

The Importance of The Organization of Turkish States in Turkey's Relations with Central Asian States

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Abstract

This article examines the strategic function performed by the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in Türkiye's Central Asia policy in light of institutional developments between 2021 and 2026. It aims to identify the organization's internal capabilities, external environment, and capacity to deepen cooperation between Türkiye and the Central Asian states. Within a qualitative case-study design, official declarations, strategic documents, reports by international organizations, and peer-reviewed scholarship are assessed through document analysis and process tracing. SWOT factors are coded across political-institutional, trade-transport, energy, security, and cultural-humanitarian dimensions and converted into strategic combinations through a TOWS matrix. The findings identify shared identity, Trans-Caspian connectivity, and a networked institutional ecosystem as the organization's principal strengths, while consensus-based governance, limited intra-organizational trade, logistical bottlenecks, and divergent foreign-policy orientations constrain implementation capacity. Its theoretical contribution is the model of "selective functional institutionalization", identity generates political trust, whereas sustainable outcomes depend on specific regimes, measurable indicators, and shared ownership among member states.

Keywords: Türkiye; Central Asia; Organization of Turkic States; regionalization; SWOT; TOWS; Middle Corridor; institutionalization; multi-vector foreign policy; functional cooperation.

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1. Introduction

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye viewed Central Asia not only through the prism of shared language, history, and culture but also as a new space for political and economic cooperation. During the initial period, Ankara's emphasis on symbolic leadership encountered the regional states' need to consolidate sovereignty, preserve their established relations with Russia and China, and pursue multi-vector foreign policies. Türkiye-Central Asia relations therefore

developed not as a unidirectional model of influence, but as a polycentric process negotiated among the parties and constrained by the agency of the member states. (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022; Akıllı, 2019)

The dialogue among the leaders of the Turkic-speaking states, initiated at the 1992 Ankara Summit, acquired a legal and institutional basis with the Nakhchivan Agreement of 3 October 2009. The Turkic Council, which became operational in 2010, was renamed the Organization of Turkic States at the Istanbul Summit of

12 November 2021, where the leaders also adopted the Turkic World Vision 2040. The organization's current full members are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan. Its observers are Hungary, Turkmenistan, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and the Economic Cooperation Organization. This composition has transformed the OTS into an intergovernmental platform linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus. (Organization of Turkic States [OTS], 2009, 2021a, 2025a)

The existing literature generally interprets the organization from three perspectives, as a sphere of identity and cultural diplomacy, as an instrument of economic and transport integration, or as a geopolitical actor capable of affecting the balance of power in Eurasia. Although these approaches are important, some fail to consider together the post-2021 institutional deepening, the operationalization of the Turkic Investment Fund in 2023, multilateral programs concerning the Middle Corridor, the 2024 proposal for a common Turkic alphabet, and the Central Asian border agreements of 2025. Moreover, descriptive SWOT lists frequently stop short of converting identified factors into strategy. (Demir, 2022; Emeklier et al., 2022; Musabay Baki, 2022)

The article argues that the OTS's advantage lies not in shared identity alone, but in its ability to translate identity into measurable functional regimes in transport, customs, investment, education, and risk management. Within this process, Türkiye plays a more sustainable role as an initiator, a bridge to Western and maritime routes, and a coordinator of rules than as a dominant center.

2. Literatures and Methods

The research employs a qualitative single-case study design. The empirical corpus comprises summit declarations issued between 1992 and 2026, the Nakhchivan Agreement, the Turkic World Vision 2040, documents on the OTS's structure and membership, World Bank and OECD reports on the Trans-Caspian transport corridor, official materials issued by the Turkic Academy and the United Nations, and peer-reviewed academic literature. The primary temporal focus is 2021-2026, while the 1992-2020 period is used as background for explaining the organization's institutional genesis.

The documents were analyzed through two methods. First, process tracing was used to identify the organization's transition from a consultative format to a

legal institution and subsequently to a platform for functional projects. Second, directed content analysis classified the evidence across five coding domains: political-institutional affairs, trade and transport, energy, security, and cultural-humanitarian cooperation. For every factor, the type of source, its current status, and the direction of its effect on Türkiye-Central Asia relations were examined.

