

# The Reinvigoration of the Organization of Turkic States amid Ongoing Geopolitical Unrest and Economic Uncertainty

Vusal Guliyev 

Hebei International Studies University, Shijiazhuang, China

Khazar University China Studies Center, Baku, Azerbaijan

[vusalglyv@yahoo.com](mailto:vusalglyv@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

The recent regional events and the geopolitical consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian war have had a profound impact on the dynamics among Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian Turkic states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan). This shifting geopolitical landscape has been the catalyst of collaboration and integration for these countries under the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), an intergovernmental organization that aims to foster cooperation among Turkic-speaking nations. Being established in 2009, this emerging bloc has pursued a relatively low-profile policy on geopolitical issues in the past decade. However, after years of relatively little activity, things have started to change drastically due to the global situation that is being shaped by wider geopolitical factors. The OTS steadily began to pursue a more ambitious agenda and eventually helped bolster relations and stimulate regional socio-economic development efforts during the last four years, focusing on building stronger regional cooperation through ethnocultural links. The article examines how the Turkic alliance has stimulated functional cooperation through the facilitation of trade, investment, and economic cooperation among its members and observer states.

**Keywords:** Organization of Turkic States, Geopolitical Unrest, Regional Integration, Economic Cooperation, Middle Corridor Initiative

## Introduction

The revitalization of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) is an intriguing development in the wider Eurasian region, bringing together states with significant cultural and linguistic ties. The emergence of a shared regional identity is a key factor that has shaped the organization's formation and activities, however,

relations among the OTS member states need to be considered in a broader context. Today, the alliance's five members (i.e., Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan) are home to over 150 million people and generate a GDP of around \$1.2 trillion. The organization is fostering multilateral partnerships to forge economic integration among the OTS-involved actors and flexibly deliver strategic solutions to respond to geopolitical developments through institutionalized cooperation. Noticeably, the OTS's efforts toward playing a pivotal role in regional politics and critical areas have increased in the wake of the ongoing Russo-Ukraine conflict. By leveraging historical ties and shared cultural heritage, the OTS has not only strengthened intra-regional connectivity but also positioned itself as a significant actor on the global stage. Through an analysis of recent initiatives and policies, the study highlights the role of the OTS in fostering regional cooperation, promoting economic integration, and enhancing security collaboration. The research underscores the importance of the OTS in providing a unified platform for addressing shared challenges and advancing common interests in an increasingly volatile international environment. Several examples will suffice to portray these developments in the following sections of this article.

### **Facilitating Dialogue and Coordination**

Diplomatic efforts among member states are on the rise, aimed at fostering a cooperative political climate. Summits, bilateral meetings, and multilateral forums are becoming increasingly common, facilitating dialogue and coordination on shared challenges. The organization's strategic documents and summit declarations increasingly reflect a commitment to addressing regional stability and security. The high-level meetings accelerated the development of a more robust institutional framework and laid the foundation for setting strategic goals to envision the long-term objectives within the OTS. In this context, the latest summit of the OTS held in Astana, Kazakhstan on 3rd November, 2023 (the 10th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States), under the motto "TURKTIME" (abbreviation of the words: Tradition, Unification, Reforms, Knowledge, Trust, Investments, Mediation, Energy), demonstrated commitment and prior strategies to greater cooperation amid geopolitical fragmentation through joint action. The summit resulted in several significant declarations aimed at enhancing cooperation among member states. The pivotal resolutions, which addressed recent regional and international developments, were adopted by the leaders in Astana. These joint decisions involve collaborative projects, joint ventures, and unified stances on international issues affecting the Turkic World.

More specifically, the Astana summit resulted in decisions regarding regulations for permanent representatives, the introduction of new flags for Turkic organizations, and granting observer status to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) within the OTS. Additionally, ministers and heads of various institutions from member states signed the "Protocol on Cooperation in the Field of Metrology among the Relevant Institutions of the Member States of the Organization of Turkic States" and the "Joint Action Plan for the Implementation of the Transport Connectivity Program of the Organization of Turkic States for 2023-2027".

Following the Astana summit, the senior representatives of state-run news agencies from member states announced the creation of a media alliance aimed at strengthening information ties among Turkic states and promoting their cultural and historical heritage through mass media. This initiative led to the formation of the Alliance of Turkic News Agencies (ATNA) involving the Azerbaijan State News Agency (AZERTAC), Türkiye's Anadolu News Agency (AA), the Kyrgyz National News Agency (Kabar), the Uzbekistan National News Agency (UzA), and Kazakhstan's news agency Qazcontent. The meeting also underscored a comprehensive strategy to foster international cooperation in education and science, aiming to enhance academic and technological capabilities across participating nations. The Astana Declaration expressed support for advancing institutional cooperation through the initiative of the Union of National Academies of Sciences of the Turkic World. Additionally, the decision to develop a common alphabet marked a significant step towards strengthening Turkic unity.

