

Regional Leadership through International Institutions: Türkiye and the Organization of Turkic States amid Geopolitical Upheavals

Joosong Lee

The protracted wars in Ukraine and Gaza, unfolding amidst the inaction of the international community, are shaking the foundations of the existing international order based on established norms, while ushering in an era of unstable multipolarity. Consequently, the role and credibility of global cooperative frameworks have weakened, and states are pursuing foreign policy strategies driven by geopolitical calculations in which national interests and regionalism take precedence. Within this complex geopolitical crisis, Türkiye has sought to consolidate its position and expand its influence by endeavoring to establish a platform over which it can exercise leadership and ensure credibility, which was the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). This paper aims to investigate why, how, and through what mechanisms Türkiye seeks to utilize the OTS in the current geopolitical transformation. To substantiate the theoretical background, the study first draws on realist theory to examine how regional powers conceptualize the attributes and functions of international organizations, and how they employ such institutions as strategic and institutional instruments to maximize national interests and consolidate influence. Subsequently, the paper reviews the developmental trajectory of the OTS, alongside Türkiye's efforts in shaping this process, and assessing the consequent shifts in Türkiye's strategy after the 'Two Wars.' Building on this foundation, the analysis explores how the outcomes of Türkiye's strategic calculations and diplomatic initiatives have been manifested and what significance they hold. As a conclusion, the paper outlines the outlook and challenges of the OTS, evaluates Türkiye's potential responses, and considers the theoretical and policy implications it may offer.

Keywords: Türkiye, Organization of Turkic States, International Organization, Realist Approach, Geopolitics

* Joosong Lee (jojokaplee@hanmail.net, ORCID: 0000-0002-8268-8595) is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Institute of International Relations (IDIS), Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science (Middle East) from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. He previously served as an HK Research Professor for three years at the Center for International Area Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and earlier as a Visiting Researcher for two years at the Asia Pacific Research Center, Ankara University, Türkiye. His research interests include Middle Eastern politics, Turkish foreign policy, geopolitics, and Mediterranean security.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's uncompromising violence against Palestine have been protracted under the international community's passive observation. The existing norms and international system designed to maintain order and peace through law have ceased to function effectively, revealing their inherent limitations. We are now living in an era of instability grounded in surrealism (Brunk and Hakimi 2022). The weakening of the liberal order has ushered in an era of multipolar instability, where repeated failures by the international community to respond to great power violations have eroded the roles and trust in existing global cooperation mechanisms. Systematic collective responses to global crises have taken a backseat to national interests and regionalism, which now prominently influence state behaviors (Lee and Lim 2025). States have formed blocs aligned with their respective interests, accelerating multipolarity. In the Middle East, the Gaza conflict has catalyzed regional powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye to vocalize their aspirations for expanding their influence, seeking new regional orders grounded in their geopolitical calculations (Roll and Thies 2025).

Amid this complex geopolitical crisis, Türkiye is seizing the opportunity to strengthen its position and expand its influence (Özdemir 2024). Rather than aligning decisively with one side in the two conflicts, Türkiye has taken upon itself the role of mediator to alleviate regional tensions, thereby pursuing the enhancement of its international standing and influence. This trajectory of Türkiye exemplifies the archetype of state strategy posited by realist theory. As a middle power and a recognized regional actor, Türkiye demonstrates a strategic tendency to leverage regional institutions as instruments for advancing its national interests and expanding its regional influence. In particular, rather than perceiving international organizations as neutral platforms for cooperation, Türkiye exhibits a pronounced inclination to employ them as institutionalized tools for consolidating its influence (Özdemir, 2024). Specifically, to achieve these objectives, Türkiye has sought a platform characterized by guaranteed mutual interests, trust among parties, and where it can exercise leadership in agenda-setting and implementation (Guliyev 2024). The international organization that best fits this geopolitical calculation is the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which is the focal point of this study. Founded on the strategic approach of Türkiye following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the OTS is a regional organization comprising the so-called 'Turkic Belt' countries that share common linguistic, cultural, and social identities, and it possesses substantial potential and competitiveness in terms of population size, economic capacity,

and geopolitical significance (Acar 2025). Notably, Türkiye has invested significant efforts to institutionalize the OTS, fostering multidimensional cooperation across political, economic, and cultural domains.

This paper aims to explore the background and process underpinning Türkiye's strategic decisions, as well as the theoretical foundation supporting such actions. Specifically, it will focus on examining why, how, and in what manner Türkiye has utilized the OTS as a strategic and institutional instrument to maximize its geopolitical interests, foster a favorable security environment, and expand its regional influence. To underpin the theoretical background for Türkiye's strategic utilization of the OTS, this study adopts a realist theoretical framework. To conduct this study, a comprehensive analysis will be carried out on key secondary sources addressing Türkiye's foreign policy and the OTS. The core materials examined will be reconstructed within the framework of realist theory, allowing for a systematic evaluation of the theory's suitability and applicability. Furthermore, this research adopts a methodological approach that integrates primary statistical data with relevant literature to assess the values embodied in the OTS and Türkiye's potential strategies for their utilization. The temporal scope of this study spans from the early 1990s, when the foundations of the OTS began to take shape following the collapse of the Cold War order, to 2025, amid the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Within this period, the study examines the historical context in which the OTS was established, investigates the ways in which it has evolved over time, and analyzes how its values and significance have transformed throughout its development.

Chapter two will build the theoretical foundation through a literature review on how realist theorists perceive the nature and functions of international organizations, and how great powers and regional powers strategically utilize these organizations to maximize their national interests and augment their influence. In fact, numerous studies addressing the OTS predominantly employ constructivist approaches, analyzing the OTS as a product of collective identity or as a cooperative entity (Demir 2022; Demircan 2022; Hamzaoglu 2022; Lee and Jung 2023; Mustofaev 2022). While such analyses hold substantial explanatory power regarding the developmental trajectory of the OTS, this paper aims to distinguish itself by demonstrating that Türkiye's choices are rooted in geopolitical calculations and strategic decisions grounded in realist theory. Chapter three will briefly examine the OTS's developmental trajectory from its inception to the present, its organizational structure, and key agendas. Particular attention will be given to the strategic value of the OTS and the efforts Türkiye has undertaken to institutionalize the momentum of cooperation. Subsequently, Chapter four will succinctly outline the geopolitical context engendered by the

Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, focusing on how Türkiye conducted its geopolitical calculations within this milieu. Central to this discussion will be an analysis of Türkiye's endeavors to leverage the OTS as a strategic and institutional apparatus. Then, Chapter five will be divided into three parts to analyze in depth the outcomes and significance of Türkiye's strategic calculations and efforts. Especially through the lens of the '2040 Turkic World Vision,' this chapter will comprehensively demonstrate how Türkiye utilized military partnership building, economic resource allocation, and cultural-ideational bond strengthening to build regional influence. Finally, the conclusion will project the ongoing developmental prospects of the OTS, considering the trajectory it might follow amid continuous geopolitical volatility and the potential shifts in Türkiye's positioning. Moreover, this section will critically examine the intrinsic limitations of the OTS and consider how Türkiye, as the central driving force, might address these challenges and exercise leadership. The conclusion will also discuss the theoretical and scholarly implications of the OTS case study within international politics and distill its practical lessons for South Korea.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS FROM A REALIST PERSPECTIVE

Scholarly perspectives on the role and significance of international organizations are diverse. From a liberal standpoint, international organizations are not merely frameworks for cooperation but serve as key mechanisms that mitigate interstate conflict, address collective problems, and provide predictability and trust through norms and rules (Keohane 1984; Keohane and Nye 1977). By fostering repeated interactions, enhancing transparency, and reducing transaction costs, such institutions are seen as central facilitators of cooperative behavior among states. Realist approaches, however, are skeptical of this optimistic view. Even the trust-building functions and institutional autonomy emphasized by liberals are ultimately constrained by the boundaries set by great powers, and international organizations are better understood as institutional products that reflect the interests and power structures of dominant states. Against this backdrop, it is essential to examine the nature and function of international organizations through the lens of realist scholarship.