In the SWOT framework, strengths and weaknesses were defined as the organization's internal capabilities and limitations, whereas opportunities and threats were treated as features of the external environment. To reduce the subjectivity and strategic ambiguity associated with simple list-making, the factors were triangulated across official documents, independent international reports, and academic literature. Internal and external factors were then paired into SO, WO, ST, and WT strategies within a TOWS matrix. This procedure converts SWOT from a description of the situation into an action-oriented strategic instrument. (Helms & Nixon, 2010; Weihrich, 1982)

The analysis has two principal limitations. First, many outcomes of an intergovernmental organization are expressed through declarations, while implementation data are not equally accessible across all policy areas. The article therefore does not equate declaratory commitments with practical outcomes, claims concerning trade, transport, and institutional implementation are compared, wherever possible, with independent multilateral sources. Second, SWOT is not a probabilistic measure, it is an evidence-based strategic classification.

3. Results

The formation of the OTS can be divided into three stages. During the first, consultative stage from 1992 to 2008, the summits restored political communication and a shared sense of identity among the newly sovereign states. The official chronology records meetings in Ankara (1992), Istanbul (1994), Bishkek (1995), Tashkent (1996), Astana (1998), Baku (2000), Istanbul (2001), and Antalya (2006). Consequently, the date "Bishkek-1994," which appears in some secondary sources, is incorrect; the summit was held in 1995. (OTS, n.d.-a)

The second stage, covering 2009-2020, was characterized by institutionalization through the Nakhchivan Agreement, a permanent Secretariat, and a

network of Turkic cooperation institutions. TURKSOY, TURKPA, the Turkic Academy, and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation extended political dialogue into culture, parliamentary diplomacy, science, and heritage. Uzbekistan's accession as a full member in 2019 strengthened Central Asia's representation within the organization and increased its demographic and economic weight. (Akıllı, 2019; OTS, n.d.-b)

During the third, strategic-functional stage beginning in 2021, the change of name to the OTS was accompanied by a program considerably broader than symbolic rebranding. Vision 2040 sought to facilitate the movement of goods, capital, services, technology, and people, strengthen transport and energy connectivity and enhance foreign-policy coordination. The 2025 Gabala Summit introduced the "OTS+" format, reinforcing the organization's openness to partnerships beyond formal membership. This development indicates that the OTS is evolving into a layered and adaptable regional platform rather than a closed ethnic alliance. (OTS, 2021a, 2025b)

Türkiye contributes three types of resources to the OTS. The first is agenda-setting capacity, expressed through summit diplomacy, the location of the Secretariat in Istanbul, and Türkiye's sponsorship of numerous initiatives. The second is geographical connectivity, Türkiye links the Caspian-South Caucasus route to European and Mediterranean markets. The third is normative and soft-power capacity, which produces long-term societal ties through education, media, culture,

tourism, and business networks.

These resources, however, do not automatically translate into leadership. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan engage simultaneously with Russia, China, the European Union, the United States, South Korea, Japan, and the Gulf states, their security commitments and economic dependencies also differ. The OTS therefore gains legitimacy not as a "Turkish project," but through member equality, rotating chairmanship, consensus, and the aggregation of compatible components of national interest. The empirical literature indicates that Türkiye's economic and security influence in the region remains limited in comparison with that of Russia and China, although it is expanding in transport, defense industries, education, and diplomatic networks. (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022; Salihi & Mehmetcik, 2025)

From this perspective, the OTS is not a classical supranational integration organization. Although it is normatively grounded in identity, it is operationally intergovernmental, consensus-based, and characterized by differentiated rates of development across sectors. This feature lowers the entry costs for sovereignty-sensitive members, but also limits binding implementation, a common budget, and monitoring capacity. The outcome is not uniform integration across all domains, but deeper cooperation in selected areas such as transport, customs, investment, and education. (Avçu, 2025; Emeklier et al., 2022)

Table 1. SWOT analysis of the OTS in the Context of Türkiye's Central Asia Policy

S — STRENGTHS <i>internal factors</i> • S1. A shared historical-cultural identity and regular high-level political dialogue. • S2. An institutional ecosystem comprising TURKSOY, TURKPA, the Turkic Academy, the Foundation, and the Turkic Investment Fund. • S3. Geographical continuity along the Central Asia-Caspian-South Caucasus-Türkiye axis and access to the Mediterranean. • S4. Complementarity among energy-producing, transit, and energy-consuming economies. • S5. Capacity to build diplomatic bridges through members' participation in diverse international networks.	W — WEAKNESSES <i>internal factors</i> • W1. Limited intra-OTS trade and high customs and logistics costs. • W2. Consensus-based and voluntary implementation without supranational enforcement. • W3. Divergent security affiliations and foreign-policy priorities among members. • W4. Uneven financing, administrative capacity, and statistical-data quality. • W5. Linguistic and alphabetic proximity does not automatically harmonize political and legal standards.
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O — OPPORTUNITIES *external factors*

- O1. Accelerating the Middle Corridor through ports, railways, digital customs, and single-window systems.
- O2. Financing SMEs, joint value chains, and industrial cooperation through the Turkic Investment Fund.
- O3. Moving beyond oil and gas transit toward renewable energy, electricity networks, and green finance.
- O4. Student and researcher mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications.
- O5. Joint management of practical risks related to Afghanistan, climate, water, and natural disasters.