The discussions also revolved around initiatives that defined new directions for expanding cooperation in the fields of finance and banking. To expand interregional trade and create a conducive environment for investment, Astana has been designated as the financial center of the Turkic world. This decision is based on the "Regulations on granting certain statuses to cities of the Turkic world", proposed during the Istanbul Summit in 2021. The Astana Financial Services Authority has entered into several agreements and memorandums with financial regulators from OTS-related countries to enhance information exchange, as well as the supervision and regulation of these entities' activities. By promoting diplomatic interaction, economic cooperation, and regional integration, OTS member states appear to be striving to create equal opportunities to reap the gains from globalization.

The OTS's Samarkand Summit (the 9th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States), hosted in Samarkand, Uzbekistan on November 11, 2022, was another significant evidence of the Turkic states' willingness and readiness toward regional interconnectivity and economic cooperation through the diversification of multilateral relations and strengthening of close interstate relations in order to ensure regional stability and sustainable economic development and strengthen transport and communication ties. During this summit, the leaders underlined the importance of common action concerning pressing topics in the international arena. The Turkic leaders have stated their commitment to enhancing the stability and prosperity of their countries and to engaging in international cooperation to promote comprehensive reform packages to enable institution-building and a transition to well-functioning and integrated market economies. As a result of the Samarkand Declaration, member countries unveiled plans to take their mutual relations forward in various fields, ranging from military, and defense industry technologies to energy, tourism, transportation, and economic and humanitarian relations. Crucially, the 9th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States marked a significant turning point for the organization, as the leaders of the Turkic states agreed on a package of new practical measures to enhance the bloc's activities. Among these measures was the creation of the Turkic Investment Fund, aimed at promoting investment among member states in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, agriculture, tourism development, and other strategic initiatives.

Prior to the recent geopolitical developments, the OTS has been steadily becoming a significant force and an active political entity in regional politics in the last three to four years. In this regard, the Eighth Summit of the Organization of Turkic States, held on October 14, 2021, in Istanbul, Türkiye, demonstrated the commitment of member states to deepening their cooperation in various areas, including economic, cultural, and political spheres. The summit was significant in terms of advancing the goals of the OTS, which include promoting economic integration, enhancing cultural and social links, and fostering political cooperation among member states. The summit provided an opportunity for member and observer states to assess progress made in achieving these goals and chart a course for future cooperation. The Istanbul Summit was a historic event in that the leaders took a decision to officially alter the name of the "Turkic Council" to the "Organization of Turkic States".

One of the main outcomes of the summit was the adoption of the Istanbul Act, which outlined the commitments of member states to deepen their cooperation in

various areas. The declaration affirmed the importance of strengthening economic ties among involved states and reiterated the commitment to achieving the geoeconomic goals of the OTS members. The declaration also emphasized the importance of cooperation in the areas of energy, transportation, and tourism, paving the way for a comprehensive partnership format among the OTS member and observer states. More importantly, the Eighth Summit of the Organization of Turkic States also welcomed Turkmenistan as the new observer member of the Turkic bloc. Speaking of observer countries, Hungary and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) were also granted observer status in 2018 and 2022, respectively. The ratification of the document "Turkic World Vision – 2040" was another major step toward the institutionalization of the OTS during the Istanbul Summit. This important document outlines the short- and mid-term goals and objectives of the Turkic cooperation in the areas of strategic importance for the next two decades. The Istanbul summit also addressed issues related to regional security and stability. The leaders reaffirmed their commitment to fighting terrorism and extremism and expressed concern over the situation in Afghanistan. Additionally, the Azerbaijani incumbent president Ilham Aliyev was also awarded the "Supreme Order of the Turkic World" in recognition of the liberation of Azerbaijan's decades-long occupied territories as a result of the 44-day Patriotic War that occurred in 2020.

It is worth noting that, the summits of the Organization of Turkic States (particularly those held in Istanbul, Samarkand, and Astana) represent significant milestones in promoting greater cooperation and integration among Turkic-speaking countries and communities. These historic events underscored the importance of connectivity, innovation, and cultural exchange in building a more prosperous, stable, and united region, providing a framework for future collaboration and action.