From the realist perspective, international politics is fundamentally characterized by anarchy, where states constantly compete for survival and power maximization (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). Within this context,

international organizations and regimes are not autonomous actors endowed with independent agency but tools shaped and operated by states—particularly great powers—to advance their interests. Hegemonic stability theory, for instance, argues that hegemonic states create institutions and establish favorable rules and norms as a means of maintaining their security and economic dominance (Gilpin 1981; 1987). Rather than viewing international organizations as neutral arenas for cooperation, this analysis portrays them as mechanisms for institutionalizing and entrenching existing power asymmetries. Further, critics contend that international institutions cannot independently constrain state behavior; instead, they serve as instruments that reflect and legitimize the strategic calculations of great powers (Mearsheimer 1995). Institutions such as NATO or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) exemplify this dynamic, as they represent institutionalized outcomes of power politics rather than autonomous determinants of state security behavior. This perspective narrows the scope of institutional autonomy, treating organizations as extensions of great power influence.

Parallel insights emerge in regime theory. Krasner (1982) argues that international regimes are never neutral; the rules and procedures that constitute them reflect the interests of powerful states. By designing regimes in their favor, great powers limit the options available to weaker states and constrain their autonomy within institutional frameworks. Regimes thus mirror the underlying distribution of power in the international system.

At the same time, Pedersen (2002) advances the concept of “cooperative hegemony” to show that not only great powers but also regional powers can leverage institutions and cooperation to expand their influence. He emphasizes how regional hegemons combine economic and institutional resources with normative frameworks to secure the voluntary consent of surrounding states, rather than relying solely on military coercion. This illustrates how power projection can be institutionalized and legitimized through cooperative mechanisms. In this sense, international organizations are not mere arenas of cooperation but institutional platforms through which hegemonic and regional powers formalize and embed their leadership.

Accordingly, from a realist viewpoint, international organizations are less arenas of cooperation and norms than strategic instruments that great and regional powers employ to expand and consolidate their interests and preserve their positions. Through agenda-setting, rule-making, and institutional design, dominant states embed their preferences into institutional frameworks, constrain the autonomy of weaker states, and reinforce the international and regional orders they seek to maintain.

Building on these realist insights, it becomes crucial to explore the concrete ways in which states strategically utilize international organizations to advance their interests. International organizations provide institutional frameworks that can be instrumentalized not only for material gains but also for shaping political and security outcomes. Great and regional powers alike employ these institutions to extend their leverage, whether by distributing economic resources, cultivating military partnerships, or reinforcing cultural and ideational bonds with member states. Through these mechanisms, international organizations function less as neutral arenas of cooperation and more as strategic platforms through which states institutionalize influence and embed their preferences into collective arrangements.

Cultivating Military Cooperation within the Institutional Framework

First, through military cooperation with member states of international organizations, a state can either upgrade its relations with these members or expand its influence over them through military assistance. Various forms of military cooperation and support can enhance the level of amicable relations between the donor and recipient states. In general, collaborative efforts such as joint exercises and military exchanges, as well as security assistance, are believed to play a crucial role in improving interoperability, establishing mutually beneficial relationships, and fostering mutual understanding between the two states (Omelicheva et al. 2017, 127). These processes can consequently lead to a deepening of bilateral goodwill. For example, the United States (the U.S.) has long provided a variety of training and educational programs for foreign countries, inviting overseas military officers to participate in military training and education. Through these U.S.-hosted programs, foreign military personnel not only receive training and instruction but also develop a deeper understanding of U.S. military practices, gain insights into the foundational values pursued by the U.S., cultivate personal ties with individuals who uphold these values, and, in some cases, aspire to emulate them (Omelicheva et al. 2017, 129). This process extends beyond the mere enhancement of military capabilities, contributing to the building of mutual trust and the establishment of long-term cooperative foundations between the donor and recipient states. By deepening their understanding of the U.S. and building personal networks, foreign military and political elites develop a positive view of their relationship with the U.S., reinforcing bilateral ties and enabling the U.S. to institutionalize these relations and expand its political and diplomatic influence.

Meanwhile, military assistance can also serve as a means for donor states to

expand their influence over recipient countries. For instance, direct U.S. military aid has been shown to be statistically correlated with the voting compliance of recipient states (Moon 1983), and countries that align more closely with U.S. positions in the United Nations tend to receive U.S. economic or military assistance (Derouen and Heo 2004). Although partially, evidence also suggests that the dependence of non-democratic states on U.S. military or economic aid increases their voting alignment with the U.S. at the UN (Lai and Morey 2006). In the case of great powers, the influence established through military assistance can be used to enforce cooperative relations with recipient states. Economic asymmetries between donor and recipient states create an asymmetric relationship in which dominant states can affect the foreign policy of subordinate states through rewards or punishments (Keohane and Nye 1977), and this dynamic can similarly apply to military relations. Theoretically, all types of aid function as instruments of influence at the most general level, provided that donors believe aid encourages recipients to undertake actions desired by the donor (Palmer et al. 2002). Accordingly, in asymmetric relationships established through military aid, donor states inevitably gain political leverage and diplomatic negotiating power over recipients, and the greater the dependency on, or need for, military assistance, the more likely recipient states are to pursue foreign policies aligned with the donor's preferences (Sullivan et al. 2011).

In this context, military assistance and cooperation directed toward member states within international organizations are effective not only in enhancing military capabilities but also in deepening amicable relations through long-term trust and repeated interactions. Joint training exercises, combined operations, and educational programs within the institutional framework enhance mutual understanding with member-state militaries and foster positive perceptions of the donor in policy and military decision-making. Unlike economic assistance, these interactions build experiential and relational ties based on physical cooperation and capability sharing, leading member states to view their military linkage with the donor as a strategic asset. Consequently, the institutional environment of international organizations provides a stable mechanism for donors to expand their military influence and exert a degree of impact on member states' policy and security decisions.

