while Duran (2023) argues that the West should support Türkiye as a balancing force against China's expanding influence. In reality, however, Türkiye faces considerable structural limitations that hinder its capacity to rival Russian and Chinese hegemony in the region, particularly in three areas: security, trade, and political leadership. As a NATO member, Türkiye is constrained in its ability to confront Russia on security matters, curbing its strategic reach. In trade, the lack of a robust transportation and logistics network across the CCA region, coupled with China's infrastructural dominance and commercial connectivity via Iran, exposes Türkiye's limited economic leverage. Politically, authoritarian governance and strong centralised leadership in CCA states diminish the potential for deep, institutionalised cooperation. Despite Türkiye's favourable bilateral ties with regional leaders, their entrenched alignment with Russia often takes precedence over relations with Ankara (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022).

The OTS, regarded as an emerging actor in the wake of the Ukraine War, becomes attractive primarily through the realisation of its members' common interests. Therefore, it is essential to analyse the economic and political dimensions of the organisation.

## **Economic Integration: Energy, New Trade Routes and Cooperation among Member States**

The Turkic world holds a significant position in the global economy due to its geopolitical location and natural resources. The combined population of OTS member and observer states reaches approximately 170 million, covering 4.5 million square kilometres with an economic output exceeding 1.5 trillion dollars—ranking them as the 13th largest economic bloc globally (Kocaman, 2022; Baghirov, 2022). In terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), these countries collectively account for around 2 per cent of the global economy, with a total GDP of 2 trillion dollars. Although Russia and China maintain economic dominance in the region, the strategic importance of the Turkic states has created a landscape where global and regional powers, particularly the U.S. and the EU, experience both overlapping interests and economic competition. Following the



institutionalisation of the OTS, issues such as joint investments, trade development, and economic integration among member states have gained increasing prominence (Koçak, 2023).

Economic opportunities in the Turkic world centre on three main areas: hydrocarbon resources, trade routes, and economic cooperation within the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). On energy, strategic infrastructure projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, the Southern Gas Corridor, and its components TANAP and TAP have aimed to transport the region's hydrocarbon wealth to Western markets while prioritising cooperation among OTS members. These initiatives have enhanced the region's geostrategic importance for the West. The "OTS Energy Cooperation Programme for 2023-2027" and the "OTS Energy Coordination Committee," both launched in Almaty, further reflect a coordinated strategy to utilise energy as a tool for regional peace and stability. Trade connectivity is another key dimension, particularly through the Central Corridor, a component of China's Belt and Road Initiative that has gained prominence amid the Ukraine-Russia War. Complementing this, the Zangezur Corridor—under construction after the Karabakh victory—offers further integration potential. TRACECA (Transit Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), headquartered in Baku, provides land, rail, and sea connections between the EU and Kyrgyzstan and supports economic integration among OTS states (Yalçınkaya & Güzel, 2021). Regarding intra-OTS trade, Türkiye is the largest economy among members, followed by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Hungary, and Kyrgyzstan. While the share of intra-group exports rose from 13.9% in 2016 to 25.9% in 2021, this accounts for only 3% of the members' total trade volume, which stands at approximately 700 billion dollars. Moreover, the share of these countries in Türkiye's foreign trade remains low at 1.94%, highlighting the underdeveloped nature of economic integration (Baghirov, 2022; Kocaman, 2022; Sarıkaya, 2021; İstikbal, 2021). Türkiye has supported the region through investments, loans, and aid since its independence, notably via the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which has led numerous initiatives (TIKA, 2025). Economic coordination has been prioritised in OTS summits: the 2013 Gabala Summit focused on transport networks, the 2014 Bodrum Summit on tourism, and the 2019 establishment of the Union of Turkic Chambers of Commerce and Industry (TCCI) marked a step toward institutional economic cooperation. The "Turkic World Vision-2040" sets a long-term agenda for governance, digitalisation, and investment diversification (Koçak, 2023, p. 122). Most recently, the Samarkand Summit saw the establishment of the Turkic Investment Fund—the first joint financial institution of the Turkic world—based on equal capital contributions by member states (turkicstates.org, 2022). These developments signal a growing emphasis on deepening economic integration in the coming period.

The economic structures of the OTS member states are shaped significantly by their hydrocarbon resources. Central Asia is among the world's richest regions in this regard: Kazakhstan holds 30 billion barrels of oil and 2.4 trillion cubic metres of gas; Turkmenistan has 7.5 trillion cubic metres of gas (Kireçci, 2011); Azerbaijan possesses 7 billion barrels of oil and 2.5 trillion cubic metres of gas (worldometers.info; iea.org); and Uzbekistan has 1.8 trillion cubic metres of gas and 594 million barrels of oil (deik.org). In contrast, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye lack significant energy resources, with Türkiye meeting 92.8% of its energy demand through imports (Yalçın & Doğan, 2023).



