

The Potential Evolution of the OTS into a Military Bloc

Is a New Security Alignment Emerging?

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“Regrettably, today, the norms of international law are being flagrantly violated across different parts of the world. Wars and bloody conflicts are inflamed. Under such circumstances, primarily, the countries’ defense capability becomes their main security guarantee. I believe that cooperation between the Member states in such spheres as security, defense, and defense industry must be ramped up.”

*– Ilham Aliyev, [Address to Tenth OTS Summit](#),
3 November 2023*

Over the past thirteen years, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has substantially finalized its formation, institutional consolidation, and expansion. Through sustained and close coordination among the institutions and agencies of its member states, the organization has fostered a robust communication network and cultivated a cooperative administrative culture across national bureaucracies.

Building on the tangible outcomes achieved through its project-based approach, the OTS is now shifting its emphasis toward establishing more binding forms of cooperation among member states. In the coming decade, the organization seeks to elevate comprehensive collaboration among its brotherly Turkic states to an institutional level of irreversibility by concluding multilateral international agreements with legal force.

Grounded in the shared political will of the Turkic states united by a common language, history, and cultural heritage, the OTS has taken significant, forward-looking steps in recent years. Its expansion process included Hungary’s admission as an observer in 2018, Uzbekistan’s accession as a full member in 2019, and the inclusion as observers of Turkmenistan in 2021 and the non-UN member state Turkish Republic of

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Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 2022. In parallel, the OTS has convened ten regular, two extraordinary, and one informal summit at the level of heads of state, reflecting its increasing institutional maturity and political dynamism.

Since its establishment, OTS has experienced a notable institutional transformation, evolving from a platform largely focused on cultural and economic cooperation into a strategic body increasingly engaged with regional security concerns. Since 2025, several initiatives have been launched to deepen defense cooperation among Turkic states. This shift reached a defining moment at the Twelfth OTS Summit in Gabala in October 2025, where member states endorsed a declaration that formally identified security cooperation as a core dimension of Turkic integration.

Given this growing emphasis on security issues, it is reasonable to anticipate that the military dimension of policy coordination among OTS member states will continue to develop and expand in the coming years.

This IDD Analytical Policy Brief begins by examining the emerging, multidimensional security architecture within the OTS framework. It then evaluates the strategic implications of institutionalization, specifically the transition from predominantly bilateral defense arrangements to formalized multilateral security frameworks.

Background

For most of its institutional history, Turkic multilateralism deliberately avoided the hard-security domain. Even following the establishment of the Turkic Council in 2009—later institutionalized as the OTS—cooperation remained concentrated in areas such as culture, connectivity, economic integration, and identity-building.

However, beneath this predominantly soft integration agenda, a gradual and less visible expansion of bilateral and trilateral security cooperation was taking shape among member states. While security issues were not formally embedded within an OTS framework, they increasingly developed through parallel bilateral arrangements. Over time, these functional security ties began to complement and eventually influence the broader trajectory of the organization's institutional evolution.

Since 2020, bilateral security and defense cooperation among Turkic states has expanded both in scope and institutionally, laying the groundwork for broader multilateral coordination under the OTS umbrella. These arrangements span alliance-level political commitments, military training and interoperability, intelligence-sharing, and defense-industrial collaboration.

The most advanced example of bilateral security integration is that between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. A foundation for strategic alliances was established by the June 2021

[Shusha Declaration](#), which included provisions for mutual support in the case of external threats or aggression. In addition to its political symbolism, the proclamation formalized increased collaboration in the defense industry, operational coordination, and joint military exercises. Expanded military education exchanges, doctrinal alignment, and the acquisition and cooperative development of cutting-edge defense technologies, such as unmanned aerial systems, have all strengthened this partnership.

Türkiye has also significantly expanded defense cooperation with Central Asian Turkic states. In Kazakhstan, military cooperation intensified beginning in 2020, facilitating joint defense projects and expanding training programs. This was followed by a 2022 [intelligence cooperation protocol](#) and an enhanced strategic partnership agreement incorporating defense collaboration. Kazakhstan's procurement and licensed production of Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) further signaled a shift toward deeper technological and industrial integration. In a similar vein, Türkiye and Uzbekistan concluded a [defense cooperation agreement](#) in 2022, which encompassed intelligence exchange, training initiatives, and logistical coordination. A subsequent accord broadened the scope of collaboration to include military education and defense-industrial cooperation. Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan have likewise deepened their military-technical engagement with Türkiye, particularly through the procurement of Turkish unmanned aerial systems and expanded interaction with Turkish defense enterprises.

Collectively, these developments signify not merely evolving procurement trends but also the gradual dissemination of operational practices and the strengthening of defense-industrial interconnections across the Turkic space.