T — THREATS *external factors*

- T1. Great-power competition, sanctions, and spillovers from secondary geoeconomic pressure.
- T2. Politicization of South Caucasus transport corridors and disputes over connectivity arrangements.
- T3. Terrorism, illicit trade, and humanitarian instability emanating from Afghanistan.
- T4. Dependence on commodity prices, export routes, and global supply chains.

Strengths

The first strength of the OTS is the complementarity among identity, political dialogue, and operational institutions. A shared language family and historical memory generate social legitimacy for cooperation, but results are produced by bodies such as TURKSOY, TURKPA, the Turkic Academy, the Secretariat, and the Investment Fund. Cultural diplomacy acquires strategic value only when it develops into a network of trust capable of reducing transaction costs. (Akıllı, 2019)

The second strength is geographical and economic complementarity. The resource base of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan's position as a Caspian and South Caucasus hub and Türkiye's industrial, logistical, and European-market access can be combined within a single functional chain. In this context, "geographical continuity" should be measured not as a slogan, but through port capacity, rail-service frequency, customs-data exchange, and tariff harmonization.

The third strength is the participation of members in diverse international organizations and partnership networks. Although divergent orientations are often treated as a weakness, if effectively managed they enable the OTS to build issue bridges among, the European Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and other platforms.

Weaknesses

The principal weakness is the gap between political declarations and implementation. Consensus protects the

equality of members, but it can also delay decisions and diffuse responsibility. Unlike the European Union, the OTS has no supranational legislature, binding arbitration mechanism, or large redistributive budget. The true measure of cooperation is therefore not the number of summits, but the incorporation of agreements into national legislation and the reduction of time and costs for citizens and businesses.

A gap between potential and practice also persists in trade and logistics. Although the political importance of the Middle Corridor has increased, transshipment at Caspian ports, border waiting times, divergent tariffs, shortages of wagons and ferries, duplicated documentation, and non-interoperable digital systems continue to reduce speed. The World Bank estimates that appropriate policies and investment could triple freight volumes and halve travel time, this projection simultaneously demonstrates the considerable efficiency reserves that remain within the current system. (World Bank, 2023; OECD, 2023, 2025)

A further constraint is the asymmetry in economic size, institutional quality, financial resources, and external-security dependencies. The 34-letter common Turkic alphabet proposed in 2024 is an important symbol of cultural convergence, but it does not mean that a single alphabet with identical legal force has been implemented in every country. Standards are introduced gradually through national decisions. (Turkic Academy, 2024).

Opportunities

The greatest opportunity is to transform the Middle

Corridor from a “route” into a “service regime.” Alongside infrastructure, this requires electronic queuing, advance cargo information, a single transit document, mutually recognized authorized economic operators, coordinated tariffs, and regular ferry schedules. Türkiye can connect Central Asian markets with European standards, industrial production, and seaports. Yet the corridor’s success depends not only on Türkiye, but also on open cooperation with Georgia, the European Union, China, and international financial institutions.

The second opportunity is to transform the Turkic Investment Fund from symbolic capital into a project-preparation institution. If the Fund finances small and medium-sized enterprises, cross-border industrial clusters, cold chains, logistics hubs, digital services, and green-energy projects through uniform and transparent criteria, interstate political proximity can become interfirm value chains. The effects of joint projects on local employment, export diversification, and technology transfer should be evaluated openly.

The third opportunity is to avoid limiting energy cooperation to hydrocarbon transit. Although alternative routes for Caspian gas remain important, electricity transmission, wind and solar potential, green hydrogen, methane-emission reductions, and climate finance constitute long-term priorities. This agenda can convert differences in members’ resource profiles into common energy-security and decarbonization projects.

The fourth opportunity lies in human capital. Student and researcher mobility, mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications, joint research grants, digital libraries, and terminological standards can move the OTS from elite diplomacy toward intersocietal cooperation. The common-alphabet proposal will likewise generate practical benefits when linked to translation technologies, corpus linguistics, and open educational resources.

Threats

The first threat is the interpretation of the OTS as an exclusive instrument of great-power competition. Given the high levels of trade, infrastructure, and security interdependence with Russia and China, an anti-Russian or anti-Chinese bloc narrative would conflict with the multi-vector policies of the Central Asian members.