This dependency is a key driver of Türkiye's CCA policy, as it seeks both to meet its energy needs and enhance its geopolitical role by becoming a key transit route for energy exports to Western markets. Kazakhstan effectively leverages its energy wealth in foreign policy, pursuing a multi-vector strategy aimed at balancing the interests of China, Russia, the U.S., and the EU to curb Russian dominance and bolster its regional influence (Zabotseva, 2012; Omelicheva & Du, 2018; Nurgaliyeva, 2015). Its diversified foreign partnerships have attracted substantial infrastructure and pipeline investments from countries such as the U.S., Italy, the UK, and China. Kazakhstan's expectations from the OTS include securing alternative energy export routes, diversifying its economic base, and expanding access to global markets (Aydın & Liui, 2024). These aims align closely with the interests of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. For Kyrgyzstan, whose economy is relatively weak and resource-poor, economic cooperation within the OTS is of vital importance. Uzbekistan, sharing similar economic partners with Türkiye and Kazakhstan, also emphasises economic collaboration as a core element of its multidimensional foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev (Aydın & Liui, 2024). Azerbaijan likewise places economic relations at the centre of its engagement with the OTS, particularly through its focus on the Central Corridor, which aims to link Central Asia and Europe while mitigating Russian influence via cooperation with China. Azerbaijan's strategic motivations include energy and logistics, reinforced by its victory in the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent construction of the Zangezur Corridor. This corridor not only elevates Azerbaijan's geopolitical significance but also promises to enhance trade connectivity, with an estimated 10 million tonnes of cargo expected to be transported over 13 years, benefiting all OTS members, especially Türkiye and Azerbaijan (Rickleton, 2024a; Anadolu Agency, 2022).

In addition to the economic potential of the OTS and the economic capacities and approaches of its member states, it is essential to examine the policies of global and regional powers in Central Asia. Since the independence of the CCA countries, the United States has provided over \$9 billion in direct aid for security, democracy, and economic development, alongside more than \$50 billion in loans and technical assistance from American financial institutions, which reportedly generated \$31 billion in local employment. These efforts have been viewed as tools to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence. A significant recent event provides another important clue regarding the U.S.'s CCA policy. This is the declaration signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia with Trump's mediation. While the political ramifications of the declaration between the two countries will be assessed at a later date, it is imperative to address its economic implications in the present context. The route, formerly known as Zengezur and now called TRIPP, has been referred to as the Trump corridor. It has been leased by the U.S. for 99 years. It is evident that this strategic manoeuvre will have a dual impact. Firstly, it will serve to diminish Russia's influence within the given region, thereby increasing pressure on Iran. Conversely, it will elevate the United States to a position of prominence with respect to trade relations and the transfer of energy resources among the EU, the OTS, and China. The advantages of this route are manifold, including a 10-15 per cent reduction in energy transport costs, an increase in freight volume to 15 million tonnes, the creation of a \$100 billion trade volume, an increase in the national income of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Türkiye's rising power and influence in the region, which



will enable it to act as an agent for the renewal of Armenia's infrastructure. It has been argued that the primary benefit of economic integration among countries in the region is that it can lead to lasting peace, as evidenced by the example of the relationship between Turks and Armenians (Ryzhko & Sabirova, 2025). The European Union, meanwhile, has focused primarily on energy policy, aiming to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor and signing a Memorandum of Understanding to secure the flow of 20 billion cubic metres of gas from the region by 2027. Economically, the EU remains Türkiye's main partner and has made significant investments in the region. Russia, however, continues to hold the greatest economic sway over the CCA countries, accounting for 85% of the value generated through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Following the Ukraine War, many CCA states aligned with EU sanctions, which in turn boosted intra-regional trade (Koçak, 2023). There has also been a growing trend to reduce Russian economic dominance by diversifying partnerships. The decision by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to decline invitations to BRICS' 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary event reflects their intent to assert economic autonomy amid shifting geopolitical dynamics (Rickleton, 2024b). Nevertheless, Russia maintains a strong presence through its energy companies, with Gazprom and Rosatom securing agreements to construct nuclear power plants in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (rfe/rl, 27.12.2024). Alongside Russia, China represents the other major economic actor in the region. Since the independence of the Turkic republics, China's trade turnover in the region has increased 60-fold. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has funded infrastructure projects, including transportation corridors, energy pipelines, and trade agreements to strengthen connectivity and economic integration across the Caucasus and Central Asia (Koçak, 2023). Key initiatives such as the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-China railway and energy transfer deals with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan further highlight China's growing regional influence (Rickleton, 2024c).

