



GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES FOR CENTRAL ASIA: OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the geopolitical significance of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) for the Central Asian region, focusing on its impact on regional integration processes and its strategic opportunities in the political, economic, and security spheres. The study explores the stages of the Organization's formation, its institutional development, and the evolution of cooperation mechanisms among member states through historical and geopolitical perspectives. Particular attention is given to the role of the OTS in developing transport and communication networks, strengthening geoeconomic connectivity, and promoting cooperation in the fields of energy and regional security.

The article further assesses the potential of the OTS to serve as a balancing mechanism for Central Asian states in the context of competing interests among major geopolitical actors, including Russia, China, the United States, and other influential powers. At the same time, potential challenges associated with regional integration processes, external political pressures, and Türkiye's ambitions in the region are critically analyzed. The findings demonstrate the strategic importance of the Organization of Turkic States in promoting multilateral cooperation, strengthening regional stability, and contributing to the emergence of a new geopolitical balance in Central Asia.

KEYWORDS: Organization of Turkic States, Central Asia, geopolitics, regional integration, geoeconomics, geopolitical competition, Turkic world, strategic partnership.

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, as the role of regional organizations in the international system continues to expand, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) is emerging as one of the most significant integration frameworks in the Eurasian space. In particular, the geostrategic location of Central Asia, its abundant natural resources, and its position at the crossroads of major transport and communication corridors linking East and West necessitate a closer examination of the activities and strategic relevance of the OTS.

Following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Turkic states faced the need to deepen political, economic, and cultural cooperation. This process initially developed through a series of summits of Turkic-speaking states and subsequently acquired an institutional framework with the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009. The process reached a new stage of development in 2021, when the organization was officially renamed the Organization of Turkic States, reflecting its growing scope and institutional maturity.

Today, the OTS functions not only as a platform based on shared cultural and historical ties but also as a regional institution that facilitates the coordination of geoeconomic and geopolitical interests. At the same time, the intensification of competition among major global powers, the multi-vector foreign policies pursued by Central Asian states, and the intersection of competing regional interests demonstrate that the Organization operates within an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

The primary objective of this study is to comprehensively analyze the geopolitical significance of the Organization of Turkic States for Central Asia, assess its impact on regional integration processes, and evaluate the opportunities and challenges associated with its growing role in the region.

Literature Review

The Organization of Turkic States and the geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia have attracted considerable attention from both international and regional scholars. In particular, M. Aydın examines the historical development of relations between Türkiye and the Central Asian states and analyzes the new geopolitical environment that emerged in the post-Cold War era, highlighting Türkiye's foreign policy approach toward the region. The works of H. Eroğlu, V. Toklu, and V. Yılmaz explore the evolution of Turkish foreign policy and its role within the broader regional security architecture.

In his studies, İ. Bal emphasizes the strategic importance of the Turkic republics in Türkiye's foreign policy after the Cold War. Similarly, E. Çaman analyzes Türkiye's emerging regional policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia from the perspective of geopolitical transformations. The approaches advanced by M. N. Turan provide valuable insights into the geopolitical dimensions of the "Turkish Model" and the concept of the "Turkic World."

The research of K. Zorlu and H. Doğanay focuses on the geographical boundaries, demographic potential, and geocivilizational characteristics of the Turkic world. Meanwhile, the works of Ö. F. Kocatepe and V. Huseynov examine the prospects for political and military cooperation within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States, its contribution to regional security, and the opportunities for greater integration in the field of defense and security cooperation.

Analysis And Results

The formation of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) is closely linked to the establishment and development of relations between Türkiye and the countries of Central Asia. From a historical perspective, cooperation between Türkiye and the Central Asian states began to develop following the end of the Cold War. Prior to this period, relations had been significantly constrained by the Moscow Treaty signed in 1921 between the newly established Republic of Türkiye and the Soviet government [1, p. 367]. Under the terms of this agreement, Türkiye was obliged to suspend its relations with the "Turks abroad" living within Soviet territory [5, p. 181]. Consequently, this policy, initiated in 1921, remained in effect until the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

This approach was also influenced by Türkiye's foreign policy orientation during the period from 1923 to 1938, which was largely based on preserving the international status quo and contributing to international peace and security [8, p. 443]. During these years, the primary

objective of Turkish foreign policy was to safeguard the country's hard-won independence and territorial integrity within the framework of the existing international order [11].