For example, at the Bishkek Summit on 23 August 2012, the leaders came to a consensus on establishing the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation (TCHF), which would work to promote and preserve the rich cultural heritage of Turkic peoples through assistance programs and funding activities. The center is also meant to serve as a unified platform for promoting cultural exchange and dialogue among member states and contribute to the core objectives of the OTS within the framework of cultural diplomacy. Moreover, the establishment of the "Common Alphabet Commission" was also announced at the international seminar entitled "Common Alphabet of the Turkic World" held in cooperation between the Organization of Turkic States and the Turkish Language Association in Bursa,

Türkiye in 2022 with the purpose of creating a unified script system for the Turkic world.

In general, the primary focus of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) is to promote political and economic cooperation, enhance regional security, and support the development of the Turkic language and culture. The organization aims to strengthen ties among its member states while simultaneously establishing long-term partnerships and encouraging robust collaboration with other regional and international organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the European Union (EU). To this end, it is also worth highlighting that the member states of the OTS have their own individual relationships with other countries and regions, and these relationships are not necessarily impacted by their membership in the organization.

### **Ankara's Pivotal Role in the OTS**

Traditionally, Türkiye has been devoting significant attention to expanding its regional footprint in the Caucasus and Central Asia since the dissolution of the USSR. Türkiye has been striving to consolidate its political clout while simultaneously curtailing long-standing Russian, Iranian, and Chinese political, economic, and cultural influence in the region by all means. In doing so, Ankara has been working on diversifying its diplomatic ties by coordinating institutional mechanisms, utilizing multilateral platforms, and implementing multidimensional initiatives to advance national priorities and achieve strategic interests in both the South Caucasus and Central Asia, thereby catalyzing the long-term integration process on a larger scale. In this context, the Organization of Turkic States has come in handy. Common historical and cultural roots have helped Ankara gain footholds in post-Soviet Turkic states for decades. Ankara has thus been active in securing Middle Corridor-related contracts with the relevant Turkic states through the OTS.

As one of the founding members of the OTS, Türkiye still plays a significant role within the organization and the wider framework of Turkic cooperation. Ankara's political and economic influence in the region has been a driving force behind the creation and development of the Turkic union. Türkiye has been an active participant in the establishment of functional cooperation among member states, particularly in the areas of trade, transportation, and energy. The establishment of the Turkic Investment Fund, which was initiated and strongly supported by

Türkiye, has been a major achievement of the OTS since the bloc's creation. The agreements facilitated trade among member states and contributed to the promotion of economic development in the region. In the transportation sector, Türkiye has played a leading role in the development of multi-functional transit and trade channels, that aim to connect member states through land, air, and sea transportation routes. These initiatives were instrumental in facilitating the movement of goods and people among member states and contributed to the integration of regional markets. Ankara has also been active in promoting energy cooperation among resource-rich member states, aiming to promote multifaceted cooperation and coordination among partners in the sectors of energy production, distribution, and consumption.

In addition to its vital role in promoting functional cooperation, Türkiye has also been an advocate for deeper political and social cooperation among member states. Ankara consistently emphasized enduring historic, cultural, and social connections among Turkic peoples and supported initiatives aimed at promoting social and cultural exchange among closely concerned states. Türkiye has also been a vocal advocate for the rights and interests of Turkic peoples in the wider international community. Hence, Türkiye's role within the OTS has been significant in shaping the organization's agenda and promoting cooperation among member states. Ankara's leadership in the development of the collaboration platforms has been instrumental in facilitating economic development and integration among relevant states. Furthermore, Ankara's commitment to promoting cultural and historical ties among Turkic peoples has helped to strengthen social and cultural bonds among members.

However, despite the above-mentioned joint initiatives and lucrative economic partnerships, two recent historical events provided Türkiye with favorable opportunities to strengthen solid diplomatic connections and deepen its alliance with Turkic fellows. The first development was Türkiye's extensive support for Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War in late 2020. Ankara's military backing, mainly via advisers and combat drones, played consequential roles in Azerbaijan's decisive victory over Armenian forces and thus helped cement Türkiye's presence in the region. As a crucial follow-up, the Shusha Declaration signed by Baku and Ankara in June 2021 increased the bilateral relations to a historically unprecedented level, where two sides pledged support for each other on significant issues at both international and regional levels, deepening cooperation and integration in the Turkic world. To this end, the new realities in the South

Caucasus helped Ankara become a strong neighbor to the region in the post-Second Karabakh War period.