## Security and Politics

Security issues and political relations are at least as vital as economic considerations for the CCA countries, if not more so. Following independence, these states faced significant security challenges, including border and ethnic tensions inherited from the Soviet era, the rise of radical religious groups, and disputes over water resources—all contributing to strained inter-state relations in the Turkestan region. The border and ethnic disputes originated from administrative arrangements imposed during Tsarist and Soviet rule. Notable examples include the Uzbek-Kyrgyz clashes in Osh, repeated changes in the status of the Karakalpak Autonomous Region, ongoing border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and situations where states must traverse neighbouring territories to access their own capitals (Ari, 2010). Among these, the Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has had particularly profound regional and international implications. The roots of this conflict date back to the early 19th century, when Russia expanded into the Caucasus, defeating the Qajars and occupying the region. Although Turks were the majority in Karabakh, Russian authorities began settling Armenians—viewed as politically aligned—in the region to create a strategic buffer against the Ottomans and Qajars. This policy continued during the Soviet era, and by the 1980s, the



region's demography had shifted dramatically from 90% Turkish to 78% Armenian. Following the USSR's dissolution, Armenian separatist demands led to violent clashes, and with Russian military support, Armenians occupied Karabakh and carried out ethnic cleansing (Böyükbaşı, 2023). Beyond territorial disputes, the water-sharing issues among Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan and the threat of radical religious groups—exacerbated by the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan—pose ongoing challenges. While partial agreements have addressed water concerns, radicalisation persists, fueled by the presence of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the Fergana Valley and East Turkestan, as well as Iranian influence. In response, CCA states have adopted legal and policy measures aimed at reinforcing secularism and social resilience (Cumhuriyet, 2025). Lastly, the long-standing dispute over the legal status of the Caspian Sea among Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan—whether it should be classified as a sea or lake—was settled in 2018 through a multilateral agreement (Euronews, 2018).

In addition to persistent regional security challenges, the strategic rivalry among global and regional powers significantly shapes the geopolitical landscape of the CCA countries. The United States has prioritised diplomatic engagement in the region to curtail Russian and Chinese influence, while also expressing concern over Iran and the spread of radical Islam. However, energy security remains its primary focus. Following Donald Trump's re-election, U.S. strategy appears to be shifting, as reflected in Vice President Vance's statement that Russia should not remain China's junior partner (WSJ, 2025) and ongoing diplomatic efforts to end the Ukraine War. Analysts suggest that Trump's CCA policy will largely hinge on his relations with Russia, China, and Türkiye (Painner, 2024). Current U.S. actions—such as new sanctions on Iran and warm overtures toward Russia against China—underscore the priority given to strategic and geopolitical interests. Meanwhile, China emphasises East Turkestan as a key security concern in its relations with the region. Fearing that the OTS might support Uyghur independence and thus threaten its territorial integrity, China exerts political pressure through the SCO. However, the CCA countries consistently reassure China that the OTS has no such agenda and does not intervene in the affairs of Turkic groups abroad. China has also deepened its influence by selling an air defence system to Uzbekistan (Standish, 2025), thus extending its reach beyond the economic sphere. Despite this, Russia remains the dominant political and security actor in the region, largely through mechanisms like the CIS and CSTO. Yet, since the Ukraine War, there has been a growing effort by CCA states to reduce Russian dominance. For example, while Türkiye voted at the UN General Assembly on 1st March 2022 to demand Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine, CCA countries abstained—mainly due to their entanglement with Russian-led organisations and Türkiye's NATO membership (Mustofaev, 2022). As Brzezinski (2021) notes, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have taken specific steps to foster national identity and curb Russian influence in Turkestan. This trend continues under Tokayev, who emphasises economic integration and a new security architecture for the Turkic world (Kazakh MFA, 2024). Similarly, Uzbek Foreign Minister Kamilov's (2024) remarks on a pragmatic, multilateral foreign policy signal a strategic distancing from Moscow. The approaches adopted by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are influenced by systemic factors, namely their relations with global powers and their national interests. Furthermore, the presence of rising nationalism in the region is another factor that is relevant in this context. Additionally, the objectives of the two



