

Shaping Eurasia's Future: The Evolving Role and Impact of the Organization of Turkic States

ÖMER KOCAMAN

Organization of Turkic States, Türkiye

ORCID No: 0009-0009-5605-6859

ABSTRACT *This commentary provides a comprehensive analysis of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), tracing its evolution from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to its recent summits. Specifically, it discusses the establishment of the OTS, its institutionalization, and its role in regional and international politics. Furthermore, this analysis delves into the organization's evolution, project execution, and growing regional and global impact, with a particular emphasis on the OTS' commitment to cooperation and solidarity among Turkic states.*

Keywords: Organization of Turkic States, Turkic Cooperation, Regional Diplomacy, Cultural Integration

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The Establishment of the Organization of Turkic States

In the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, Türkiye established close contact and strong relations with the newly-formed Turkic states, becoming the first country to recognize their independence. The Summits of the Heads of Turkic-Speaking States, which started in 1992, embodied their commitment to the spirit of fraternity and cooperation. A total of eight summits, which the Organization held between 1992 and 2009, promoted solidarity among member states, represented a unique platform to guide efforts toward more comprehensive cooperation, and paved the way to the gradual institutionalization of Turkic cooperation.

Due to the formation period of the statecraft in the newly-independent Turkic countries and Türkiye's internal and regional preoccupations during the 1990s, the rapprochement period among the Turkic states in the form of Leaders Summits has lasted over a decade until they realized that they needed an institutional professional mechanism where the decisions of the summits were followed-up and implemented meticulously. By 2009, that spirit of rapprochement became institutionalized thanks to the shared political will of all member states. The Heads of State of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye signed a historic agreement in Nakhchivan on October 3, 2009 to establish the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (also known as the Turkic Council) – an international organi-

zation seeking to encourage comprehensive political, economic, cultural, and social cooperation among Turkic states and coordinating their relevant efforts. Following the ratification of the Nakhchivan Agreement in November 2010 by the parliaments of all member states, the newly-formed Turkic Council established its secretariat, which would coordinate and execute its actions, in İstanbul.

The Secretariat reports to the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Senior Officials Committee and the Council of Elders. Initially, the Organization concentrated on its internal organizational development, identifying priority areas for cooperation and creating a platform to establish relations among the ministries and specialized institutions of its member states. As the Organization of Turkic States rests on the common political will of Turkic states, which are united by language, history, and culture, to build their future together with the same objectives, the Organization, took bold steps over the following years. Upon creating its fundamental documents and completing its organizational development, it facilitated multidimensional cooperation among the member states in more than twenty areas –ranging from political and economic fields to transportation, customs, tourism, education as well as youth and sports, among others– and implemented concrete projects. It developed many projects and put in place mechanisms to promote partnership and cooperation among its members, including the Turkic Chamber of Commerce

and Industry, the Turkic Investment Fund, the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, the Sister Ports Process, the Health Scientific Board, the Supply Chain Group, and the Modern Silk Road Joint Tour Package. Moreover, the Organization has devised mechanisms to cultivate the people-to-people cooperation, which lays the groundwork of the historical fraternal ties among the brotherly Turkic countries, through the initiatives such as Orkhun Student and Academic Exchange Program, the International Youth Camps, Youth Festivals, Collegiate Athletic Competitions, the OTS Youth Platform, and the Young Diplomats Training Programs.

In so doing, in the course of last 13 years, the Organization of Turkic States has largely completed its establishment, institutionalization and enlargement processes, and as a result of the continuous and close working processes among the relevant institutions and agencies of the member countries, a strong communication network and a collaborative working culture among the bureaucracies of respective countries have been built.

Accordingly, the Organization now focuses more on the establishment of binding cooperation among member states, due to the concrete gains achieved with the project-oriented approach it has displayed so far. In this context, the Organization aims to evolve the comprehensive cooperation among brotherly Turkic states towards an irreversible phase with binding multilateral international agreements in the next decade.