Economic Cooperation and Support within the Institutional Framework

Second, states can expand their influence over other member states within international organizations by promoting trade, providing economic assistance, and offering investments. States fundamentally engage in economic cooperation

on the international stage to pursue mutual gains. However, such economic interactions can also contribute to one state establishing leverage over its partners. Enhanced trade relations between two states imply higher interdependence, allowing them to establish a more cooperative partnership and act as suppliers of resources that each lacks, thereby reducing the likelihood of resorting to military force against one another (Koehn and Nye 1977). In certain cases, however, this can create an asymmetry of power. Differences in economic capacity, resources, and market size may produce asymmetrical interdependency, whereby one state becomes more economically dependent on its partner, or vice versa. When a partner state becomes economically reliant on another, this dependency can be transformed into political leverage that the dominant state can exercise over its partner (Hirschman 1945; Kwon 2020). As some scholars have implied, a partner with high economic dependence is less able to resist the demands of the dominant state, due to increased vulnerability to potential retaliatory measures or sanctions (Rosecrance 1981; Morgan and Schwebach 1997). Consequently, a state can exercise political and diplomatic influence over its partner, or create an environment where the partner is compelled to anticipate and accommodate its interests, even without explicit demands.

From this perspective, especially great powers or at least regional powers possessing significant economic resources and capabilities, can utilize international or regional organizations to expand their influence over member states through economic cooperation and support. Recent examples, such as China, demonstrate that states often act with such strategic intentions and motivations (Clarke 2018). Unlike bilateral relations between states, international and regional organizations provide institutional, procedural foundations and established networks, as well as rules and codes of conduct for cooperation, which enable great powers or regional powers to more easily provide economic support and investment. These institutional routes and networks within organizations justify economic engagement as part of institutionalized cooperation rather than as a series of ad hoc bilateral favors, while also facilitating long-term and stable influence. Therefore, providing economic resources through the organizational framework may appear as assistance to other states, but in practice it constitutes a strategic act that strengthens political influence under the legitimacy of institutional norms.

Great powers can actively engage in economic cooperation and investment through international organizations, and by increasing partner states' dependence, they can leverage fears of sanctions, boycotts, tariffs, or restricted market access to secure influence over member states, as well as to establish a favorable security environment. This dynamic is exemplified by China's recent

use of its economic resources toward member states through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Andornino 2019; Blanchard 2017; Shambaugh 2018; Wang 2016). Meanwhile, regional powers can employ economic statecraft through regional organizations to strengthen their economic influence over member states. Such efforts are intended not only to foster a favorable regional environment but also to constrain and counterbalance the attempts of extra-regional powers to expand their economic influence within the regional power's sphere.

Ideational Elements within the Institutional Framework

Finally, by leveraging ideational factors such as culture and religion, states can consolidate their influence within international organizations. As proposed by hegemonic stability theory, hegemonic states design institutions and systems to maximize their security and economic interests, stabilizing their position by setting rules, norms, and orders within international regimes that are favorable to them (Gilpin 1981; 1987). In particular, great powers can steer rules, procedures, and agenda-setting processes so that other states comply with these norms within the institutional framework, thereby inducing behaviors and structures that align with the hegemon's objectives. For example, in the establishment of the Bretton Woods system and the World Bank, the U.S. led the creation of economic rules and orders, encouraging or compelling other states to adopt the hegemon's rules and norms within these institutions (Gilpin 1987).

From this realist perspective, not only material resources but also ideational elements are considered significant instruments for securing influence. Great powers can enhance their status by playing a leading role in protecting the values and norms shared with states belonging to a particular group or by pursuing related collective interests. Hegemons may act to safeguard the values and traditions of a specific region against external forces or promote common interests through the protection of regional identities (Pedersen 2002). Through these efforts, hegemonic states can garner support and consent from other states within the region, thereby ultimately exercising influence. Religious and cultural identities inherently distinguish between "us" and "them," prompting the in-group, or "us," to seek solidarity, cohesion, and collective support. Protecting the in-group's identity and the norms that constitute it from "them" becomes especially critical. Moreover, identity can generate affective dynamics among group members—such as "we-feeling" or "thinking like a team"—which in turn motivate efforts to pursue collective interests (Mercer 2005, 96–97). In this context, great and regional powers can leverage the religious or cultural elements

underpinning identity to assume a protective role, safeguarding these elements or the group's interests, thereby garnering respect and legitimacy from other member states within the group.

Therefore, a strategy that leverages ideational factors provides great opportunities for great and regional powers to strategically utilize values shared with other member states, particularly within international organizations formed around non-material commonalities such as religion, culture, or ethnicity. Such international organizations are inherently designed so that their founding purposes and operational objectives promote the protection and development of cultural or religious values and norms shared among member states, as well as the expansion of cooperation and exchange based on these cultural and religious elements. Moreover, other member states participating in these organizations often already share cultural, religious, or ethnic affinities with the great or regional power, which increases the likelihood that they will voluntarily accept policies and agendas led by the great power, while their resistance remains comparatively limited. Consequently, when a great or regional power within such an organization takes the lead in setting agendas aimed at protecting or advancing cultural and religious values, or securing shared interests, or in establishing rules and order, it can more easily and efficiently garner the support of other member states within the organization.

Based on this theoretical framework, this paper examines how Türkiye, classified as both a regional power and middle power, has perceived and utilized the OTS, an international organization encompassing the Middle East and Central Asia regions. Drawing on realist insights, this study specifically explores how Türkiye has strategically employed the OTS as a platform for institutionalizing its influence and internalizing its preferences within a collective framework, thereby expanding its regional influence and maximizing its national interests.

EVOLUTION AND STRATEGIC VALUE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES

The establishment of the OTS is closely linked to the epochal event of the Soviet's collapse. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991, fifteen countries across Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe emerged as newly independent states, which signified new opportunities for Türkiye. Having pursued a band-wagoning strategy with the Western bloc as a NATO member during the

Cold War, Türkiye began to focus on the power vacuum created by the Soviet collapse (Sayar 2000).

Formation of the Türkiye-led 'Turkic Belt' Cooperation

As Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan declared independence, Türkiye, as a relatively significant regional power within the so-called 'Turkic Belt'—stretching from China's western borders to Eastern European frontiers—began actively promoting multidimensional cooperation with these states across economic, political, social, and cultural spheres by emphasizing shared linguistic, religious, and cultural identities rooted in historical ties (Aydın and Liu 2024, 37). Particularly, Türkiye established TİKA (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı; Turkish International Cooperation Agency) in 1992 to provide Official Development Aid (ODA) to these countries, thereby emphasizing 'brotherhood' and consistently highlighting the collective identity of 'Turkic' peoples (Lipovsky 1996). In particular, Central Asian states found themselves compelled to band-wagon with this Türkiye-led regional initiatives, as they were experiencing continued economic stagnation due to their inability to integrate adequately into the global economic order following their systemic transition (Lee and Jung 2023, 15).

As Central Asian and Caucasian states welcomed Türkiye's proactive support and expanded cooperation, Türkiye's geostrategic calculations to expand influence and maximize national interests in the power-vacant Central Asian region proved highly successful (Lee and Jung 2023, 13-14). It is important to note that although cooperation was driven by the element of 'identity,' the underlying motivations and objectives of Türkiye were essentially the product of pragmatic politico-diplomatic calculations.