countries differ from those of the international organisations to which they belong. However, Russian analysts view these moves as attempts to undermine CSTO dominance. Commentator Kirsanov claims that a Central Asian security architecture without Russia is unrealistic and accuses Tokayev of being backed by British intelligence (Asia24.media, 2024). Russian warnings, citing Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan's pro-NATO tilt as a costly mistake during the Karabakh conflict, serve as veiled threats to CCA states. These pressures limit the manoeuvring capacity of smaller countries like Kyrgyzstan, which has postponed implementation of the common Turkic alphabet, fearing a backlash from Moscow (RFE/rl, 03.10.2024). Ultimately, it is yet to be determined how Russia will respond to the declaration that was signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia under the leadership of the United States. Despite maintaining an official silence on the matter, the ongoing challenges in Russia's relationship with the U.S., compounded by the ongoing costs of the Ukraine War, have led to concerns regarding the potential loss of a pivotal region such as the Caucasus. Concurrently, President Trump is endeavouring to emulate the Abraham Accords between Arab states and Israel during his inaugural term, this time between Armenia and the Turkic world (Holland, 2025). In addition to its economic benefits, TRIPP is regarded as having the potential to provide the U.S. with significant power in the Caucasus from a political and strategic perspective, and could also potentially undermine Russia's hegemony in Turkestan.

The deep-rooted problems in the CCA region and the impact of global power competition have significantly shaped the dynamics among Turkic states and their engagement with the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), revealing the political meaning attributed to the organisation by its members. From an external perspective, Aneschi & Grigoryan (2022) argue that despite the post-Ukraine War environment enabling more autonomous behaviour by Turkic states, their integration efforts remain vague and rhetorically hollow. This view gains clarity through an analysis of inter-CCA relations since 1992, when the foundations of the OTS were laid with the Summits of Turkic Speaking Heads of State—initiated under Türkiye's patronage to navigate its foreign policy challenges. CCA countries joined to integrate into the international system and benefit from Türkiye's support, yet during the First Karabakh War, the organisation proved ineffective as members, except Türkiye, failed to support Azerbaijan. Political integration remained limited due to Türkiye's missteps and the internal and external agendas of the CCA states; notably, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan long refrained from summit participation (Böyükbaşı, 2020). The 2009 Nakhchivan Agreement marked a turning point by initiating institutionalisation and transforming the Turkic Council into the OTS, prioritising political and security cooperation. Since then, the OTS has faced three major tests. First, during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, the OTS supported Azerbaijan's military operations to reclaim its occupied territories, a campaign bolstered by Turkish-made UAVs. Second, during the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border clashes, the OTS expressed support for Kyrgyzstan. Third, following the unrest in Kazakhstan in January 2022, OTS foreign ministers convened an emergency meeting and backed the Kazakh government. However, as the situation escalated, Kazakhstan turned to the CSTO for military assistance, exposing the OTS's limited crisis-response capacity. Member states' divergent expectations from the OTS further complicate integration: Türkiye and Kazakhstan seek



regional and global influence; Azerbaijan aims to consolidate support against Armenia; Uzbekistan aspires to regional leadership; and Kyrgyzstan prioritises political and economic stability (Aydın & Liui, 2024). These differing priorities underscore the absence of a unified vision. A recent incident exemplifies this fragmentation: at the Samarkand Summit, the EU offered a €12 billion aid package in exchange for the CCA states' recognition of the Greek Cypriot Administration and endorsement of UN resolutions on Cyprus. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan initiated diplomatic engagement with the Greek Cypriot side, refraining from siding with Türkiye on what it considers a national cause—unlike the past solidarity shown by Islamic countries (Güller, 2025). This stance sparked disappointment in Turkish public opinion and raised questions about the OTS's credibility. Although the TRNC's admission as an observer had initially generated optimism, its exclusion from the 2023 Astana meeting signalled growing disillusionment (Karaveli, 2024). Ultimately, the OTS has fallen short of meeting political and security expectations, revealing the fragile unity among its members.

## Conclusion

With the end of the Cold War, the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) emerged as an identity-based international organisation initiated by Türkiye, shaped by its efforts to address the challenges faced by both itself and the CCA countries in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics. The OTS represents a significant attempt to foster political, economic, and cultural integration among Turkic-speaking societies that have been fragmented under separate political entities for centuries. However, the question remains: is the OTS becoming a rising actor in the CCA region in the face of competing international organisations and global powers? To address this, it is essential to assess the extent of political and economic integration within the organisation and to analyse its relations with other actors in the context of regional and global developments.

