

Mechanisms Of Regional Cooperation And Integration In The Organization Of Turkic States

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Abstract: This article examines the evolution of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) from a culturally motivated cooperation platform into an emerging regional integration structure with growing geopolitical and geo-economic significance. Grounded in the intellectual legacy of early Turkic thinkers such as İsmail Gaspirali and Yusuf Akchura, the research analyzes institutional milestones including the 2009 Nakhchivan Agreement, the Turkic World Vision–2040 and the outcomes of recent summits, particularly the 2021 Istanbul Summit and the 2023 Astana Summit.

The findings highlight the OTS's hybrid institutional model, which blends intergovernmental pragmatism, economic cooperation, and cultural diplomacy. The OTS demonstrates an increasingly proactive role in connectivity, energy corridors, and regional security dialogue, particularly in the post-Karabakh geopolitical environment. However, achieving long-term strategic coherence will require further institutionalization, financial coordination, and harmonization of trade and transport regulations. The paper concludes that the OTS has the potential to consolidate into a significant Eurasian actor, contributing to multipolar regional governance and enhanced economic resilience within the broader Eurasian space.

Keywords: Turkic States Organization; regional integration; Eurasian geopolitics; trade cooperation; TOPSIS analysis; economic connectivity; cultural diplomacy; Vision-2040; multi-vector foreign policy; Middle Corridor; Turkic world.

Introduction: The evolution of cooperation among Turkic-speaking states can be analytically divided into two distinct phases: the period preceding the establishment of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the period following its institutional consolidation. However, existing scholarly literature remains insufficiently systematized and does not fully uncover the fundamental transformation of cooperation mechanisms, the institutional dynamics of Turkic interstate interaction, nor the long-term prospects of integration within the Turkic world.

Institutional cooperation among Turkic-speaking states has historically progressed through four major stages:

1. the convening of summits of Turkic-speaking state leaders (1991–2008);
2. the establishment and institutional development of the Turkic Council (2009–2018);
3. the expansion of membership and activation of

sectoral cooperation platforms (2018 – November 2021);

4. the institutional redefinition, consolidation, and strategic reorientation of the organization as the OTS from 2021 onward.

In the immediate post-Soviet period, cooperation initiatives among Turkic states were primarily shaped by linguistic affinity, shared cultural heritage, and civilizational identity. These factors contributed to redefining the conceptual logic, core actors, and functional contours of what came to be understood as the contemporary “Turkic World.” As a result, identity-oriented cooperation gradually evolved into more structured mechanisms of regional coordination and institution-building.

Nevertheless, the contemporary drivers of cooperation are not rooted in ideological constructs such as pan-Turkism. Instead, they derive from the national interests of individual states, shaped by pragmatic

foreign-policy priorities, economic modernization goals, security considerations, and the search for diversified international partnerships. In this context, one of the key determinants of Türkiye's strategic approach to Turkic cooperation is the geopolitical and geoeconomic positioning of the Central Asian republics. Their role in regional connectivity, energy security, and emerging Eurasian dynamics significantly influences Ankara's long-term engagement strategy.

Today, cooperation among Turkic-speaking states has reached its most advanced level since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The institutional mechanisms established within the OTS—ranging from political dialogue and economic coordination to transport connectivity, security consultations, and cultural cooperation—indicate the formation of a qualitatively new phase of integration. Furthermore, the organization's consolidated institutional framework, reinforced by strategic documents such as the "Turkic World Vision – 2040," provides a foundation for the Turkic region to emerge as a meaningful actor within the rapidly transforming multipolar international system.

Given these developments, a comprehensive academic analysis of the evolution of Turkic cooperation, the institutional logic underpinning the OTS, and the articulation of Uzbekistan's national interests within these mechanisms represents a timely and analytically significant research task.

METHOD

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on one of the modern approaches in international relations theory — neo-liberal institutionalism. This theory explains the role of regional and global institutions (organizations) in shaping and enhancing cooperation among states. The core premise of neo-liberal institutionalism is that states pursue and protect their interests not only through power or competition, but also through institutional mechanisms — shared rules, agreements, and organizational structures.

According to this approach, international and regional organizations, including the OTS, serve as important instruments for information exchange, political coordination, interest balancing, and the formation of normative unity among member states. Through institutional mechanisms, states strengthen mutual trust and achieve long-term cooperation. The OTS operates precisely on these principles: regular summits, the Secretariat's activities, inter-sectoral working groups, and political-economic initiatives continuously strengthen the organization's institutional foundation. Furthermore, neo-liberal institutionalism is integrated with empirical methods to

evaluate the geopolitical significance of the OTS, leadership dynamics within the organization, and in the international system. This approach allows for a comprehensive, systematic, and theoretically grounded analysis of the activities and evolution of the OTS.