Institutionalization of the Türkiye-led Cooperation Momentum

To maintain and further strengthen the momentum of such cooperation, Türkiye actively pursued the institutionalization of collaboration. In 1992, Türkiye hosted the Summit of the Heads of State in Ankara, beginning to build consensus with the leaders of the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). Subsequently, by institutionalizing these summits and holding a total of nine summit meetings by 2010, discussions extended to political and economic agendas, gradually deepening what had initially been gatherings focused on interstate solidarity and

cultural exchange (Acar 2025). Later, in November 2008, four countries—Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan—established the TURKPA (Türk Devletleri Parlamenter Asamblesi; Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States) through the Istanbul Agreement to promote enhanced inter-parliamentary cooperation among member states. Although non-binding, it holds symbolic significance as a forum for ‘parliamentary diplomacy’ where national parliaments collaborate to deliberate on various regional agendas, serving functions of opinion coordination and interaction among member states (Durdular 2017). The ultimate achievement of institutionalizing this cooperative framework was the establishment of the Turkic Council in 2009. On October 3, 2009, in Nakhichevan, the ‘Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (in short Turkic Council),’ the predecessor of the OTS and an international organization centered on Turkic languages, was officially launched (Acar 2025, 56). Finally, at the 8th Summit held in Istanbul in 2021, the Turkic Council was renamed the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), completing the institutional evolution from a cooperative summit to a cooperative international organization.

Structure and Key Agenda of the Organization of Turkic States

The official status of the OTS, as declared on the OTS homepage, is ‘An intergovernmental organization to promote comprehensive cooperation among Turkic states’ (OTS 2025). The institutionally matured OTS can be characterized as an international organization that promotes political and economic cooperation centered on the common values of the Turkic world: linguistic, historical, and cultural bonds. The OTS consists of five core institutions. The most important institution is the Council of Heads of State, which holds annual summits to make major decisions. The chairmanship is determined by alphabetical order of member states’ names with a one-year term, and the current chairman is President Sadyr Zhaparov of the Kyrgyz Republic. Under the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Foreign Ministers and the Council of Senior Officials are established to handle practical affairs, while a secretariat is constituted to perform overall administrative duties. The most distinctive institution within the OTS is the ‘kşakals (Council of Elders),’ which can be seen as directly reflecting the tradition of Turkic nomadic tribalism, where respected tribal elders gather to share wisdom and provide counsel on major organizational matters. They assist official decision-making bodies such as the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Foreign Ministers, serving to provide guidance for setting directions to enhance cooperation and understanding among member states (OTS 2025).

Table 1. Key Agenda of the Organization of Turkic States

1	Political Cooperation	11	Energy Cooperation
2	Economic Cooperation	12	Health Cooperation
3	Customs Cooperation	13	Migration Cooperation
4	Transport Cooperation	14	Agricultural Cooperation
5	Tourism Cooperation	15	Cooperation on Justice
6	Education Cooperation	16	Cooperation on Humanitarian Issues
7	Information & Media	17	Cooperation in Human Resources
8	Youth & Sports Cooperation	18	Cooperation among Muslim Institutions
9	Diaspora Cooperation	19	Cooperation with IOs
10	ICT Cooperation		

Source: OTS Homepage

The core agenda that the OTS addresses through cooperation are summarized into 19 areas as shown in Table 1. Beyond basic political and economic cooperation, the organization promotes collaboration in various sociocultural fields such as education, youth, diaspora, health, and tourism, while also pursuing cooperation in areas that consider religious identity, such as collaboration among Muslim organizations (OTS 2025). Initially, cultural values were emphasized, but over time, political and economic expectations have predominantly supported the organization's sustainability and effectiveness (Aydın and Liu 2024, 40). Additionally, the organization has consistently shown interest in external expansion. At the 2018 summit, Hungary gained observer status, forming a new cooperative structure, and in 2019, Uzbekistan, which has Central Asia's largest population, obtained full membership status. Furthermore, in 2021, Turkmenistan acquired observer status, further consolidating the OTS's position (OTS 2025). Through this process, the OTS has definitively moved beyond criticism of being merely a forum for identity-based exchange and is evaluated as having upgraded to the next level in terms of scale through successful external expansion (Yaldız 2023, 67).

Strategic Value of the Organization of Turkic States

The OTS, which has successfully institutionalized as an international organization encompassing the Middle East and Central Asia regions, possesses significant geopolitical value in terms of population, economic scale, competitive industrial sectors, and cultural significance (Bagirzadeh 2023). The OTS is strategically positioned at a geopolitical crossroads that unites Eurasia,

Central Asia, and the South Caucasus regions, holding the potential to serve as a strategic balancer in relations with major powers such as Europe, Russia, China, and the Middle East (Koçak 2023, 129). Additionally, the total population of OTS member states reaches approximately 170 million people, and with their young and dynamic demographic structure, they possess high potential in terms of economic growth and human resources. This signifies competitiveness not only in forming a vast domestic market but also in labor supply and securing innovative talent. Moreover, member states are countries where competitive industrial sectors such as energy, minerals, and agricultural products are prominent, and recently they have been focusing on expanding ICT, eco-friendly energy, and logistics and transportation infrastructure sectors to promote economic diversification and sustainable development (Koçak 2023, 120). Furthermore, the OTS, which encompasses multi-ethnic nations sharing the Turkic language, represents a group with strong historical, linguistic, and religious bonds, serving as a symbol of cultural integration and identity strengthening. Based on these diverse strengths, the OTS possesses both geopolitical competitiveness and cooperation potential, and is increasingly expanding its influence in regional and global dimensions of international political economy and security.

GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE UKRAINE & GAZA WARS AND TÜRKİYE

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is assessed as one of the most significant shocks to the global order since World War II. The international order, which had been regarded as grounded in peaceful rules and law-based principles, has been fundamentally destabilized, revealing the inherent limitations of existing norms and the international system. As international organizations, including the UN Security Council, have repeatedly failed to address the lawless actions of great powers such as Russia, skepticism regarding the collapse of normative order and the rule of law has intensified (Brunk and Hakimi 2022). Concerning the Gaza war as well, the United States' consistent provision of diplomatic and military support despite Israel's apparent violations of international law has resulted in outcomes tantamount to the demise of the principle of universal application of international law (Van Steenberghe 2024). With the repeated exercise of U.S. veto power effectively blocking the international community's effective intervention in the Gaza war, the structural limitations of the international peacekeeping system

have become increasingly pronounced. Additionally, as the Trump administration in its second term shows reluctance to actively engage in both wars, assessments suggest that the U.S.-centered unipolar system and liberal hegemonic order are also following a trajectory toward dissolution, and that a new era of multi-polarization and instability will be accelerated (Lee and Lim 2025, 9-10).

The weakening of the liberal hegemonic order has also induced considerable changes in the security perceptions of various states that had relied on the international system to manage conflicts and ensure peace. In Europe and elsewhere, as Finland and Sweden joined NATO, discussions of NATO re-expansion and military rearmament movements have accelerated, making the new Cold War structure more pronounced and leading to further decline in global cooperation mechanisms (Brunk and Hakimi 2022). This naturally leads to a tendency where national interests and regionalism are prioritized over collective responses to international crises. The international community's response to the Gaza war has also been polarized, driving the acceleration of a multipolar order (Devji 2024). While the United States and other Western allies support Israel, the majority of developing countries and non-Western states support Palestine, deepening the divisions. As non-Western multilateral organizations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), centered around the so-called Global South, raise their voices, the necessity for alternative governance structures to the U.S.-led order is also being highlighted alongside the intensification of U.S.-China competition (BRICS 2025).