In economic terms, the OTS has gained positive momentum with the deepening of its institutionalisation following the Nakhchivan Agreement. The primary motivation of member states appears to be economic cooperation, supported by Türkiye's status as one of the world's twenty largest economies and the CCA countries' rich natural resources. However, significant challenges remain. First, for meaningful integration, OTS member states should rank among each other's top ten trading partners; for instance, Türkiye, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan—as well as observer members like the TRNC, Hungary, and Turkmenistan—should feature prominently in Kazakhstan's foreign trade statistics. Currently, intra-OTS trade constitutes only 3% of the members' total trade volume, a notably low figure. Moreover, the combination of vast geography, low population density, and abundant underground resources contrasts starkly with the low GNP rates across the region, highlighting structural economic deficiencies. Under current conditions, the OTS lacks the economic capacity to rival global actors such as the U.S., EU, Russia, or China. Indeed, the protocol signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, leasing TRIPP to the U.S. for 99 years, exemplifies the inability of OTS countries to compete economically with global powers. Nevertheless, the primary objective of the present endeavour does not lie in the pursuit of competition with the USA. Rather, it is



an attempt to diversify the country's foreign policy. In contrast, Türkiye has recently adopted a more pro-American stance in its own foreign policy.

Political and security relations within the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) are considerably more complex than its economic integration. The emphasis on economic cooperation stems from the underdeveloped state of political collaboration. In a global order shaped by neoliberalism, economic integration cannot be sustained without corresponding political alignment. Since its inception in 1992, the OTS has struggled to establish a coherent political framework. Türkiye's leadership role and its developmental advantage over Central Asian counterparts have fostered a "big brother" perception, undermining mutual trust. The lack of support for Azerbaijan following the First Karabakh War, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan's prolonged absence from summits, and declining diplomatic engagement reflect this fragility. Contributing factors include Türkiye's economic and security challenges, as well as the authoritarian tendencies of regional regimes. Militarily, the OTS remains ineffective; Kazakhstan's appeal to the CSTO during the 2022 unrest highlighted the organisation's inability to act as a security alliance. Even prior to military integration, the desired political unity had not materialised. A striking example is the recent adoption of an EU-aligned declaration by some CCA countries, recognising the Greek Cypriot Administration while sidelining the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and implicitly portraying Türkiye as an occupier. Although institutional progress and Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War represent positive developments, the latter resulted largely from Azerbaijan's bilateral alliance with Türkiye, with minimal support from other OTS members. The indifference of certain CCA states to the Cyprus issue—central to Türkiye's security concerns for decades—further illustrates the weakness of political integration. This disillusionment, however, is not solely the fault of other member states; Türkiye must also reconsider its policies. For instance, in the case of East Turkestan, neither Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, nor any other OTS member has dared to openly confront China's repressive policies. Despite their ethnic ties with the Uyghurs, these states remain silent in the face of China's coercive diplomacy and human rights violations.

Ultimately, the OTS requires further economic integration and has yet to develop a true political union. The differing objectives of its member states, the perception of the OTS as a secondary organisation compared to others, and the focus on short-term national interests rather than the long-term stability and interests of Turkic societies hinder the OTS from becoming a regional actor. In accordance with the precepts of neo-realist theory, this scenario is indicative of regional hegemonies in the face of global powers. In the case of the OTS, this was Türkiye during its founding process in the early 1990s, and today it is Türkiye to the west of the Caspian Sea and Kazakhstan to the east. This situation is analogous to the classical division of Eastern and Western Khanates in historical Turkish states. Indeed, rather than considering the OTS in its totality, it is more logical to divide it into two distinct regions: Turkestan and the Caucasus-Black Sea area. Additionally, economic unity alone is insufficient; political and security cooperation must complement the economic framework, which the OTS has not yet achieved. While the Ukraine War temporarily positioned the OTS as an emerging actor, the Cyprus issue exposed its limitations. The states of the Turkic world demonstrate this through their own national interests and the relationships they have established with global powers.



Russia's diminishing influence, Türkiye's transition towards a policy aligned with that of the United States, Azerbaijan's relationship with Israel, and the desire of Kazakhstan and other states east of the Caspian Sea to benefit from EU assistance are all significant factors that must be taken into consideration. It can be posited that the CCA states prioritise their own interests over those of the OTS in their dealings with global actors, and that the OTS is regarded as a mechanism for regulating relations among themselves. The OTS's ability to navigate the challenges posed by Trump's policies towards China will be a crucial test, determining whether it can establish itself as a regional actor.

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