The end of the Cold War brought profound changes and significant transformations to the international system. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of East and West Germany, one of the first regions toward which Türkiye sought to establish closer ties was the Turkic world. In this regard, Türkiye's growing interest in the region became particularly evident even before the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union, during the period when the Soviet state was already entering a phase of disintegration. As the Turkic-speaking republics of the former Soviet Union declared their independence one after another, they emerged as autonomous actors within the international system. After decades of Soviet rule, the Turkic peoples entered a new era of nation-state building. In response to these evolutionary changes, Türkiye reassessed and reoriented its policy toward the region [2, p. 370].

The emergence of independent Turkic states in Central Asia created favorable conditions for strengthening cooperation with Türkiye. The independence of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan-countries sharing significant linguistic, religious, and cultural affinities with Türkiye-generated considerable enthusiasm in Ankara and was perceived as a development that could substantially enhance Türkiye's regional role. As a result, Türkiye adopted a new foreign policy approach that prioritized relations with the Turkic states, influenced by both idealistic and pan-Turkic perspectives.

These aspirations attracted international attention. American statesman Henry Kissinger referred to the region as the "Turkic world stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China," while the then President of Türkiye, Turgut Özal, characterized this new geopolitical vision with the concept of the "Turkic Century" [3, p. 187]. These ideas reflected the growing perception that the newly independent Turkic states could form the basis of a broader framework for political, economic, and cultural cooperation across Eurasia.

It should be noted that the discourse of the "Turkic World" is defined from a geopolitical perspective not only as a geographical space encompassing all Turkic peoples and states, but also as an ideal that requires continuous effort and cooperation to be realized [9]. From a geographical standpoint, it is argued that the boundaries of the Turkic World extend from Kosovo and Montenegro in the west to Mongolia in the east. Within this vast geographical area exist seven independent Turkic states as well as several autonomous or semi-autonomous regions, including East Turkestan, Tatarstan, Chuvashia, Bashkortostan, Sakha (Yakutia), Altai, Karachay, and Balkaria. It should also be emphasized that these seven independent states occupy only approximately 43.7 percent of the territory commonly associated with the Turkic World. Today, the Turkic World encompasses a population of around 300 million people living across an area of approximately 10 million square kilometers [12, p. 10].

Central Asia constitutes the heart of Eurasia, which has traditionally been regarded as the focal point of major geopolitical theories concerning global influence and strategic dominance. Four of the five Central Asian states are independent Turkic countries. East Turkestan, located in the eastern part of Central Asia, is bordered by the Karakoram and Kunlun mountain ranges in the south and the Greater Altai Mountains in the northeast. According to some historians, the Turkic peoples who inhabited various political and geographical entities across the "Old World" originally emerged from East Turkestan and later expanded into Western Turkestan and other regions [4].

In the contemporary international environment, characterized by significant geopolitical and economic transformations, integration and cooperation among Turkic states have become not merely a choice but a strategic necessity. Following the independence of the Turkic republics, the first major step toward institutionalized cooperation was the initiation of the Summits of Turkic-Speaking States. These meetings laid the foundation for greater unity among Turkic countries. The institutionalization of this process at the Nakhchivan Summit in 2009 represented a crucial turning point in deepening cooperation and strengthening the perception of a common Turkic identity. Subsequently, the decision adopted at the Istanbul Summit in 2021 to rename the organization as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) provided a more concrete institutional framework for the political, economic, cultural, and strategic potential of the Turkic World [10].

As a result, the Organization's overall concept has evolved from a framework focused primarily on cultural cooperation into a broader platform encompassing economic, financial, and security cooperation. Furthermore, discussions have increasingly emerged regarding the possibility of expanding collaboration into the field of defense. In this regard, following Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War, the summit of the heads of the National Security Councils of OTS member and observer states held in 2022 was regarded as a significant step toward developing a common security vision. Among the member states, Azerbaijan has been one of the strongest advocates of expanding defense cooperation within the OTS framework. According to President Ilham Aliyev, in a world where wars and conflicts remain a persistent threat, the primary guarantee of security is a strong defense capability. Therefore, cooperation among member states in the fields of security, defense, and the defense industry should be further strengthened and expanded [6].