Following the Gaza war and the decline of the U.S.-centered order along with regional upheaval, traditional regional powers in the Middle East, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, are seeking to expand their influence. In Iran's case, it is continuously strengthening solidarity with Global South great powers, including China and Russia, along with some organizations such as BRICS and the SCO, as it seeks breakthrough strategies. As part of efforts to overcome persistent Western sanctions, Iran deepened economic solidarity by signing a free trade agreement with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in December 2023 (Reuters 2023). Since then, Iranian officials continue their efforts to form regional cooperation frameworks through sustained exchanges with high-ranking Russian officials. Saudi Arabia, while maintaining security cooperation with the United States, is pursuing a new form of 'strategic autonomy.' To avoid the risks of a U.S.-centric diplomatic policy, Saudi Arabia is strengthening cooperation with China and Russia, utilizing energy price leverage through OPEC+, and forming a dual structure of cooperation with both the U.S. and China in the new multipolar order (Roll and Thies 2025).

Geopolitical Calculation of Türkiye amid Two Wars

In Türkiye's case, the country regards the complex geopolitical crisis precipitated by the Ukraine and Gaza wars as an opportunity to strengthen its own position and influence (Koçak 2023, 133). In particular, President Erdoğan hopes to perform the role of an indispensable partner who can actively cooperate with and be utilized by the Trump administration, which is reluctant to directly intervene in the Middle East region (Günerigök 2025). Türkiye is the only NATO member state capable of direct dialogue with both Russia and Ukraine, positioning it to contribute to Trump's envisioned war termination mediation initiative, and has even proposed playing the role of a 'guarantor state' to ensure ceasefires between both sides regarding the Gaza crisis. In this geopolitical environment, Türkiye's calculation is to position itself as a regional balancer and mediator.

Furthermore, Türkiye is maintaining a framework of 'strategic ambiguity and diversification,' minimizing conflicts with the West while preserving strategic relationships with non-Western powers such as Russia and China (Günerigök 2025). With EU accession persistently frustrated and U.S.-Turkish relations also lacking clear solutions, Türkiye has adopted a hedging approach rather than closely aligning with the West, engaging with various powers instead. It also shows interest in new alternative multilateral frameworks within the multi-polarized order. The most prominent force among these is BRICS, to which Türkiye formally submitted its membership application in 2024. Although official membership was not achieved due to opposition from some member states including India, it participates at a certain level with partner country status, and the Turkish Foreign Ministry continues to emphasize close exchanges with BRICS (Daily Sabah 2025b). Moreover, Türkiye has been sending messages in recent years that it hopes to become a full member of the SCO. Since 2024, President Erdoğan has made statements about SCO membership expansion at various high-level events, and he personally attended as an official representative at the SCO summit held in early September 2025 (Haçaoğlu 2024). In particular, Türkiye is exceptionally active as NATO's only SCO dialogue partner state.

Türkiye's Aspiration for Cooperation Platform it can lead

In fact, Türkiye is considered to have even grander visions beyond joining aforementioned major multilateral cooperation organizations. This is because Türkiye harbors a larger grand strategy, targeting the Middle East and the

Eurasian region, which it regards as its so-called sphere of influence (Özdemir 2024, 94). Although Türkiye is already a member of various international organizations worldwide through its proactive foreign policy and serves as a major member state, its influence within such organizations remains minimal. While it does exert some degree of influence within regional organizations that exist in the Middle East and Central Asian regions, the influence and strategic value of such regional organizations can hardly be considered very high. This is because the ideal regional cooperation organization that Türkiye seeks means a platform composed of trustworthy states that is mutually beneficial and within which the country can secure a certain degree of agenda-setting and implementation capacity (Guliyev 2024, 42). Türkiye's perception, as discussed in the theoretical framework section, aligns precisely with the realist perspective. Realists argue that international organizations form institutional structures that enable the redistribution of economic resources, the creation of military partnerships, and the strengthening of cultural bonds, and that these institutions are ultimately utilized by great powers or regional powers to advance their interests (Mearsheimer 1995; Pedersen 2002). In this context, Türkiye regards international organizations not primarily as arenas for cooperation and norm-building, but as strategic instruments to maintain its status within the international community and to consolidate and maximize its national interests.

In this context, the regional cooperation organizations where Türkiye can exert considerable influence and which possess ideal configurations can be narrowed down to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) established in 1985, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), and the OTS. The ECO is a regional economic cooperation body where Türkiye has played a leading role as a founding member, providing a platform for economic integration and trade promotion among Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and South Asian countries. However, there are significant gaps in economic levels and interests among member states, and the organization's infrastructure and resources are also relatively poor compared to other organizations (Ataman, Yücekaya, and Küçük 2025). Moreover, beyond economic cooperation, there is a lack of bonds and symbolism to unite member states. In other words, while it is an organization where Türkiye can easily exercise leadership, there is a limitation in that it fails to guarantee the benefits as much as expected. In the case of the OIC, since its primary purpose is cooperation and exchange with various Islamic countries, it differs somewhat from the strategic interest acquisition that Türkiye envisions, and it is difficult to achieve the expected effects because numerous regional competitors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are positioned within it. The BSEC plays a pivotal

role in Black Sea regional economic cooperation and security enhancement, and has the advantage of being able to promote cooperative projects in various fields such as energy, trade, transportation, and environment. However, this also faces constraints in pursuing substantial economic integration and cooperative projects due to differences in economic levels and political interests among member states (Ataman, Yücekaya, and Küçük 2025). In particular, Russian influence is considerable, and since many countries possess political instability, it remains somewhat symbolic in its role.

Considering these various factors, the OTS can be viewed as the regional cooperation organization that most closely approximates Türkiye's ideal vision. Because it possesses a common Turkic identity, there exists strong bonds of solidarity, and through long-term interactions, a certain degree of solid trust has been established. Moreover, as discussed in the previous section, the strategic and economic value possessed by the OTS also has sufficient potential to contribute to the enhancement of Türkiye's national interests (Özdemir 2024, 99). Furthermore, considering Türkiye's national power and position within the OTS, it can be regarded as a regional cooperation bloc where it can proactively set agendas, pursue them, and manage these processes. For these reasons, Türkiye has demonstrated active engagement from the establishment to the expansion of the OTS throughout the entire process, which has enabled the OTS to 'evolve' into its current form.

ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR TÜRKIYE'S POWER PROJECTION

In this section, Türkiye's utilization of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) as an institutionalized mechanism of cooperation to enhance its national interests and expand its influence will be systematically examined. As described in detail in the theoretical section, great powers or regional powers tend to perceive international organizations not primarily as arenas of cooperation or standard-setters for norms, but as strategic instruments to redistribute economic resources, establish frameworks for military cooperation, and strengthen cultural ties, thereby advancing their national interests and securing influence. Drawing on this realist perspective, this section analyzes how Türkiye has institutionalized and strategically utilized the OTS, presenting it as a case that aptly illustrates how a regional power perceives and utilizes an international organization, in line with realist theoretical assumptions.