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The Organization completed four enlargement processes with Hungary's accession as an observer in 2018, Uzbekistan's full membership in 2019 and the accession of Turkmenistan (2021) and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (2022) as observers. Moreover, it held ten ordinary summits, two extraordinary summits and one informal summit at the level of heads of state. Having formed partnerships with many international organizations, including the United Nations, Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the World Health Organization, the Organization of Turkic States opened its European office in Budapest (2019) to bolster its cooperation with Hungary as well as to work more closely with European countries and institutions across the continent. It is important to note that the member states set an example to many international organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic through their unity and solidarity.

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Last but not least, the increasing and institutionalizing cooperation among the Turkic states made the region and all member states more influential internationally.

The OTS' Institutionalization: The Istanbul, Samarkand, and Astana Summits

Three historic summits, which took place in İstanbul (2021) and Samarkand (2022), and Astana (2023) represented a turning point for the Organization in many ways. Hosted by Türkiye, the 8th Summit led to a historic decision by the Heads of State to rename the entity as the Organization of Turkic States – which was key to revealing the institution's real potential, bolstering its role within the international community, and deepening the cooperation and integration processes. Moreover, the member states adopted the “Turkic World Vision – 2040” document, which charted the course of all cooperation efforts for

the next two decades, at that summit. As a strategic document guiding future cooperation efforts in various areas, where the Turkic states have shared interests, the document was highly significant. Finally, the member states adopted the “OTS Strategy Document 2022-2026” at the Samarkand Summit in 2022 –which was the first roadmap pertaining to the 2040 Vision document.

Meanwhile, the 8th Summit led to the adoption of a regulation that defined the Organization's relationship with third countries and international organizations who want to become observer members and partners. Reflecting the Council's achievements and increasing international prestige, more than ten countries have asked to join the Turkic Council as observers to date. The Organization's cooperation with those countries rests on the above-mentioned regulation. Another major development was the creation of the Turkic Investment Fund, whose groundwork was laid at the 9th Summit in Samarkand in 2022. The Fund shall encourage mutual trade, investments and small and medium –sized enterprises from the member states, contributing to the growth of their national economies.

In a way, the Samarkand Summit complemented the historic decisions made at the Istanbul Summit. Its agenda included the Protocol for the Amendment of the Nakhchivan Agreement, the OTS Strategy for 2022-2026, the OTS Strategy for Facilitating Trade, the Agreement on the Creation of a Simplified Customs



Corridor, the Agreement on International Combined Freight Transportation, the Transport Connection Program, and the Memorandum of Understanding between the Relevant Institutions of the OTS Member States on Digital Human Resources Systems.

Again, the Declaration of the Samarkand Summit made references to encouraging closer cooperation in the fields of the defense industry and the judiciary –in addition to politics and security– in accordance with Vision 2040’s relevant goals, and the year 2023 was identified as the Year of the Turkic Civilization’s Rise. Another major outcome of the 2022 Samarkand Summit was the admission of the Turkish Republic of North-

ern Cyprus as an observer –which marked the fourth enlargement of the Organization.

The Organization held its 10th and most recent summit in Astana in November 2023. There is no doubt that the 10th Summit in Astana represented a milestone for the OTS. It was a historic event that captured the attention of Turkic states as well as all entities interacting with the Turkic World. In particular, the Organization’s engagement with various international organizations over the last year encouraged international stakeholders to follow the Summit more closely.

The 10th Summit represented a celebration of Turkic unity as the leaders of the Turkic states gathered to mark

The leaders of the Turkic Council member states and the Secretary General of the Turkic Council convened in İstanbul on November 12, 2021, where they made a landmark decision to rebrand the Organization as the Organization of Turkic States.
TUR PRESIDENCY / MURAT CETİNMÜHÜRDAĞ / AA

the beginning of a new chapter called the TURKTIME. Taking place in the Kazakh capital, the Summit served as a platform for the sharing of ideas, strategies and commitments seeking to further the Turkic World's shared interests. At the same time, the 10th Summit was proof of the Organization's maturity and ability to adapt to changing circumstances. That fact was embodied by the TURKTIME spirit. In addition to reaffirming the commitment of all states to the principles of unity and solidarity, the Summit demonstrated the Organization's resilience in the face of modern challenges and its credibility worldwide. Accordingly, the number of cooperation areas, which had been steadily increasing since the OTS' establishment, climbed to 30 as a result of new initiatives launched over the last year.