Beyond Türkiye-centered frameworks, security cooperation has increasingly developed among Turkic states belonging to the Silk Road region. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan elevated their relationship to the level of allied partnership in 2022, institutionalizing coordination mechanisms that include military exchanges, joint exercises, and defense-industrial collaboration. Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan followed a similar trajectory, signing a declaration on allied relations that incorporated provisions for military-technical cooperation. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, through their [Treaty on Allied Relations](#) and the establishment of a [Supreme Interstate Council](#), have formalized security coordination at the intergovernmental level, including regularized military engagement and intelligence exchange.

A Growing Convergence

Although security interactions within the Turkic world began years ago, they were largely confined to bilateral and trilateral arrangements, conducted with limited visibility and without formal multilateral branding. At the same time, this kind of security defense integration enabled the gradual incorporation of security into the broader OTS agenda.

Eventually, a growing convergence emerged among Turkic states regarding the inadequacy of existing intra-Turkic world security arrangements. The perceived erosion of the Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) credibility, combined with selective and limited Western (and Chinese) engagement in the region, has reinforced the sense of a structural security vacuum. This has led the Turkic world's three [keystone states](#) (i.e., Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) to seek to enhance strategic autonomy and assume greater responsibility for regional stability.

Against this structural backdrop, a number of proximate and operational threats have further intensified the rationale for deeper security cooperation among Turkic states. These emerging risks have shifted security coordination from a largely strategic discussion to a more functional, threat-driven collaboration.

By geographical proximity, Afghanistan and its surrounding region continue to pose a threat to international security. Although Afghanistan no longer holds the same discursive place on international security, its structural weakness still poses threats that directly affect Central Asia. These threats are more likely to appear as transnational issues, such as the movement of extremist networks, drug trafficking, illegal financial flows, and irregular migration, rather than as traditional cross-border violence. Such dynamics provide real risks to border security and domestic stability for the four OTS member states from Central Asia. In this situation, OTS security coordination is expected to continue to revolve around improved intelligence sharing, coordinated border management, and counterterrorism cooperation. The organization's ability to respond collectively to international dangers will be a measure of its developing institutional maturity; therefore, the issue also has reputational significance.

The second risk is the militarization of the region due to the armed conflict between Iran and the United States (and Israel) that resumed over the weekend. A full-scale war in the Middle East could destabilize the broader region and spill over into areas that affect them politically or economically. Potential expansion of the conflict raises significant concerns among policymakers throughout the Silk Road region due to the risk of disruptions to established trade networks, critical energy transit corridors, broader geopolitical alignments, and refugee flows.

The third risk is the resilience and security of vital infrastructure and major connecting routes. Infrastructure defense has become a top security priority due to the increasing significance of transcontinental trade routes, especially the Middle Corridor and associated trans-Caspian energy and transport networks. These corridors are more than just economic initiatives; they are part of broader energy diversification and geopolitical competitiveness strategies, including those that pertain to markets in the EU and its sphere of influence. They are therefore susceptible to hybrid threats, such as sabotage, disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, and coercive economic pressure. Protecting

digital and physical infrastructure is essential for OTS member states to maintain their political legitimacy and economic integration.

Four risks arise from this evolution: managing external power balances in a more competitive geopolitical environment. In particular, OTS member states must strike a delicate balance in their interactions with China, Russia, and Western actors to prevent strategic backlash or the emergence of new forms of overdependence. At the same time, they have to ensure that the institutionalization of OTS security cooperation does not make the bloc appear hostile or exclusive, which could prompt counterbalancing forces.

Deeper Security Cooperation

Within this evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic context, the OTS has been gradually transformed into a political umbrella that facilitates and legitimizes deeper coordination in the security sphere.

In this regard, the May 2025 OTS Informal Summit in Budapest marked a significant advancement in the organization's growing geopolitical stature. Another milestone was the meeting of defense ministers and defense industry leaders from OTS in Türkiye in July 2025 (Azerbaijan is set to hold a similar event in 2026). The heads of OTS states' national security councils convened in Bishkek in September 2025 to discuss regional and global dangers as well as broader developments affecting the Turkic world. Additionally, Turkic state intelligence chiefs have been holding frequent coordinating sessions since 1992.

The OTS's October 2025 summit in Gabala was a significant milestone not only for its member states but also for the broader Silk Road region. Convened under the theme "Regional Peace and Security," the meeting signaled a clear shift in the OTS's trajectory—from a predominantly cultural association toward a more assertive and structured regional actor.

The opening section of the summit declaration focused prominently on security issues, highlighting the proposal to conclude a "Treaty on Strategic Partnership, Eternal Friendship, and Brotherhood of Turkic States." This initiative signaled an intention to formalize and institutionalize deeper political and strategic alignment among OTS member states. Although the concept of joint military exercises was not formally incorporated into the final communiqué, Azerbaijan nevertheless expressed its willingness to host the first military drills conducted under the auspices of the OTS, thereby reinforcing the organization's gradual expansion into the security domain.