The second historical opportunity arose for Ankara in early 2022 owing to Russia's military campaign in Eastern Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February has brought many transportation and logistics challenges globally. On the other hand, given the disastrous war in Continental Europe, the alternative Trans-Eurasian passageways have gained prominence over the past couple of months - the Middle Corridor (also known as the Trans-Caspian Route) in particular. Nevertheless, the uncertain geo-economic outlook affords the transit states located along this Eurasian transcontinental trade channel—Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, and Georgia—a significant opportunity to forge new commercial partnerships and strategic relationships, adapting to the dramatic effects of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The aforementioned transit states have long-standing strategic partnerships in terms of logistics and transportation that go back as far as the early 1990s. Essentially, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have thus appeared as the early promoters of alternative transcontinental routes bypassing Russian territory by implementing region-wide infrastructure initiatives and facilitating multilateral institutional development initiatives.

As cited above, Türkiye supplied domestically developed and battle-proven drones to the OTS countries. These tactical-combat vehicles manufactured by Baykar Defense give further credibility to Ankara's foreign policy in Turkic countries. Turkish drones, particularly the Bayraktar TB2 series, have been gaining popularity due to their affordability and reliability among allies in recent years. For instance, Türkiye exported different types of military drones to Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. With the latest procurement, all the above-mentioned countries have already expanded their arsenals of modern strike weapons. As a continuation of this policy, Ankara also signed a deal with Astana to manufacture unmanned combat aerial vehicles at the jointly-established production facility in Kazakhstan. It is noteworthy that it will be the first overseas factory to produce ANKA drones outside of Türkiye. In addition to Central Asia, on April 2023, Türkiye's major drone producer, Baykar Defense, launched its subsidiary "Bayraktar Technology Azerbaijan LLC" in Baku to contribute to the development of the cutting-edge drone fleet of the country's air defense system and to strengthen its military capacity. The Bayraktar TB2 is currently actively used by several OTS member countries, admittedly, due to a combination of factors, the Turkic states will increase the number of Turkish-made drones in their military inventory in the years ahead.



Thus, in the face of these complications, Turkish-Azerbaijani-Central Asian relations have reached the level of strategic partnership. While the post-Soviet Turkic states are currently distancing themselves from Moscow, Ankara will seek a more proactive role in these countries, and consequently, the scale of collaborative strategic initiatives will grow exponentially. This, in turn, will pave the way for increasing levels of trade turnover along the Middle Corridor over the coming years. However, in a changing geopolitical environment, it will not be easy for Türkiye to be an influential force in Central Asia as Russia and China still maintain substantial presences in the region by remaining important security and economic actors.

### **Baku's Contribution to the OTS**

Apart from the intensified efforts of Türkiye, another major Turkic-speaking state, Azerbaijan, also appears to be focused on approaching Central Asia more broadly. Azerbaijan's strategic location in the South Caucasus, its economic potential, as well as its historical and cultural ties with other Turkic states, make it a crucial player in the region and within the scope of organization. Azerbaijan's location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and its proximity to major energy producers and consumers, make it a key transit hub for energy resources, particularly oil, and gas. This has positioned Azerbaijan as a critical player in regional energy security and created opportunities for cooperation and partnership with peripheral states. The country diversified its economy beyond the energy sector and developed expertise in areas such as technology, transportation, and tourism. This has opened up opportunities for economic cooperation and investment among the OTS-involved states, particularly in the spheres of trade and infrastructure development.

Baku has pursued proactive diplomacy with Central Asian countries to further facilitate dialogue and regional interconnectivity since Russia launched its attacks on Ukraine. Notably, the state leadership has activated its engagement with face-to-face meetings and high-level visits by intensifying its contacts through its own regional formats. In this vein, the recent official visits by Azerbaijan's incumbent president Ilham Aliyev to Uzbekistan in June and September and Kyrgyzstan in October last year are a good case in point. These positive developments help bring these countries closer in regional affairs. During Aliyev's official visits, numerous important documents were signed between state structures to expand bilateral cooperation in defense, transportation, agriculture, and trade. Among the most significant intergovernmental deals that were inked between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan was the Declaration on Deepening the Strategic Partnership and

Building Up Comprehensive Cooperation, deepening allied cooperation in various fields.

Aliyev's official visit to Astana on April 10, 2023, where the leaders signed a joint statement and protocol on the establishment of a Supreme Interstate Council, was also highly significant. Bolstering political and economic bonds with this core Central Asian state is eventually becoming vitally important for Baku in many aspects. The interstate documents that were signed during this high-level meeting covered many spheres for cooperation and focused on enhancing connectivity along the TITR as a part of export diversification efforts. With regards to Azerbaijan-Central Asia relations, Baku's recent active and pragmatic foreign policy and rising engagement with its neighbors are important for the viable realization of interconnectivity projects in this part of the world, as it's the only Turkic country that has direct geographical access to both Anatolia and Central Asia.