It goes without saying that the Organization's success depends on the active implementation of leaders' decisions. Accordingly, the OTS hosted a total of 110 events over the last eleven months with the support of its member states. Those events related to politics, trade, the economy, transportation, information technologies, customs, tourism, healthcare, security, and education among other topics. In addition to their practical importance, they made serious contributions to further strengthening Turkic cooperation. During Uzbekistan's rotating presidency, the Organization took necessary steps in accordance with the Vision 2040 document, setting new goals and creating a favorable and efficient platform for the following term.

At the Astana Summit, the leaders looked for ways to further strengthen the Organization's influence and to jointly address pressing problems in the world as well as exchanged views and information regarding various fields including the economy. Furthermore, it is important to underline the importance of the Declaration that the Heads of State adopted in Astana. The 156-point document reflected the entire agenda of the Turkic states, and blended the Turkic World's objectives, commitments and spirit of cooperation. It covered all areas of cooperation from politics to cultural and humanitarian affairs, – from major developments to minor details.

Expressing concern over the deteriorating situation in Gaza, the leaders condemned all attacks against civilians, stressed the importance of working toward a two-state solution in Palestine, and called for an immediate ceasefire. They also reiterated Azerbaijan's righteous cause in Karabakh and celebrated the centennial of Türkiye's establishment.

Placing special emphasis on closer economic and trade cooperation, the leaders highlighted the development of transport routes and pipelines, investment funds and ongoing efforts to simplify commercial procedures in addition to discussing the Turkic Investment Fund and projects like TuranSEZ, which will serve as a mechanism to facilitate trade between the relevant countries. That striking enterprise aims to strengthen economic ties, promote innovation, and create a favorable climate for trade

and investment. At a time when economic cooperation bears utmost importance, the Turkic states position themselves as a major player in the global economic arena.

Meanwhile, the Turkic leaders declared Astana and İstanbul as the Turkic World's financial centers for 2024 and 2025 respectively. They resolved to continue their efforts toward facilitating transportation along the Trans-Caspian International East-West Middle Corridor, focus on the development of physical and digital transportation infrastructure projects, and promote transportation cooperation between member states and observers. In this sense, they appreciated the recently-adopted OTS Action Plan Regarding the Transport Connectivity Program's Implementation, instructing their transportation ministers to oversee and monitor that plan's implementation.

Turkish President Erdoğan's particular reference to alphabetic unity in the Astana Summit was a noteworthy development for ensuring and strengthening the unity and solidarity among the member states of OTS. Unification of alphabets will contribute to the growth of self-awareness in terms of belonging to a single civilizational space as mentioned in the Astana Act which was adopted by the leaders of OTS in the Astana Summit. The Turkic leaders especially emphasized the common language and alphabet, and decided that the newly-formed Common Alphabet Commission should continue its work without interruption.

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Another major decision related to the Economic Cooperation Organization's recognition as an observer at the Organization of Turkic States – which makes it the first international organization to become an OTS observer. It is important to note that many countries and international organizations have expressed their intention to attain such status at the OTS –which reflects its high international standing.

Moreover, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan was awarded the “Supreme Order of the Turkic World” by the Council of Heads of State in recognition of his important contributions to strengthening Turkic unity at the proposal of Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. That award was created by the heads of state four years ago and is presented with the approval and signatures of all Heads of State.¹

One of the most meaningful Decisions was the declaration of February 6 as the Day of Remembrance and Solidarity with Disaster Victims based on a proposal by Uzbekistan on

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the occasion of the earthquake in Türkiye. It is important to recall that the entire Turkic World came together and stood in solidarity with Türkiye in the aftermath of the ‘disaster of the century’ in February 2023. February 6 was thus officially etched on the Turkic World’s collective memory to remember those acts of solidarity and the lives lost.