CORE ISSUE AND ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Trade relations between Kazakhstan and Türkiye also followed a long-term path of stable development. During the early 2000s, this partnership recorded comparatively higher trade volumes than Azerbaijan–Türkiye relations; however, the pace of growth moderated during the last decade. This relative slowdown is linked to the rapid expansion of Azerbaijan–Türkiye trade and the structural dependence of Kazakhstan's economy on commodity markets. Despite this, Kazakhstan–Türkiye economic ties remain among the most significant and consistent within the region.

In contrast, trade between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan developed at a considerably slower pace. Over the observed period, their bilateral trade not only remained low but also showed a declining trend. Several structural factors explain this dynamic: both economies are resource-based with similar export profiles, the level of economic complementarity is limited, and transport–logistics routes connecting the two states are comparatively constrained. Trade relations between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan followed a markedly different trajectory, characterized by steady and robust growth. The volume of bilateral trade expanded several-fold, with a particularly strong increase after 2010. This surge reflects the impact of deeper regional integration—especially within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union—as well as enhanced cross-border economic activity and improved logistical cooperation. Consequently, the Kyrgyzstan–Kazakhstan trade corridor has become one of the most practical and functionally integrated economic linkages in the region.

Overall, the trade dynamics from 1999 to 2024 indicate a notable strengthening of economic interconnectedness among Turkic states, albeit with varying speeds and intensities across bilateral partnerships. Large-scale cooperation in energy and infrastructure sectors accelerated growth in some relationships, while structural similarities and logistical limitations constrained others. These trends collectively underscore the complex, uneven, yet progressively consolidating nature of economic integration within the Turkic region.

Key Findings

1. Türkiye has become the central trade partner.

For all three states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan), Türkiye has emerged as the most significant trade partner, reinforcing its economic and geostrategic role in the Turkic world.

2.Azerbaijan–Türkiye trade leads the region.

Since 2014, this pair has shown the highest bilateral trade volumes, driven primarily by large-scale cooperation in energy and infrastructure projects.

3.Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have strengthened their mutual economic integration, particularly since the 2010s, with cross-border trade, joint industrial production, and logistics infrastructure significantly reinforcing these relations.

4.Trade between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan has been declining, which demonstrates that economic proximity within the OTS remains uneven; certain bilateral pairs have still not achieved effective trade integration.

Overall, regional trade integration is intensifying, especially in the post-2020 period, as institutional policies and measures aimed at boosting intra-regional trade within the OTS have accelerated this growth.

According to official statistics, Uzbekistan diversified export markets towards the Middle East and Southeast Asia in 2023–2024, reducing the traditional share of OTS partners. Although preferential trade agreements within the OTS (e.g., between Turkey and Uzbekistan) adopted in late 2023 are gradually coming into force, their potential impact on exports has not yet been fully realized. Ratification procedures and customs harmonization delays slowed implementation.

Key dynamics by partners:

1.Turkey: Decline in exports, especially in textiles, automotive parts, and leather products, driven by Turkey's internal economic downturn and inflation. Expedited implementation of the preferential trade regime (2023 agreement) and development of re-export mechanisms through Turkey to third markets (Middle East, Africa) are required.

2.Kazakhstan: Increased competition in fruit-vegetable exports. Kazakhstan's logistics advantage (lower fuel costs, faster delivery) reduced Uzbekistan's competitiveness. Minimum export price policies (particularly for onions, potatoes, carrots) increased export costs. Simplification of logistics at the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan border and flexible adjustment of minimum export prices based on market conditions are needed.

Although Uzbekistan's trade volume with Kyrgyzstan remained stable, additional inspections and rising customs fees on transit through Kyrgyzstan slowed export flows. In this regard, it is essential to launch a

“Single Customs Window” mechanism and introduce preferential transit corridors (“green corridors”) for cargo shipments. Trade with Azerbaijan is constrained by long transport distances, high logistics costs, and rising domestic export volumes in Azerbaijan itself, which has reduced demand for Uzbek products. Strengthening Uzbekistan's trade mission in Azerbaijan is required to address this issue.

Relations with Hungary within the OTS framework are still at an early stage; however, there is significant potential in technology and pharmaceuticals. Hungary should be utilized as a gateway to Europe by establishing technological cooperation, joint logistics hubs, or free economic zones.

Additional observations:

1.Steady growth in total trade volume (2021–2023): This demonstrates that Uzbekistan has been consistently expanding its trade relations with OTS member states.

2.Export-import imbalance: Uzbekistan continues to import more than it exports, indicating a negative trade balance and suggesting that the country has not yet fully realized its export potential in the OTS market.

3.Relative decline in 2024: Although this may be temporary (based on nine-month data), the sharp fall in exports indicates structural challenges in export performance and reflects the impact of global economic conditions.

