



## CHANGING GEOPOLITICS AND THE OTS: A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE GABALA SUMMIT

The 12<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) Heads of State Council was held in Gabala, Azerbaijan – one of the ancient crossroads of the Silk Road – under the theme “Regional Peace and Security.” The summit marked not only a milestone for the Turkic world but also a turning point amid shifting global geopolitical balances. The past five summits demonstrate the OTS’s growing institutional depth and functional regionalism. At the 2021 Istanbul Summit, the organization adopted its current name, “Organization of Turkic States,” and endorsed the Turkic World Vision-2040. The 2022 Samarkand Summit approved the 2022–2026 Strategic Roadmap and admitted the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) as an observer member. The 2023 Astana Summit, themed “The Turkic Era,” emphasized connectivity, while the 2024 Bishkek Summit adopted a common flag, endorsed the Charter of the Turkic World, and advanced the common alphabet initiative. Collectively, these developments reveal a multidimensional institutional integration encompassing politics, economy, transport, and digital transformation.

Since the 2009 Nakhchivan Agreement, Azerbaijan has served as one of the pivotal driving forces behind the OTS’s institutional evolution. The 6–7 October 2025 Gabala Summit reaffirmed Baku’s visionary diplomacy, producing transformative outcomes for both the regional security architecture and the connectivity agenda. The theme “Regional Peace and Security” extended across foreign policy, energy, transport, and artificial intelligence, reflecting the OTS’s emergence not only as a cultural entity but as a strategic alliance.

After the Cold War, the dissolution of hegemonic stability ushered in a multipolar and fragmented world order. The diversification of power centers, the rise of non-state actors, and widening governance gaps have generated an environment of uncertainty described in the literature as “chaotic multipolarity.” The U.S. – China rivalry, manifesting most visibly through technology and trade wars, has redefined the global agenda around strategic sectors such as data, AI, and semiconductor production. As Keohane (2011) observed, deepening interdependence has evolved into an asymmetric multipolarity repeatedly disrupted by crises.

In this environment, regionalism has become a mechanism for states to manage uncertainty and

build collective capacity. The OTS – alongside the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the expanding BRICS+ platform – has emerged as an institutional framework strengthening economic interdependence. Simultaneously, China’s 2025 China–Central Asia Summit focusing on energy and digital transformation, India’s Connect Central Asia initiative, Japan’s “Central Asia + Japan Dialogue” platform, and the U.S. C5+1 mechanism have consolidated Asia-centered multi-layered integration dynamics.

The European Union (EU), although developing Central Asia strategies since the 1990s, has long remained constrained by a normative and reactive approach. Steps taken in energy security and connectivity were mostly crisis-driven, failing to produce a sustainable strategic vision (EPRS, 2024). By contrast, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2013 has entrenched its structural economic presence (Nedopil, 2025). The EU’s 2021 Global Gateway program sought to bridge this gap, yet financial and political incoherence limited its effectiveness (DGAP, 2025). Consequently, the EU has emerged as a late yet still limited actor in the region.

The United States’ regional engagement has been recalibrated, particularly since the Trump administration. Washington sought mediation in Azerbaijan – Armenia negotiations and prioritized energy routes facilitating Azerbaijani gas deliveries to Europe (Atlantic Council, 2022). Concurrently, U.S. efforts to secure the Trans-Caspian and Middle Corridor routes aimed to expand economic and geopolitical presence across the Caspian Basin (CSIS, 2024). However, inconsistencies between diplomatic outreach and investment policy have constrained the sustainability of these initiatives.

Within this shifting power landscape, Central Asian states face both opportunities and risks. China’s infrastructure investments and Europe’s diversification agenda provide connectivity and investment prospects but also induce asymmetric dependencies through external debt and technological reliance (World Bank, 2023; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024). The OTS’s key strength lies in its collective decision-making and regional coordination capacity. Through joint transport corridors, energy cooperation, and digital

infrastructure projects, the organization enhances members' negotiating leverage in global forums.

Accordingly, the OTS has sought to institutionalize its regional peace and security framework through closer cooperation with the UN, EU, and Council of Europe. Collaboration with the UN extends to humanitarian response and peace missions, while engagement with the EU covers logistics, customs, and digital transformation. Hungary, an EU member and OTS observer, has assumed the role of a "bridge state." Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's call at the Gabala Summit for a "strategic partnership between the EU and the OTS" (Anadolu Agency, 2025) underscored Hungary's pivotal position within the organization.

Building upon this, the OTS+ concept embodies the ambition to project influence beyond the region. The initiative envisions modular cooperation with neighboring areas and major powers, particularly in energy, digital infrastructure, and logistics, forming a flexible integration model (TDT, 2025). In doing so, the OTS seeks both to mitigate the spillover of regional crises and to assert collective agency in global platforms.

From a regional peace and security standpoint, a comparison of the 2019 Baku and 2025 Gabala Declarations reveal the OTS's evolution from reactive security discourse toward proactive peace diplomacy. Early summits emphasized sovereignty and territorial integrity (TDT, 2019), while the 2022 Samarkand and 2023 Astana Summits expanded the agenda to transboundary threats and cybersecurity (TDT, 2022; TDT, 2023). By the 2024 Bishkek and 2025 Gabala Summits, this framework broadened to include human security, climate security, and strategic foresight (TDT, 2025). President Erdoğan's assertion that "forming a peace belt across the Turkic World is now a necessity" (Anadolu Agency, 2025), President Aliyev's statement that "the OTS is a guarantor of regional peace" (Azertag, 2025), and President Tokayev's view that "security and development are inseparable" (Inform.kz, 2025) collectively encapsulate the organization's unified vision.

The OTS is also deepening institutionalization in security and defense. At the 2023 Tashkent Meeting of National Security Council Heads, mechanisms for information-sharing and joint threat assessment were established, while the 2025 Bishkek Meeting addressed cyber threats and counter-terrorism cooperation (TDT, 2023; TDT, 2025a). Regular defense ministers' meetings and planned joint exercises illustrate the organization's intent to act as a proactive pillar of regional security architecture (Anadolu Agency, 2025).

Today, the OTS embodies a hybrid model merging neorealist balancing and liberal institutionalist

cooperation. Member states simultaneously seek equilibrium among major powers and deepen interdependence through institutional solidarity, building regional security on collective action (Eurasian Monitor, 2025).

Expectations for the future converge along three axes. First, institutionalizing strategic foresight and early-warning mechanisms will enhance the OTS's role in crisis management. Second, multilateral funds for energy, transport, and digital infrastructure will elevate the region's economic and strategic weight. Third, the OTS+ framework's multilateral foreign-policy dimension will enable the Turkic World to emerge as a more influential global actor. In this context, Hungary's bridge role within the EU and the TRNC's geopolitical position in the Eastern Mediterranean are likely to strengthen the OTS as a strategic nexus between Europe and the Middle East.

Ultimately, the Gabala Summit symbolized the OTS's transition from a phase of political, economic, and cultural solidarity to one of geopolitical agency. Through its pursuit of multilateral diplomacy and the OTS+ vision, the organization now stands poised to shape the evolving global order as a collective actor of the Turkic World.

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