Azerbaijan has likewise shown a growing interest in strengthening the capacity of alternative overland transit corridors over the past many years. Indeed, the current geo-economic uncertainties have prompted Baku to encourage the deepening of friendly ties in order to eliminate potential political barriers, financial constraints, regulatory and bureaucratic hurdles, and logistical capacity limitations that are hindering communication among the keystone countries of the Silk Road region. At the same time, along with its Turkic fellows - Türkiye and Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan has also invested heavily in modernizing and expanding its transportation infrastructure in recent years, including building new highways, railways, and ports, as well as upgrading its airports and aviation infrastructure as part of a larger network of transportation options.

Azerbaijan has been known to be one of the first initiators of constructing multiple multi-purpose transportation infrastructure projects across the region, such as the Baku-Tbilisi Kars Railway (BTK), the Port of Baku, the Alat Free Economic Zone (AFAZ), etc. Particularly, Baku is active in policies and strategies to improve connectivity and create a multifunctional logistics complex along the shore of the Caspian Sea by developing the maritime industry. The Caspian segment of multimodal transportation has made significant progress in recent years, with the establishment of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and the development of new port facilities in Aktau/Kuryk and Baku/Alyat. However, there are still some challenges and bottlenecks (such as the limited capacity of the ferry services, insufficient infrastructure facilities, and lack of critical technologies and integration between different transport modes) that need to be addressed to

fully realize the potential of this given supply route. Investing in maritime capacities will help Azerbaijan to become a prominent link in the global chain of trade and generate new export-oriented industrial activities. The central government's actions include the implementation of hard and soft infrastructure interventions to build the optimal shipping route between the regions. Increased import-export traffic allows the littoral states to expand their transshipment activities and hinterland connectivity. This increase is expected to stimulate the revival of international trade in the region and beyond.

Aside from political engagements and construction projects, Baku has also taken a proactive role in initiating humanitarian assistance within the OTS. For example, in light of the recent catastrophe in Türkiye, upon a proposal of Ilham Aliyev, on 16 March 2023, the leaders of Turkic states convened the first-ever Extraordinary Summit of the Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States under the theme of "Disaster-Emergency Management and Humanitarian Assistance" to extend a helping hand to the earthquake-hit regions of Türkiye. During the Ankara Summit, the OTS revealed its plan to develop a number of mechanisms to facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance, including the establishment of a humanitarian aid coordination center and the creation of emergency response funds. Seemingly, humanitarian assistance is becoming a key aspect of the work of the OTS, which will commit to addressing the needs of vulnerable populations within its member states. The provision of such assistance will give an additional impetus to elaborate on the multilateral cooperation and coordination mechanism in the face of catastrophic tragedies. Overall, the implementation of joint humanitarian initiatives involving Turkic states illustrates greater efficiency within the framework of the OTS.

Azerbaijan's active role within the alliance and its commitment to advancing its goals have contributed to its importance. Azerbaijan has hosted several key events and initiatives, including the establishment of the Turkic Academy and the creation of the Turkic Council Youth Platform. Additionally, Azerbaijan's strong diplomatic ties with major regional powers, such as Iran and Russia, have enabled the country to play a more prominent role in regional affairs and to advocate for the geostrategic interests of the OTS.

### **The Revitalization of the Middle Corridor under the OTS deals**

The OTS is energetically working on developing direct, secure, and viable transport and trade corridors by expanding the transshipment capacities of coastal ports, improving the railroad networks, constructing multifunctional complexes, and introducing digital solutions for smooth cargo handling. In particular, Ankara and Baku in partnership with leading regional actors are devoting significant attention to the establishment of alternative inland commercial arteries to bypass the southern and northern passageways through sanctions-battered Russia and Iran. All these attempts, driven by wide-ranging consensus and political cooperation, envisage setting out a roadmap for stronger ties and creating favorable conditions to advance the macroeconomic interests of the transit states located along the Middle Corridor.

One prominent example is the latest interstate partnership deals that were inked among the major stakeholders to prioritize the flow of commodities transported via the Middle Corridor, ranging from upgrading existing terminal facilities to delivering technical assistance. The presidents and senior officials of the relevant actors conducted numerous important meetings aimed at leading the way to promote further cooperation in the transit sector along this cross-regional trade route. The increasing number of official and diplomatic exchanges has thus yielded fruitful results with respect to building cordial ties and securing mutually-beneficial agreements.