Overall, the analysis shows dynamic trade activity in transport, logistics, energy, textiles, and chemical industries. Uzbekistan needs to expand the range of goods exported to OTS markets (e.g., finished textiles, agricultural products, pharmaceuticals). Reducing import dependence through technology cooperation with Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan remains a strategic priority. Expanding digital customs systems and “green corridor” mechanisms will accelerate transit among OTS countries.

Turkic-speaking nations are endowed with a wealth of natural resources, which encompass raw materials and energy reserves, extensive agricultural lands, and a well-developed transport infrastructure. Nevertheless, their reliance on centralized decision-making bodies in Moscow during the Soviet era resulted in a strong economic and administrative linkage to the Russian Soviet Republic. Following their independence, these nations encountered significant obstacles in advancing their industries and securing medium- to long-term financing for technological upgrades and the development of human capital. As a result, they were necessitated to implement extensive reforms across various sectors, including social, cultural, religious,

political, economic, and military domains. In the aftermath of independence, Azerbaijan underwent an economic downturn in the initial five years, largely attributable to the Armenian occupation of Karabakh. Consequently, Azerbaijan forfeited 20 percent of its territory, which included critical oil, natural gas, and arable land. This situation precipitated an increase in immigration and unemployment rates. The economy of Azerbaijan is predominantly dependent on oil, natural gas, and agriculture, with nearly 90 percent of its exports comprising these resources or associated products.

In 2000, Azerbaijan's exports amounted to USD 1.7 billion and imports reached USD 11.7 billion. By 2009, exports rose to USD 14.6 billion and imports to USD 61.1 billion; however, despite overall trade growth, the share of trade with Turkic states declined. In 2019, exports reached USD 19.6 billion and imports USD 136 billion, with 14.7 percent of exports and 13.3 percent of imports involving other Turkic states. The share of trade with Turkic partners rose significantly in 2019 compared to previous years. In 2020, 25 percent of previously occupied territories in Karabakh were liberated. Article 9 of the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia stipulates the opening of the Zangezur corridor, providing land and rail connectivity between Türkiye and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. This development supports substantial regional economic growth and integration.

Following independence from the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan faced severe economic challenges, resulting in its economic indicators declining by nearly half. Nevertheless, a series of reforms were introduced that facilitated gradual economic recovery. Kyrgyzstan's imports largely consist of oil, natural gas, and industrial materials. In the year 2000, the nation's exports were valued at USD 505 million, whereas imports reached USD 554 million. By 2009, exports had risen to USD 1.1 billion, and imports escalated to USD 2.9 billion. In 2019, exports further climbed to USD 1.9 billion, with imports amounting to USD 4.9 billion, of which 22.1 percent of exports and 17.5 percent of imports were with other Turkic states. Concurrently, as total foreign trade expanded, the proportion of trade with other Turkic nations also grew.

Despite the initial downturn in economic indicators following independence, Kazakhstan experienced a relatively swift recovery, largely attributable to its abundant hydrocarbon resources and its pivotal role as a significant energy producer. Almost half of the nation's industrial sector is associated with oil extraction and petroleum-derived products. The exports of Kazakhstan are predominantly comprised of crude oil and other high-value goods, while its imports

mainly consist of machinery, equipment, electronic items, and textile products. In the year 2000, Kazakhstan's exports amounted to USD 8.6 billion, with imports at USD 5 billion. By 2009, exports surged to USD 43.1 billion and imports increased to USD 28.4 billion. Despite this remarkable expansion in foreign trade, the proportion of trade with Turkic states remained relatively modest. In 2019, Kazakhstan's exports reached USD 57.7 billion, and imports totaled USD 38.3 billion, with only 5.3 percent of exports and 2.8 percent of imports linked to trade with other Turkic states.

Kyrgyzstan has capitalized on the opportunities presented by the OTS more effectively than other member states. Nevertheless, it continues to exhibit the lowest trade volume among the members. For instance, in 2007, Azerbaijan's trade volume with OTS states constituted 20 percent, primarily due to a contraction in other export markets. Although there has been little change in total export volume since 2008, Azerbaijan's exports to OTS members fell to 2 percent. As illustrated in the table below, Azerbaijan's exports to OTS countries remained around USD 900 million, while its annual imports averaged roughly USD 1.6 billion post-2009. Meanwhile, Türkiye's imports from other OTS countries stood at USD 1.8 billion, representing only 1 percent of its total imports.