According to Turkish researcher Ömer Faruk Kocatepe, military cooperation between Türkiye and the Turkic states is important not only for strengthening the armed forces of the participating countries but also for establishing peace and security throughout the region. In particular, developing new approaches to resolving territorial disputes and border conflicts that have persisted since the dissolution of the Soviet Union remains a critical task. Political, economic, and security organizations established to promote regional peace, stability, and cooperation—such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—have thus far been unable to provide lasting solutions to many of the region's existing challenges. Similar criticisms have also been directed at Western-based organizations, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) [7, p. 10]. In particular, Russia's military intervention in Ukraine since 2022, the uncertainty surrounding its geopolitical position, and the persistence of Russian militarism have contributed to declining confidence in Moscow-centered political institutions.

At the same time, although the Organization of Turkic States is widely regarded as a promising model of regional integration based on unity and mutual interests, a number of critical and skeptical views regarding its activities, nature, and future continue to exist within international political and academic circles. These concerns are primarily related to geopolitical considerations, the Organization's internal dynamics, and especially Türkiye's foreign policy ambitions in Central Asia. Such concerns may potentially conflict with the interests of major

geopolitical actors, including the European Union, China, and Russia, as well as with the multi-vector foreign policy strategies pursued by the Central Asian states themselves.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Turkic World is situated within a region characterized by intense competition among major global powers such as Russia, China, and the United States. Consequently, effective and institutionalized cooperation among Turkic states is of considerable importance for both regional and global stability. This reality encourages Central Asian countries to pursue balanced and pragmatic foreign policies. In this context, the Organization of Turkic States may serve as a balancing mechanism in the political relations of its member states with Russia, China, the United States, India, Pakistan, Iran, and the Arab countries. Such a role could be further strengthened through military-political cooperation and the modernization of defense industries within the OTS framework.

However, Türkiye does not currently possess sufficient resources or capabilities to fully protect the interests of Central Asian states against all major global power centers. Therefore, it is natural for the countries of the region to seek a careful balance among competing geopolitical actors, despite the challenges involved. As a result, some ambitious initiatives proposed by Türkiye within the OTS framework may face limitations or receive only partial support from Central Asian member states, which remain committed to preserving strategic flexibility in their foreign policies.

Conclusion

Today, the Organization of Turkic States is evolving from a mechanism primarily based on cultural affinity into a regional institution with significant geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions. Through its efforts to develop transport and communication corridors, deepen trade and economic integration, and expand cooperation in the fields of energy and security, the Organization is contributing to the growing strategic importance of Central Asia in international affairs.

The study demonstrates that the OTS provides important opportunities for strengthening regional connectivity, promoting economic development, enhancing political dialogue, and improving coordination among Turkic states. The Organization also has the potential to function as a balancing mechanism within an increasingly complex geopolitical environment characterized by competition among major global powers.

At the same time, the future effectiveness of the OTS will depend on its ability to address several challenges, including differences in national interests among member states, external geopolitical pressures, and concerns regarding the balance between regional cooperation and national sovereignty. Maintaining an inclusive and pragmatic approach will therefore be essential for ensuring the Organization's long-term sustainability and relevance.

Overall, the Organization of Turkic States represents an increasingly significant actor in the evolving geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. By promoting multilateral cooperation, strengthening regional stability, and fostering greater economic and strategic connectivity, the OTS has the potential to play a constructive role in shaping a more balanced and cooperative regional order in the years ahead.

At the same time, the activities of the Organization of Turkic States are carried out within a complex geopolitical environment where the interests of major powers such as Russia, China,

the United States, and other influential actors intersect. This situation creates a number of challenges for the Organization, including external political pressures, asymmetries in the integration process, and constraints arising from the multi-vector foreign policies pursued by member states. Nevertheless, the OTS is increasingly emerging as an important platform for Central Asian countries, contributing to the maintenance of geopolitical balance, the strengthening of regional stability, and the promotion of multilateral cooperation.

Overall, the future effectiveness of the Organization of Turkic States will largely depend on the extent to which its member states are able to deepen institutional cooperation based on shared interests, adapt to evolving geopolitical realities, and enhance their practical capacity to ensure regional security and economic integration. The Organization's long-term success will be determined not only by its institutional development but also by its ability to respond effectively to external challenges while maintaining unity and cooperation among its members.

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