For instance, the transport ministers of the OTS member states reached an agreement to sign a "Common Cooperation Protocol," and they also agreed on establishing a Coordination Council to deliver practical solutions for problems that may arise between these countries in the field of transportation and logistics during the First Meeting of the Ministers in Charge of Transport held in Baku, on 3 July 2013. Against this background, as a part of the extensive development of digital logistics and transport strategy, the officials put forward several joint initiatives related to the digitalization of the procedures among relevant transit states during the 5th meeting of the Ministers in charge of Transport of the Member and Observer States of the Turkic Council held on 14 October 2021 in Budapest, Hungary. The ministers came to a consensus to optimize the processes of transportation and declaration of goods with the implementation of eTIR, ePermit, and eCMR applications along the Middle Corridor. In the process of globalization, the digitalization and commercialization of transport and transit procedures among the core states associated with MCI tend to expand intermodal transportation routes and build the ecosystem of digital

transport corridors. The integration of multiple digital services and the optimization of cross-border regulations reflect the growing recognition among the participating countries of the transformative potential of digital technologies for economic and social development, and their desire to leverage these technologies to enhance their competitiveness and productivity within the context of MCI. More precisely, through the application of high-tech industrial technologies and efficiency-focused digital solutions, the OTS tries to ensure the productive management of transit operations and automate logistics services among member states.

Another remarkable example is the sister port agreement made between the ports of Baku (Azerbaijan), Aktau (Kazakhstan), and Samsun (Türkiye), which is designed to encourage more trade and business opportunities between them. This tripartite deal includes putting in place a set of policies that would enable them to share best practices and the latest industry developments on port planning and management to enhance maritime connectivity and port efficiency. Signing an agreement on what was termed "international combined freight transportation" within the OTS framework was also discussed during its summit held in Istanbul in November 2021. The resulting Istanbul Declaration qualified this agreement as an important step toward providing crucial measures for the simplification of administrative procedures and, in turn, the optimization of transport operations across the given supply channel.

Given this renewed cooperation record, on 27 June 2022, with the proposal of the Turkish side, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Ministers in Charge of Transportation of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan reached a consensus to enhance the competitiveness of the Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI) in comparison with alternative trade corridors by signing a protocol to establish an intergovernmental working group in Baku, Azerbaijan. This declaration is anticipated to play a crucial role in consolidating stronger diplomatic connections among three major Turkic countries and therefore helping cultivate intra-regional economic bonds in both the short and long run. In addition to key agenda items, the importance of the implementation of the Zangezur corridor was also pointedly underlined during this tripartite ministerial meeting.

Speaking of the Zangezur Corridor, this critical juncture came to light as a consequence of the terms that ended the Second Karabakh War. The proposed route is part of a package of transportation projects that are meant to uninterruptedly reconnect mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan and

thence on to Türkiye by traversing the Syunik province in southern Armenia. Taking into account the economic significance of the aforementioned transit passage within the regional political configuration, developing new trade and communications links and integrating them into the main global trade networks can greatly contribute to the formation of a more peaceful regional security environment in the post-war period. More importantly, by offering huge economic and energy potential to the peripheral states, the Zangezur Corridor could give Ankara a strategic gateway to the wider Caspian basin and one of the faster routes to landlocked Central Asia and farther to China.

Beyond that, on May 11, 2022, due to skyrocketing demand for the Middle Corridor, the delegations of the leading logistic agencies of Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, and Georgia gathered together in Ankara to provide adequate measures for maintaining close coordination and mutual communication within the scope of the Middle Corridor and to explore further possibilities for cooperation in the transportation sector. The quadrilateral meeting resulted in the initiation of the 2022 Action Plan to achieve the expansion of transit opportunities along the given overland linkage in the context of Asia-Europe connectivity. This will help to increase trade among member states, which will also facilitate economic growth and development from increased market access, lower transaction costs, and economies of scale that lead to deeper political and social cooperation.

Additionally, the Middle Corridor Development Roadmap for 2022–2027, which was prepared through the close collaboration of various ministries from Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia and unveiled on 25 November 2022, sets the goals oriented towards the continuous improvement of technological standards and further development of infrastructural and operational capabilities of the Middle Corridor. The significance of the digitalization of trade and transportation corridors was strongly emphasized during the quadripartite meeting held in Aktau, Kazakhstan. When it comes to the technical details of the project, this comprehensive plan could enhance the agility, resilience, and sustainability of operations, leading to efficient route planning and optimal fleet management by allowing cargo operators to wide access a whole range of data communication services and technologies. Intelligent transportation system applications and efficient algorithms appear to be top priorities for the aforementioned countries as they ramp up modernization efforts to enhance service quality and operational efficiency.