Strategic Calculation of Türkiye as a Leading Actor of Organization of Turkic States

As previously discussed, the emergence of newly independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union provided favorable opportunities for Türkiye. As the most competitive power within the so-called 'Turkic Belt,' Türkiye established the foundation for cooperation by emphasizing linguistic, cultural, and religious identities, and to comprehensively support this framework and consolidate its position as the 'elder brother,' it established TİKA in 1992 to assist the self-reliance of these nascent states (Aydın and Liu 2024). Throughout this process, Türkiye did not perceive these cooperative mechanisms merely as the provision of 'goodwill' or the establishment of collaborative platforms. Rather, through substantive diplomatic and political calculations, it recognized that the institutionalization of such cooperation would be conducive to enhancing national interests and maximizing influence (Lee and Jung 2023). For this reason, Türkiye exerted various efforts to institutionalize this momentum. Türkiye invited the heads of state from Turkic Belt countries to Ankara in 1992 to hold summit meetings. These summits, conducted nine times until 2010, demonstrated development that expanded beyond simple cultural and social exchanges to include deliberations on economic and political agendas (Acar 2025). This can be viewed as the gradual growth of institutionalization that Türkiye had envisioned. Subsequently, the establishment of TURKPA in 2008 enabled direct communication among national parliaments, and institutionalization was ultimately completed with the official launch of the Turkic Council in 2009. This signified the birth of a substantive regional cooperative body that transcended summit diplomacy among leaders, and by changing its designation to OTS in 2021, it was elevated to the status of a bona fide international organization. With the successful institutionalization of the OTS, Türkiye secured a new platform for maximizing national interests and enhancing regional influence. Particularly, based on its superior national power and economic capabilities among member states, Türkiye gained leadership in agenda-setting and obtained the legitimacy to utilize this advantage from a medium to long-term perspective.

Since the 2020s, Türkiye has demonstrated its desire to expand the role of the OTS, where it holds considerable leadership (Alpay 2025). In particular, President Erdoğan has repeatedly presented a vision that the OTS will function as a regional organization strengthening international cooperation across the Eurasian continent, and more specifically in Central Asia and the Caucasus regions (Özdemir 2024). It appears that Türkiye has judged that the utility value increases

as the institutional level of the OTS rises. This strategic calculation and vision of Türkiye began to be concretely revealed through the announcement of the ‘2040 Turkic World Vision’ at the 8th Summit held in Istanbul in November 2021 (Beylur 2021). This vision initiative establishes goals for OTS member states to achieve over the next 20 years and, as shown in Table 2 below, subdivides 18 areas of cooperation under four major pillars.

As shown in Table 2, the 2040 Vision presents more structured, comprehensive, and clearly articulated long-term planning compared to previous Turkic World cooperation objectives. Modern and sustainable fields such as economics, ICT, and environment have been incorporated, and the emphasis on regional connectivity and global collaboration is particularly noteworthy.

Table 2. Areas of Cooperation of the 2040 Turkic World Vision

Political and Security Cooperation	Political Cooperation
	Security Cooperation
Economic and Sectoral Cooperation	Economic Cooperation
	Transport and Customs
	Information and Communication Technologies
	Energy
	Tourism
	Health
	Environment
	Agriculture
People-to-People Cooperation	Culture
	Education and Science
	Youth and Sports
	Diaspora
	Information and Media
Cooperation with External Parties	Civil Society Organizations
	International Organizations
	Humanitarian and Development Cooperation

Source: Yaldız 2023, 68

This establishes an institutional framework through which the OTS as an international organization can be instrumentally utilized not only for material gains but also for shaping political and security outcomes. As discussed in the theoretical framework, from a realist perspective, Türkiye as a regional power has secured opportunities to expand its influence through this institutionalized international organization by means of military partnership building, economic

resource distribution, or strengthening cultural and ideological bonds with member states.

Cultivating Political and Security Cooperation within the Institutional Framework of OTS

As declared in the 2040 Turkic World Vision, the OTS regards the political and security cooperation field as the most important first pillar (Yaldız 2023). While in the past it emphasized sociocultural elements as an identity-based cooperative body and focused on exchanges and solidarity, the agenda and priorities since 2021 can be seen as having shifted toward creating a favorable regional security environment and enhancing military and security cooperation. Particularly in the field of security cooperation, it specifically emphasizes building cooperation and information-sharing networks among member states' law enforcement agencies to counter threats such as violent extremism, terrorism, transnational crime, irregular migration, and cybercrime (Kocatepe 2022).

Reflecting this agenda change, President Erdoğan mentioned at the 11th OTS Summit in 2024 that, in order to build regional peace and ensure security during turbulent times, the OTS must establish 'a shared security vision' and expand the framework of cooperation to unleash the potential of OTS member states (Daily Sabah 2024). Sarı (2023) argues that this agenda transformation is linked to Türkiye's regional security perspective. Sarı analyzed that since the Turkic world has constantly been an arena of great power competition even after the end of the Cold War, Türkiye recognizes the need for a unified security strategy and independent policy coordination among OTS member states against great powers to achieve common interests and security (Sarı 2023, 147-148). In particular, Koçak (2023) evaluates that this change has become more pronounced since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 (Koçak 2023, 129).

In this context, Türkiye is making efforts to strengthen relationships with various member states within the institutional framework of the OTS, and furthermore, to expand its influence through military assistance as a medium. Türkiye provided Azerbaijan with large-scale supplies of various weapon systems, including Bayraktar TB2 drones, during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, and has conducted regular joint military exercises during peacetime. Additionally, it is devoting significant attention to building mutual trust and establishing a long-term cooperative foundation by constantly operating programs for exchanges and education among military officers (Sarı 2023, 145).

With other member states Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, it is specifically proceeding with discussions on arms and advanced technology supply and

technology transfer, and progress is being made regarding the establishment of local defense industry production facilities (Outzen 2023, 6-7). Moreover, it is making efforts to improve interoperability, build mutually beneficial relationships, and foster bonds with both countries through conducting individual and regional joint exercises and providing officer dispatch and training programs.

Furthermore, though limited, it is also providing small arms and equipment, military technical support to Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, and offering military education and small-scale technical training (Rodeheffer 2024). This support contains the calculation that it can be utilized as a means to expand influence over these two countries in the future. In asymmetric relationships through military aid, donor countries inevitably acquire political leverage and diplomatic bargaining power, and as dependence on military support increases, recipient countries are more likely to pursue foreign policies that align with the donor country's preferences (Sullivan et al. 2011).

In addition to such direct military cooperation, Türkiye is actively cooperating closely with OTS member states to respond to regional security threats such as terrorism and transnational crime. Türkiye is providing relevant education and training for police officers from OTS member states at the Turkish Police Academy located in Ankara, and is taking the lead in policy formulation by dispatching Turkish intelligence and security experts to the OTS Secretariat (Polis Akademisi 2025).