The second threat is the politicization of transport

corridors. Positive developments regarding peace and connectivity in the South Caucasus create opportunities for the Middle Corridor, but disagreements over border-crossing arrangements, sovereign control, and the designation of routes may slow projects. The OTS should therefore support technical interoperability, international transit law, and the parallel development of existing routes instead of political maximalism.

The third threat is the convergence of instability, illicit trade, and radicalization in Afghanistan with climate- and water-related risks. The signing of the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan state-border treaty on 13 March 2025 and the agreement on the junction point of the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan borders on 31 March substantially reduced earlier tensions. Consequently, treating “unresolved borders” as an immutable weakness is outdated. Nevertheless, local implementation of the agreements, access to water and pastures, and trust among border communities still require active governance. (United Nations, 2025, President of Uzbekistan, 2025).

4. Discussion

The findings show that it is insufficient to explain the OTS either as a fully integrated union or merely as a cultural club. Identity generates political trust and an agenda, but binding powers remain limited and operational progress is uneven across sectors. This article conceptualizes the resulting pattern as “selective functional institutionalization.” The model has three conditions, members accept a common political framework, technical regimes are constructed in areas of overlapping interest and success is evaluated not through compulsory centralization, but through measurable and reproducible services.

Empirical research suggests that institutional proximity may have a positive effect on foreign trade, but the causal mechanism cannot be attributed to the organization’s name alone. Exchange rates, market size, commodity composition, transport costs, and bilateral agreements also affect outcomes. The central task for the OTS’s economic effectiveness is therefore not to increase trade volumes as a political slogan, but to improve border-crossing times, reduce the number of documents, strengthen logistics reliability, and expand firm-level participation. (Çetinkaya & Demirel, 2024).

Strategic Solutions Based on TOWS

Table 2. TOWS Strategies Derived from the SWOT Factors

Strategy	Logic	Priority operational direction
SO	Strength + opportunity	Combine Trans-Caspian connectivity with the institutional network by launching an integrated package for digital customs, port scheduling, and the Turkic Investment Fund along the Middle Corridor.
WO	Weakness + opportunity	Offset voluntary implementation through sector-specific protocols, responsible agencies, deadlines, and an open monitoring dashboard; expand the participation of SMEs and universities.
ST	Strength + threat	Use members' multi-layered diplomatic ties to position the OTS as an open platform for functional cooperation with third countries and international institutions rather than as a closed geopolitical bloc.
WT	Weakness + threat	Apply sanctions, debt, supply-chain, and reputational due diligence; generate results first in lower-risk fields such as transport, customs, education, and disaster management.

Source: Author's analysis. The strategies were developed by pairing internal and external factors.

The SO strategy uses existing strengths to realize the largest opportunity Trans-Caspian connectivity. The OTS could establish a single implementation portfolio for transport ministers, customs authorities, port operators, and the Investment Fund. The WO strategy balances the organization's voluntary nature with precise sectoral protocols and monitoring. Every project should have a baseline indicator, deadline, responsible agency, financing source, and independent evaluation mechanism.

Under the ST strategy, members' diverse external networks become a resource for external balancing rather than a threat. Project-based cooperation with third countries and multilateral banks can reduce concerns about bloc formation. The WT strategy manages the gap between ambition and capacity before undertaking high-risk defense and political commitments, it is advisable to deepen politically less costly but publicly visible cooperation in customs, disaster management, health, education, and business standards.

The first implication for Türkiye is that leadership should be measured by the production of collective goods rather than by "seizing the initiative." Project agendas should be jointly designed by member states and sustained across rotating chairmanships. The second implication is to treat bilateral relations not as competitors to the OTS, but as pilot mechanisms: a digital-customs or qualifications-recognition system successfully tested between two states can subsequently be transformed into

a multilateral standard.

The third implication is to place Central Asian agency at the center of the process. Regional states use the OTS to increase the number of their external partners without abandoning other relationships. Türkiye's proposals are more likely to be accepted when they offer diversification, technology, market access, and transit opportunities rather than a zero-sum choice. The fourth implication is to connect symbolic language with technical governance: references to common history matter, but customs and payment arrangements are decisive for businesses, credit recognition for students, and reliable schedules for freight carriers.

5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the OTS has institutionalized Türkiye's Central Asia policy through regular summits, sectoral institutions, and common strategic documents, while the organization's influence is strongest in functional areas where member-state interests overlap. The concise answer to the research question is that the OTS provides Türkiye with agenda-setting, connectivity, and soft-power resources, its practical effectiveness, however, is determined by consensus-based governance, transport costs, economic asymmetries, external dependencies, and member-state agency.

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