Moreover, the Summit facilitated a debate on improving coordination among the Turkic Cooperation Organizations under the OTS umbrella for the purpose of putting to practice the common cooperation agenda more effectively. The newly-established Coordination Committee was designed to sync all ongoing activities. For that purpose, the leaders urged that the Action Plan for Turkic Cooperation Organizations be prepared and implemented in 2024. Furthermore,

the synchronization of the flags of all Turkic cooperation organizations as a result of the Astana Summit reflected the synergy that the OTS has generated across the Turkic World. Those outcomes were perfectly aligned with the Organization’s goals, including the promotion of closer relations among the member states, encouraging economic growth, and addressing common challenges through joint action and cooperation.

In line with the Vision 2040 document and various five-year plans, which were adopted at previous summits, the Organization shall continue to work during Kazakhstan’s rotating presidency, taking into consideration its priorities and strategy, to implement decisions made at the Astana Summit. The Summit’s outcome was both solid and visionary as well as reflecting the essence of TURKTIME – its main theme. Specifically, it was consolidated by virtue of definite agreements regarding joint efforts toward economic cooperation, cultural enterprises and security. And it was visionary in the sense that the Turkic states embraced the TURKTIME spirit and laid the groundwork for a resilient future based on cooperation. With the Astana Summit, the Organization stressed the importance of uninterrupted dialogue, diplomatic interaction and dynamic strategies to chart its future course.

As mentioned above, the 10th Summit in Astana marked yet another milestone in the history of the Turkic states. It was a statement of intent, a commitment to collective welfare,

and a recognition of the importance of unity and solidarity in addressing global challenges. As the Turkic World enters a new age, the spirit of cooperation and determination, which emanates from Astana, shall undoubtedly shape the future. The Turkic states are the architects of a shared destiny that builds bridges to an interconnected and prosperous future. Kazakhstan's rotating presidency will take that already strong sense of unity to the next level, facilitating important events and actions in the fields of youth and sports, culture, education, healthcare, the economy and trade as well as newly identified areas.

In the 13th year in action, the Organization of Turkic States, which was born out of the vision of a shared history and a common future, has become a dynamic force that shapes the fate of Turkic nations. The outcome of the previous term and the objectives outlined at the Astana Summit lay the groundwork for a period of unprecedented growth, cooperation and shared prosperity among the Turkic states.

The OTS' Role in Regional and International Politics

Since the end of the Cold War, no standing order has endured in the international arena. Instability, regional wars and the ever-decreasing predictability of international politics encourage all states to look for new initiatives, alliances, and unions. The member states of the Organization of Turkic States are no exception. Hence

the Organization's emergence as a center of attraction.

Upon establishing relations through the 'Summit Process' of the 1990s, the Turkic countries created an institutional framework by signing the 2009 Nakhchivan Agreement. The OTS Secretariat became operational in İstanbul in 2010, promoting sustainable and lasting relations as well as project-based cooperation among the member states in many different areas, including foreign policy, security, defense, the economy, energy, education, healthcare, youth and sports, and the media.

Having become a unique entity with its pragmatic, result-oriented and project-based activities, the Organization distinguished itself from other international organizations, becoming more and more attractive to member states and countries in the region in the process. By hosting annual summits between Heads of State and foreign minister as well as sector-specific ministerial meetings almost every month, with tangible outcomes of such meetings reflected into action rapidly, the OTS strives to transform the Turkic states and Eurasia into a basin of peace, fraternity, and trust.

In addition to engaging in multilateral and project-centered activities almost across the board among its member states, the Organization proved itself by reacting rapidly to global and regional threats. Specifically, it responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by holding an Extraordinary Summit of Heads of State and developing con-

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crete solutions, through ministries of health and transportation, with a project-centered approach to ensure that all member states would overcome that challenge with as little damage as possible. That reaction caused the Organization to attract greater attention in regional and global politics. In 2021, against the backdrop of the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan, the OTS held an Extraordinary Summit of Foreign Ministers to discuss the situation in that country. That the OTS members responded to the damage, which the U.S. retreat and the resulting power vacuum in Afghanistan could inflict regionally and globally, highlighted its importance as a responsible stakeholder in the international political arena.