Going forward, the official visits of incumbent Kazakh president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Ankara (May 2022) and Baku (August 2022), turned out to be quite

productive in terms of building cordial ties. High-level engagement helped consolidate friendly relations and boost bilateral cooperative ties, allowing parties to strengthen the transport and transit partnership by signing numerous bilateral deals as part of an enhanced partnership. Forging long-term bilateral cooperation over the development of the Middle Corridor was one of the main subjects of these visits. Unsurprisingly, the growing involvement of Kazakhstan with two major stakeholders of the MCI comes amid the context of increasingly complex relations with the Kremlin. Hence, Astana's evolving bilateral ties with both Baku and Ankara demonstrate its desire to pursue further integration policies within the wider framework of the OTS. On the other hand, the Kazakh leadership is looking for areas of cooperation with Azerbaijan and Türkiye not only in the OTS format but also in a trilateral format to overcome current geopolitical and economic challenges.

Nevertheless, rising relations between Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Central Asia will foster long-standing technical partnerships and constitute the core of the transnational cooperation platforms to support multilateral efforts. This rapprochement will also help the OTS to be more actively synergizing with the Beijing-backed Belt and Road Initiative and the EU's recently initiated Global Gateway strategy. In other words, the sustainable development of the Central Eurasian segment of the Sino-EU trade link will represent a primary agenda item for the above-stated Turkic countries within the wider framework of OTS. Similarly, Baku and Ankara will keep encouraging their partners, primarily OTS members, to play a more active role in contributing to the interconnectivity of the region and beyond. More importantly, along with the institutional level, newly-formulated trilateral platforms (Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan and Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan) will also help Turkic states to timely and adequately coordinate their activities at both domestic and international levels.

## Conclusion

Turkic integration is gaining momentum in today's rapidly evolving global landscape. **Geopolitical dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the future of the Organization of Turkic States OTS. The OTS's emergence signifies a positive trajectory for regional cooperation among Turkic states, potentially impacting broader geopolitical and economic trends. As this new geopolitical structure evolves,** the OTS's experience provides a compelling model for other regional organizations seeking to enhance their relevance and effectiveness in a turbulent world. Despite recent regional upheavals, the regional cooperation among

the leading actors of the region will only intensify to overcome the challenging economic state the region finds itself in.

From a strategic point of view, facilitating stronger diplomatic and practical commercial bonds among these key regional states is becoming essentially important for all sides, paving the way for greater cooperation and sustainable connectivity across a broader Eurasian region while creating a counterbalance against heavyweight neighbors in the region. Looking ahead, the newly signed interstate deals are expected to create a smoother operational environment and favorable business conditions along the transit corridors and trade channels, opening new transit and logistics possibilities for the involved parties.

Meanwhile, the Organization of Turkic States took tangible steps to obtain a more active role in the midst of uncertainties and pursued a range of initiatives to promote functional cooperation among its member states, including the establishment of a joint investment fund, the promotion of cooperation in transportation and energy, and the strengthening of social and cultural ties. From a broader perspective, through national governments' regional and economic strategies, these initiatives have facilitated economic growth and development, as well as deeper political and social cooperation both regionally and in a broader sense. Of course, the success of these efforts will depend on their ability to manage internal conflicts, balance external influences, and maintain a cooperative regional environment.

However, despite a set of strategic opportunities and multiple advantages, regional geopolitics remains a major obstacle to further integration and institutionalization. On a geopolitical level, the substantive deepening of Turkish-Caucasian-Central Asian relations has yet to materialize. Given the shared historical background and strategic objectives of the Turkic countries, the OTS has considerable growth potential, and its strategic role in Eurasia is poised to increase. Nonetheless, the alliance still faces mounting uncertainties and serious challenges in promoting and preserving deeper functional cooperation among its members and observer states, including the lack of institutional capacity and regulatory convergence, and the varying levels of economic development.

## References

Erşen, E. and Köstem, S. (Ed.) (2019) *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order*. London: Taylor & Francis.