Table 3. Türkiye's Military Cooperation with the OTS Members

Country	Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan
Arms Cooperation	Bayraktar UAV munitions and electroptics contract	UAVs and force modernization dialogue	Bayraktar UAV capability upgrades and training	Bayraktar UAV acquisition agreements
Security & Military Agreements	Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations (signed 2021; ratified 2022)	Signing of various Defense/technical cooperation frameworks and MoUs		
Joint exercises	Proposed hosting first OTS joint exercise in 2026			
Military Training Support	Bilateral training and staff exchanges expanded under 2021 Shusha framework	Cooperation law and plans signed in 2019 enabling training/ education Officer education in Türkiye/NATO tracks referenced	Military education/ training protocol foundations (2020) Expanded cooperation including training and exercises (2022)	Turkish military financial cooperation and materiel support (2015) Kyrgyz troops in Türkiye's EFES 2022 training phase

Source: Sarı 2023; Koçak 2023; Aktas 2025

In this context, Türkiye emphasizes that such military and security cooperation is cooperation within the institutional framework of the OTS rather than as a frame of cooperation with individual countries. This reflects a calculation to strengthen the status and value of the OTS and to utilize the function of the OTS, which had remained as a symbolic cultural cooperation organization, as a practical security strategy framework (Sarı 2023, 155). As examined in the theoretical inquiry process, military assistance and cooperation targeting member countries within international organizations are effective not only for military capability enhancement but also for deepening friendly relations through long-term trust and repeated interactions. Türkiye's efforts within such an institutional framework will be able to provide a stable mechanism that can constrain member countries' policies and security decisions to a certain extent.

Economic Cooperation and Support within the Institutional Framework of OTS

The second pillar emphasized by the 2040 Turkic World Vision is economic cooperation. Examining the detailed tasks, it encompasses a comprehensive agenda ranging from the development of financial and investment instruments to foster economic growth and social development, free movement of goods and capital, services, technology, and people among member states, and cooperation from energy and ICT sectors to tourism, health, environment, and agriculture. This can be viewed as a comprehensive message to strengthen economic cooperation within the institutional framework of the OTS, beyond individual economic exchanges and cooperation among member states (Yaldız 2023, 75). As already mentioned above, the OTS represents approximately 170 million people, and with their young and dynamic demographic structure, they possess high potential in terms of economic growth and human resources. Furthermore, OTS member states are countries where competitive industrial sectors such as energy, minerals, and agricultural products are prominent (Koçak 2023, 120). Due to this strategic value, Türkiye has emphasized the need to form an economic and energy cooperation bloc among member states since the Turkic Council period (Koçak 2023, 121). This embodies Türkiye's strategic national interest calculation to secure stable supply of scarce energy resources within the institutional framework of the OTS and create a favorable environment for entering the large Central Asian market. Reflecting these strategic interests, Türkiye's trade volume with the principal member states of the OTS has shown a steady upward trajectory over the past five years, as illustrated in <Table 4> below.

Table 4. Türkiye’s trade volume with OTS member states (USD Billions)

Country	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Azerbaijan	3.5	5.02	5.4	5.8	5.64
Kazakhstan	4.5	5.2	6.3	7.3	6.78
Kyrgyzstan	0.8	1.0	1.2	1.33	1.55
Uzbekistan	1.6	2.0	2.4	2.6	3.36

Source: Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (Turkish Statistical Institute) Homepage

Furthermore, Türkiye has provided substantial amounts of ODA and development cooperation project support to member states through TİKA, established in 1992. According to official data from TİKA (2020), the cumulative ODA scale that Türkiye provided to Central Asia from 1992 to 2018 amounts to \$24.8 billion, which accounts for 28.6% of Türkiye’s total ODA. Among these, the largest recipient was Kyrgyzstan, which received \$8.1 billion. Interestingly, based on 2010-2016 data, even oil-producing countries like Kazakhstan received \$208.1 million in ODA, while Azerbaijan received \$157 million. Additionally, Kyrgyzstan received \$603.4 million, Turkmenistan received \$79.4 million, and Uzbekistan received \$47.4 million. This was because TİKA’s development cooperation activities in Central Asia focused on sectors such as education and vocational training programs, agriculture and livestock development, cultural heritage preservation and restoration, technological infrastructure construction, and human resource development—areas where Türkiye held relative advantages compared to Central Asia that could not be easily achieved through energy revenue funding alone (TİKA 2020).

Table 5. Türkiye’s Official Development Assistance to OTS member states (2010-2016)

Recipient Country	Accumulated Amount (USD Millions)
Kazakhstan	208.1
Uzbekistan	47.4
Azerbaijan	157
Kyrgyzstan	603.4
Turkmenistan	79.4

Source: TİKA 2020

Despite its unfavorable economic conditions, the continuation of such active support contains Türkiye’s strategic calculations. The more economically dependent recipient countries become on Türkiye, the more the political leverage that Türkiye can exercise can be strengthened (Hirschman 1945; Kwon 2020). In other words, Türkiye can maintain and strengthen its influence over

member states through economic cooperation and support utilizing the institutional framework of ODA. Such efforts can not only create a favorable regional environment but also be utilized to check and balance the attempts of extra-regional great powers such as Russia and China to expand their economic influence (Koçak 2023, 124).

Ideational Elements within the Institutional Framework of OTS

The third pillar emphasized in the 2040 Turkic World Vision is related to cultural exchange. Specifically, it advocates for strengthening cooperation among member states in areas related to culture, education, diaspora, media, and civil society organizations. Reflecting the original purpose of its establishment, this third pillar highlights aspects of Turkic cultural and social identity to some extent. In order to maintain and strengthen the institutional framework of the OTS, and to reinforce collective consciousness and homogeneity among member states, the discourse of identity has been maintained (Koçak 2023, 126). Koçak (2023) evaluates that TÜRKSOY (International Organization of Turkic Culture), the Turkic Academy, and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, which Türkiye actively supports and utilizes, have played a central role in strengthening bonds and solidarity, thereby promoting the preservation of cultural solidarity and heritage and the enhancement of shared cultural identity. In particular, at the 12th OTS Summit held in Budapest in May, this year, President Erdoğan emphasized that in order to respond to the crises and challenges presented by the new world order, solidarity among Turkic member states sharing the same foundation and heritage must be strengthened, and that we should work together to create a more just and peaceful world (Daily Sabah 2025a).

Reflecting a realist perspective, Türkiye leads values and norms that can be shared with member states, and enhances its status and strengthens its influence by pursuing their collective interests (Pedersen 2002). Furthermore, it can be seen that Türkiye's calculation includes preventing countries like China and Russia from penetrating regions under its sphere of influence by 'othering' major powers that threaten 'us' and disrupt the world order, and by spreading the message to fight against them together. Ultimately, Türkiye has calculated that it can perform a protective role using identity as an ideological element within the institutional framework, and acquire respect and legitimacy from member states by defending collective interests. Based on this, it has become easier for Türkiye to lead OTS agendas in directions that can maximize its national interests, and to more easily obtain voluntary or tacit support from member states (Koçak 2023, 127).