During the Second Karabakh War, the Organization issued statements of political support that strongly emphasized the importance of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Moreover, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was admitted as an observer. Most recently, the OTS expressed

deep concern over the deteriorating situation in Gaza, condemned all attacks against the civilian population, stressed the importance of pursuing a two-state solution in Palestine, and highlighted the need for an immediate ceasefire. Those developments showcased the importance that the Organization attaches to political and security issues in the Turkic and Muslim worlds.

As the Russia-Ukraine war undermined international trade corridors and energy security along the China-Russia-Europe route, the OTS region attracted the attention of global powers like Europe and the United States as well as regional powers like Russia, China, India and Iran thanks to its unique strategically-important location, natural resources above and beneath the ground and their economic value as well as its air, rail and land transport routes and fiber-optic transport and communication networks along the North-South and East-West axes.

At a time when global and regional competition continues to gain momentum, the OTS completed substantial projects in the OTS member States in Eurasia, especially regarding the economy and transportation, to strengthen the bonds among friendly and fraternal nations as well as to contribute to regional and global peace, supply chains, uninterrupted East-West and North-South trade, and interaction.

The main theme of the 3rd Summit in Gabala, Azerbaijan (2013) was

“Transportation” and since then the Organization has held many ministerial meetings to keep the East-West Middle Corridor on the global agenda. Facilitating sizeable investments and countless improvements in the fields of transportations and customs across its member states and making major contributions to regional and global trade. The regional and global supply chain, which was undermined by the Russia-Ukraine war, has identified a new alternative thanks to the Middle Corridor. The same goes for energy. That Europe and some Asian countries turned to the OTS region as an alternative source of energy undoubtedly bolstered the Turkic World’s strategic importance.

Under the aforementioned circumstances, increasing interest and engagement of Europe, Russia, the U.S., China, and India with the Turkic states in various ways proves the growing importance of the OTS for the region and the rest of the world. The Organization, which contributes to fruitful relations within the Turkic bloc and with regional and global powers through multilateral, definite and project-centered efforts, successfully completed its establishment and institutionalization processes and continues its enlargement and development at a steady rate.

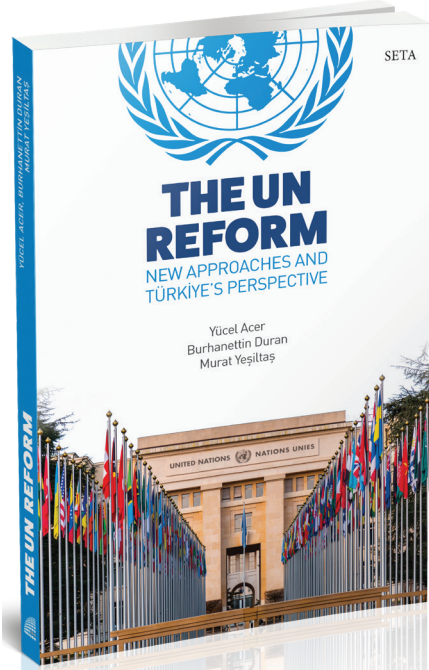
The Organization, which has been mindful of global and regional developments since the start of the

COVID-19 pandemic, developing responsible and timely responses to those challenges, will keep contributing to regional and global peace and stability as a rising player in international politics on the basis of transparency and with its result-oriented approach, programs, and project-based concrete efforts.

The Organization of Turkic States, which generated a new culture of cooperation, model and identity with summits, sector-specific ministerial meetings, thematic events and activities, will move forward with multilateral, binding agreements between its member states toward deeper cooperation almost across the board. As President Erdoğan expressed in Baku Summit in 2019 as a family assembly of “one nation, six states,” united under the OTS umbrella, the Turkic World shall be an entity at the heart of Eurasia that hopefully shelters the region from all sorts of instability through North-South and East-West interaction. ■

Endnotes

1. The first Supreme Order was awarded to Nursultan Nazarbayev, the former President of Kazakhstan and the OTS’ Honorary President, at the Baku Summit in 2019. Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev received the Supreme Order in 2021 for his outstanding contributions to strengthening the Turkic World and for his role in the liberation of the previously occupied Karabakh region. Finally, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, the Chairman of the Halk Maslakhaty of Turkmenistan, received the award in 2022 for their distinguished service to the Turkic World.



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