- Ziyadov, T. (2012) *Azerbaijan as a Regional Hub in Central Eurasia: Strategic Assessment of Euro-Asian Trade and Transportation*. Baku: ADA Press.
- Humbatov, M. and Sari, K. (2017) 'Turkic Council Countries: Infrastructure, Trade, Logistics and Transportation'. *SAM Review* (18-19).
- Ataman, M. (2018) 'The Struggle over Central Asia: Chinese-Russian Rivalry and Turkey's Comeback'. *Insight Turkey*. 20 (4). SETA VAKFI. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26542167> [Accessed 4th April 2023].
- Guliyev, V. (2022) 'The Rising Significance of the Middle Corridor'. *Journal of Baku Dialogues*. 6 (1), pp. 38 - 58.
- Museyibov, A. (2022) Organization of Turkic State's Increasing Role in Stabilizing Eurasia. *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 19 (130). Available from: <https://jamestown.org/program/organization-of-turkic-states-increasing-role-in-stabilizing-eurasia/> [Accessed 4th April 2023].
- Guliyev, V. (2022) Azerbaijan's Efforts to Digitalize the Middle Corridor, *Institute of Development and Diplomacy*. Available from: [https://idd.az/media/2022/12/01/idd\\_policy\\_brief\\_-\\_guliyev\\_-\\_1\\_december.pdf](https://idd.az/media/2022/12/01/idd_policy_brief_-_guliyev_-_1_december.pdf) [Accessed 15th April 2023].
- Guliyev, V. (2023) Neue Perspektiven für die OTS und den Mittelkorridor zwischen Zentralasien und Europa. *Zentralasien-Analysen*. 155 (12). Available from: <https://www.laender-analysen.de/zentralasien-analysen/155/ZentralasienAnalysen155.pdf> [Accessed 17th April 2023].
- Guliyev, V. (2022) The Rise of Trans-Caspian Routes amidst Russia's Isolation. *Geopolitical Monitor*. Available from: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/russian-isolation-and-the-trans-caspian-international-transport-route/> [Accessed 17th April 2023].
- Yagubova, I. (2022) The Growing Role of Türkiye in the South Caucasus: Possible Scenarios. *Institute of Development and Diplomacy*. Available from: [https://idd.az/media/2022/12/27/idd\\_policy\\_brief\\_-\\_yagubova\\_-\\_27\\_december.pdf](https://idd.az/media/2022/12/27/idd_policy_brief_-_yagubova_-_27_december.pdf) [Accessed 17th April 2023].
- Suleymanov, R. (2022) Strengthening Cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is Important for Azerbaijan. *Institute of Development and Diplomacy*. Available from: [https://idd.az/media/2022/11/15/idd\\_policy\\_brief\\_suleymanov\\_05092022.pdf](https://idd.az/media/2022/11/15/idd_policy_brief_suleymanov_05092022.pdf) [Accessed 18th April 2023].
- The Official Website of the OTS (2022) Samarkand Declaration of the Ninth Summit of the Organization of Turkic States. Available from: <https://www.turkicstates.org/assets/pdf/haberler/samarkand-declaration-2679-165.pdf> [Accessed 24th April 2023].

- The Official Website of the OTS (2021) Declaration of the Eighth Summit of the Organization Of Turkic States. Available from: <https://www.turkicstates.org/assets/pdf/haberler/declaration-of-8th-summit-2395-148.pdf> [Accessed 24th April 2023].
- Shahbazov, F. (2022) After Samarkand Summit, the OTS Charts a More Independent Course. *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 19 (173). Available from: <https://jamestown.org/program/after-samarkand-summit-the-ots-charts-a-more-independent-course/> [Accessed 18th April 2023].
- Norén, P. (2023) Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan seize the day to make the Middle Corridor a viable reality. *Common Space*. Available from: <https://www.commonspace.eu/commentary/commentary-kazakhstan-and-azerbaijan-seize-day-make-middle-corridor-viable-reality> [Accessed 18th April 2023].
- Aliyev, T. (2023) Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan Aim to Enhance Strategic Partnership. *Caspian Policy Center*. Available from: <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/kazakhstan-and-azerbaijan-aim-to-enhance-strategic-partnership> [Accessed 19th April 2023].
- Assel Satubaldina (2023) Turkic Integration Gains Momentum as OTS Summit Concludes in Astana. Available from: <https://astanatimes.com/2023/11/turkic-integration-gains-momentum-as-ots-summit-concludes-in-astana/> [Accessed 3rd July 2024].
- The Official Website of the OTS (2023) Declaration of the Tenth Summit of the Organization of the Turkic States. Available from: <https://www.turkicstates.org/assets/pdf/haberler/astana-declaration-3113-215.pdf> [Accessed 3rd July 2024].