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATION

Türkiye has persistently sought to leverage the OTS as a strategic instrument to advance its national interests and strengthen its regional influence. This strategy is rooted in realist calculation, advocating a careful and efficient diplomatic approach, rather than overtly displaying the power. Türkiye notably regards international organizations less as cooperative arenas and more as platforms to broaden its influence and secure tangible benefits, leading to its active engagement with various regional bodies. Against this backdrop, the OTS has emerged as Türkiye's key organization, distinguished by its shared linguistic, cultural, and historical foundations, alongside a deliberate and ongoing process of institutionalization that has created a relatively stable and effective platform for regional collaboration. The introduction of the '2040 Turkic World Vision' which is composed of three pillars—political-security cooperation, economic cooperation, and identity reinforcement—paves the way for the OTS to evolve into a fully institutionalized and functional international organization. Within this evolving framework, Türkiye has successfully secured a leading role and the capacity to actively shape agendas. Consequently, Türkiye has institutionalized a mechanism for projecting regional leadership that aligns with realist strategic imperatives, and at the same time, formulated a platform capable of structurally influencing the policy decisions of the other member states. Thus, the OTS transcends its original form as a cultural cooperation entity, becoming instead a strategic vehicle for the expansion of Türkiye's influence and a cornerstone for reconfiguring the regional order.

The future prospects of the OTS have been gradually trending in a positive direction over time. Through the organization's expansion, its economic potential in sectors such as trade, transportation, and energy continues to increase, and with growing interdependence, incentives for integration and cooperation are strengthening. Moreover, enhanced security cooperation among member states has fostered a consensus to jointly address regional threats, with capacities for response improving steadily, albeit slowly. Furthermore, ongoing cultural integration is being facilitated through joint activities in sports, tourism, and literature, which bolster cultural ties and mutual exchanges, creating an environment conducive to greater cohesion. Additionally, in the context of the Ukraine war and the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, the 'Turkic Belt' region is poised to assume a critical role as a key transit corridor (Baghirov 2022, 66). Particularly, as the geopolitical environment undergoes rapid shifts, the level of cooperation among OTS member states and Türkiye's position as a balancing actor are expected to be further fortified. Given

the limited political and diplomatic capacities of the majority of member states, Türkiye's leadership is unlikely to face significant challenges in the foreseeable future.

However, the OTS also faces inherent limitations and sources of instability. The most noticeable vulnerability lies in the disparities in development levels among member states. The majority of the member states, excluding Türkiye and Kazakhstan, exhibit lower economic development and institutional capacities, which may impede further integration and organizational institutionalization of the OTS as a unified entity. Additionally, the issue of free-riding by multiple member states presents a latent risk that could potentially destabilize the organization at any time. Conversely, if negative perceptions arise regarding the dominance of agenda-setting by a specific member state such as Türkiye, concerns over equality among member states may emerge, posing an obstacle to sustaining deep cooperation. Questions regarding the competitiveness and value of the OTS may also be raised. Considering the comprehensive capabilities of its member states, alternative regional arrangements such as the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) or the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) might offer greater benefits and stability.

For these reasons, the role of Türkiye as the leading actor in the OTS is paramount. As the central leader, Türkiye must proactively prevent internal crises and actively promote capacity-building among member states to strengthen the overall capabilities of the OTS. At the same time, it is necessary to enact changes that acknowledge and secure the position of Kazakhstan within the OTS, reflecting its relatively enhanced national power. Another critical aspect involves preparing mechanisms to counterbalance external influences, particularly the encroachment of Russia and China, which have the potential to undermine the expansion and cohesion of the OTS. Given that economic incentives alone are insufficient to contend with these two major powers, it is imperative for Türkiye to emphasize identity-based internal cohesion efforts alongside a political and diplomatic leadership committed to collectively addressing regional threats and conflicts as a unified 'we.' These efforts by Türkiye align closely with the realist interpretation of the roles of ideology and identity in state behavior. The emphasis on and solidarity around Turkic identity do not merely signify identity consolidation or community building; rather, they function as a lubricant that facilitates Türkiye's gradual consolidation of influence within institutionalized frameworks by reducing transactional costs and enhancing mutual trust among member states. In this regard, such an approach serves as a strategic platform through which Türkiye enhances its regional influence, maximizes its autonomy in the international arena, and

consolidates its position as both a middle power and a regional hegemon.

Cognizant of these dynamics, Türkiye has consistently emphasized these issues in various high-level meetings and events. Despite prevailing economic challenges, Türkiye maintains a steady scale of ODA directed toward Central Asia and the Caucasus, while continuously proposing visions and trajectories aimed at the 'future.' Additionally, Türkiye has been steadily increasing its trade volume with the OTS members, despite the current trade levels remaining relatively modest. Concurrently, efforts to counter external threats are actively pursued. To impede Russian influence, OTS member states have implemented a series of policies promoting the use of native languages over Russian, with Türkiye playing a proactive role in supporting and encouraging these measures. Although Türkiye cannot directly prevent China's economic penetration, it encourages its domestic enterprises to enter the Central Asian markets, emphasizing development cooperation support rather than purely commercial interests to distinguish this engagement. Through these multifaceted efforts, Türkiye strives to enhance the competitiveness and cohesion of the OTS, and such initiatives are expected to continue. For Türkiye, ensuring the sustainable projection of institutional influence is imperative to the strategic and consistent utilization of the OTS as an instrument of foreign policy.

Türkiye's strategies and efforts in utilizing the OTS reveal multiple implications. From a theoretical perspective, Türkiye's case provides yet another empirical example of the realist view that great powers or regional powers 'utilize' international organizations as instruments to maximize national interests and expand influence. Furthermore, the OTS case holds additional value when considered against the backdrop of protracted conflicts such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which are driving the international order toward a quasi-surrealist configuration, thereby facilitating the emergence of new multilateral blocs outside existing institutional frameworks.

The OTS example also offers fresh insights for South Korea. Amid the turbulence of a neo-Cold War era, South Korea must likewise explore new platforms of cooperation. Given the limited scope for South Korea to join new blocs, participating in the OTS as an observer could represent a viable option. This is partly because South Korea and the Turkic states share a 'Turkic-Altaic identity.' Although this notion has been subject to technical critique from a linguistic standpoint, from a political perspective, the South Korean government should endeavor to identify and leverage even the smallest points of commonality to enhance national interests. The Central Asian region remains a "blue ocean" of strategic value for South Korea, offering significant incentives for cooperation in areas such as energy resource acquisition and supply chain expansion through

the Middle Corridor. Moreover, it represents a critical market for potential joint ventures in defense industries, infrastructure development, and the digital economy. From the perspective of public diplomacy, the presence of ethnic Koreans (Koryo-saram) and linguistic affinities further provide fertile ground for strengthening mutual ties. In this context, South Korea's participation as an observer in the OTS could pave the way for enhanced diplomatic channels, participation in joint working groups, and the establishment of pilot projects in selected sectors. In 2019, during National Assembly Speaker Moon Hee-sang's visit to Azerbaijan, discussions were held regarding South Korea's participation in the OTS as an observer. Although formal participation did not materialize due to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' inadequate follow-up at the time, the interest and consensus had already been established. Reconsidering this matter from a pragmatic perspective remains a meaningful course of action for expanding South Korea's multilateral diplomacy and pioneering new markets.

Nevertheless, several areas require further theoretical exploration. While this study, grounded in realist theory, offers a novel analytical perspective and strengthens explanatory validity, the scope of theoretical application still warrants critical reflection. This is primarily because a constructivist interpretation—viewing Türkiye's pursuit of a strengthened Turkic identity as an end in itself and as part of genuine community-building efforts—continues to represent the dominant perspective. Accordingly, additional research focusing on the discourse and philosophical underpinnings of Türkiye's leadership would be necessary to bridge this theoretical gap.

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