This development was not incidental. In his fifth inaugural address (February 2024), President Ilham Aliyev underscored the centrality of the OTS to Azerbaijan's foreign policy orientation: "This is the main international organization for us because it is our family. We have no other family. Our family is the Turkic world." Such a formulation

reflects not merely rhetorical emphasis on shared civilizational and cultural identity, but also a deliberate strategic repositioning of Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities toward deeper institutional, political, and, potentially, security-oriented integration within the Turkic framework.

The organization is now advancing independent initiatives in areas such as security cooperation, economic coordination, cyber resilience, and infrastructure connectivity.

Implications

Russia is closely monitoring the growing institutionalization of security cooperation within the OTS. From Moscow's standpoint, the issue is not the presence of Turkic cooperation itself—this has long been acknowledged—but rather the pace, scale, and strategic trajectory that this cooperation has assumed in recent years.

Although the CSTO is conceived as Russia's principal security mechanism in the region, its responses to regional crises have contributed to perceptions of inconsistency and selective commitment among its member states. These developments, in turn, have negatively impacted the organization's reliability. Within this context, the expansion of OTS security cooperation can be interpreted less as a direct challenge to Russian primacy and more as a functional response to an emerging security gap.

At the same time, Moscow is aware of the structural and political limitations constraining the evolution of OTS security cooperation in the short term. Not all OTS member states favor establishing a formal military alliance, and several continue to attach strategic value to their bilateral relationships with Russia. Russia sustains its regional influence through extensive bilateral partnerships and patterns of economic interdependence. These channels of influence are unlikely to dissipate, even in the case of deeper institutionalization of OTS security cooperation.

This dynamic creates the conditions for what may be described as a model of controlled coexistence. From Russia's perspective, such coexistence remains manageable if the OTS does not evolve into an explicit alternative collective defense arrangement that would directly compete with the CSTO framework. As long as security cooperation within the OTS remains focused on defense-industrial coordination, training initiatives, and joint exercises, Moscow is likely to tolerate, and potentially adapt pragmatically to, its gradual expansion.

To some extent, similar considerations inform the Iranian position. However, Tehran's ability to influence, let alone object to, the trajectory of OTS security cooperation was much less pronounced, even before its recent troubles. Still, Iran closely monitors institutional developments in the region, yet its strategic objectives in the Silk Road region are shaped primarily by diplomatic outreach and economic engagement.

Tehran seeks to expand trade, enhance transport connectivity, and reduce diplomatic isolation, but it lacks Moscow's formal security architecture and comparable leverage. Moreover, Iran's bilateral relations with Türkiye and several OTS member states focus on practical cooperation in areas such as border management and counterterrorism, rather than formalized defense integration. Consequently, while unlikely to openly oppose incremental OTS cooperation, Iran is more inclined to rely on pragmatic bilateral engagement and multi-track diplomacy than to challenge the organization's evolving security agenda.

In the medium term, European states, the EU, and the wider Transatlantic community are likely to regard effective OTS security cooperation as strategically significant not because it constitutes a competitor to NATO, but because it contributes to stability in a region where Western actors have demonstrated limited readiness to assume direct responsibility in the hard-security domain. For many years, policymakers from European states, as well as those who run the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, have endorsed the principle of regionally anchored security governance in the Silk Road region. As an outside actor with no military or security institutions, however, the EU neither possesses the stand-alone bureaucratic instruments nor the political consensus necessary to act as the main partner in constructing such a framework. In this context, a consolidated and functional OTS security structure could partially fill that structural void.

From a practical standpoint, deeper OTS coordination would strengthen the protection and resilience of critical transit and energy corridors, including the International North–South Transportation Corridor, the Middle Corridor, and the broader infrastructure network connecting the Silk Road region to Asian and European markets. For the major external actors, this would translate into enhanced security of trade flows, greater diversification of energy supplies, and reduced vulnerability to disruptions arising from renewed instability or geopolitical escalation.

OTS cooperation remains pragmatic and inclusive rather than bloc-oriented, suggesting it has the potential to mitigate rather than exacerbate great power rivalry. By addressing security vacuums that have historically attracted external intervention, Turkic states assuming greater responsibility for their own security governance could reduce the need for continuous balancing among Russia, China, Iran, Western actors, and others (e.g., India and the GCC).

At the structural level, a mature OTS security framework would contribute to consolidating a more plural and regionally anchored security order in the Silk Road region. This development is significant because many persistent challenges in that part of the world—e.g., conflict relapse, corridor insecurity, energy vulnerability, and unmanaged external competition—are rooted in the absence of credible regional ownership of security. Western actors have frequently expressed support for locally driven security arrangements but have often lacked either the political will or institutional instruments

to provide sustained leadership themselves. In this respect, OTS security cooperation would not function as a competitor to Transatlantic structures; rather, it would help address a longstanding structural gap within the regional security architecture. At the same time, a credible OTS security mechanism led by the member states themselves could reduce the incentive for heavy external intervention, because the OTS would be better equipped to manage its own security challenges.