Unlike other Turkic republics, Uzbekistan did not immediately prioritize the transition to a free market economy after independence, resulting in a comparatively slower pace of economic liberalization. Instead of focusing heavily on agriculture, Uzbekistan directed more emphasis toward industrial development, which slowed the privatization process relative to other Turkic states. In 2020, Uzbekistan's exports totaled USD 12.4 billion, while its imports reached USD 15 billion. The trade turnover for Uzbekistan in that year was USD 2.52 billion with Kazakhstan, USD 1.8 billion with Türkiye, and USD 637 million with Kyrgyzstan. Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan has effectively attracted foreign investment, especially in the agriculture and energy sectors. Turkmenistan's economy is largely reliant on oil, natural gas, mining, cotton, and energy resources. The main exports of Turkmenistan include natural gas, crude oil, and electricity. Its significant trade partners are Ukraine, Iran, and Italy. Additionally, Turkmenistan ranks as Türkiye's fourth-largest export market and depends heavily on imports from Türkiye.

According to Can Demir, the OTS possesses clear strengths and opportunities—such as cultural integration and strategic trade corridors that could help it gain a place in the Eurasian balance of power. However, these opportunities are constrained by

weaknesses and threats, including pressure from Russia and China, internal disputes, and weak institutionalization. The SWOT analysis suggests that the OTS can strengthen as a regional player in Eurasia, but this requires stronger institutions, expanded resource capacity, and balanced foreign policy strategies.

Similarly, the group led by Zeynep Keser explored the interaction between national development and governance systems based on information collected from the organization's founding members.

The overall economic structure of the OTS member states was studied by Emre Geybullayev and Mehmet Kurubaş, who analyzed available resources, political and economic crises, and the attitudes of major geopolitical players such as Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union toward the region.

In addition, Mehmet Eygi used panel cointegration analysis to identify the relationship between macroeconomic indicators and economic growth in Turkic countries between 2000 and 2018. Murat Çalışır examined economic cooperation initiatives among Turkic states and argued that this cooperation may serve as an alternative integration model to the European Union.

On the 10th anniversary of the OTS, Süleyman Kaygusuz comprehensively analyzed the organization's activities and highlighted Türkiye's Customs Union membership, geographic distances among members, customs tariffs, and underdeveloped economic sectors as major barriers to trade growth within the OTS.

In the field of cultural diplomacy, Özlem Akıllı analyzed how cultural integration and communication develop among Turkic republics within TURKSOY and the OTS frameworks, using Karl Deutsch's "transactionalist" approach.

Other Turkish scholars—Erhan Şimşek and Hüseyin Destebaş—examined the relationship between corruption and human capital investment in Turkic countries from 1995 to 2017 in the context of global economic integration. Yusuf Mercan and Ayşegül Azer studied the impact of economic growth on income distribution using panel data.

Alongside these studies, Azerbaijani researchers have also analyzed communication and cooperation within the OTS. Rüfat Mustafayev, using Samuel P. Huntington's civilizational approach, explored the ideological and identity foundations of the OTS. İlkin Maharramov analyzed Azerbaijan's logistical relations with Turkic states, focusing on trade potential and infrastructure development. Turan Tohir and colleagues evaluated the regional potential of the

Turkic world by considering geographical factors, demographic resources, and geopolitical conditions.

Kazakh scholar Sapiyev, in his 2017 study, examined the importance of the OTS within the context of security and cooperation in Central Asia, emphasizing Kazakhstan's role within the organization.

Western scholars Jean-Louis Lavallé and Jean-François Lochard analyzed trade flows in the post-independence period using the example of former French colonies and applied similar findings to Turkic states. According to them, although these states initially sought to diversify trade partners after independence, intra-Turkic trade flows remain comparatively strong.

Other international researchers—Daniel Garleghi and Victor Popov—compared actual trade flows in Central Asia with gravity model predictions for 1989–2016, showing shifts in trade patterns due to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

CONCLUSION

Cooperation within the OTS has demonstrated a measurable and positive effect on intra-regional trade, facilitating greater market access, improving cross-border transactions, and promoting economic interdependence among member states. However, to fully realize the untapped potential of regional trade, several strategic measures must be implemented. First, the development of modern transport and logistics infrastructure—including railways, highways, and integrated logistics hubs—remains critical to reducing transit times and costs, particularly for landlocked states. Second, the elimination of trade barriers, including customs delays, non-tariff restrictions, and differences in legal and technical standards, is essential to streamline intra-OTS commerce and enhance predictability for investors and traders. Third, strengthening cultural and linguistic connections through educational exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and collaborative business platforms can enhance mutual understanding, build trust, and facilitate smoother commercial interactions. Fourth, the continuation of export-oriented policies, coupled with the diversification of goods and services, will increase member states' competitiveness in global markets, reduce dependency on commodity exports, and foster sustainable economic growth.

For non-member Turkic states, targeted mechanisms to participate in and benefit from OTS economic initiatives—such as preferential trade access, shared infrastructure projects, and regional investment funds—should also be explored. By deepening economic integration, the OTS can consolidate its position as a significant regional actor, promote long-term economic resilience, and increase the global

visibility and competitiveness of its member states.

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