

December 8, 2024

Organization of Turkic States (OTS): Evolution in 2023-2024

Evgeny Troitskiy

The tenth and the eleventh OTS summits held in November 2023 and in November 2024 in Astana and Bishkek respectively did not become important milestones in the Organization's development. However, the summits indicated the trends of its evolvement and highlighted the major discrepancy in the very foundation of the Turkic Union.

It became clear that that the initiatives that Tukey had been putting forward within the OTS framework were implemented unevenly, often with considerable delays and in the smallest possible scope. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan seek to use the OTS as a forum for advancing their own initiatives, to maximize their roles in the Organization and to contain the manifestations of pan-Turkic ideology and practices that they see as dangerous for themselves. It is noteworthy that only declaratory and protocol decisions were taken at the OTS Astana summit in November 2023.

From Samarkand 2022 to Bishkek 2024: major spheres of cooperation within the OTS

Security Initiatives

The mechanism of the OTS Security Council Secretaries meetings initiated by Turkey got off to a slow start. More than a year elapsed between the first and the second meetings held in Ankara in June 2022 and in Tashkent in October 2023. The meetings resulted in the establishment of an expert

Evgeny Troitskiy is Professor at the Department of World Politics, School of Historical and Political Studies, Tomsk State University (Tomsk, Russia).

group and an agreement to prepare a roadmap for the implementation of decisions. Whereas the participants of the first meeting were accepted by President Erdogan, the Uzbek President Mirziyoev limited himself to sending a welcome address to the participants of the second meeting. The third meeting (October 2024, Turkestan, Kazakhstan) remained almost unnoticed by the expert community and no information of its results was published. The participants of the SCO Security Council Secretaries meeting (April 2024) and of the first-ever meeting of the Central Asian countries Security Council Secretaries (May 2024) were granted President Tokayev's audience, but the Turkestan meeting participants did not receive even a Kazakh President's greeting.

The Central Asian countries showed a greater interest in holding regular consultations among foreign affairs ministries, a framework initiated by Turkey in 2022. At the second consultations held in May 2023 in Baku a decision was taken to elevate their level to deputy foreign ministers. The Central Asian countries' growing interest in this mechanism is linked with the higher role that the Foreign Ministry assumed in the Turkish executive after Hakan Fidan, then head of the National Intelligence Organization, had been appointed minister of foreign affairs in June 2023. Astana hosted the third deputy foreign ministers' meeting in October 2024.

Trade and Investments

In March 2023, the establishment of the Turkic Investment Fund with the modest charter capital of 500 million dollars was announced. The agreement on its establishment entered into force only in February 2024 as the Central Asian OTS countries started the ratification procedures in the late fall of 2023. The first meeting of the Fund's Management Board was held in May 2024 and the financing of projects is set to begin in 2025.

In 2022, Turkey suggested setting up the OTS Development Bank. The idea has not been put into life, though it was vociferously supported by Uzbekistan that offered to host the Bank's headquarters in Tashkent. At the 2024 Bishkek summit the Uzbek President again spoke in favor of setting up the Bank, but the idea was not mentioned in the summit declaration.

The agreement on the establishment of simplified customs corridor signed by the OTS member states at Samarkand summit in November 2022 was ratified by Kazakhstan as late as in September 2024. Thereafter, it finally entered into force. Meanwhile, the bilateral Kazakh-Turkish agreement on international combined freight transportations signed in May 2022 was ratified by Kazakhstan in May 2024 but still awaits Turkey's ratification.

Transport

The OTS agreement on international combined freight transportations signed at Samarkand summit in 2022 remains unratified by Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan ratified it as late as in June 2024 with a significant reservation according to which the special transit permits for trucks will be issued on the basis of bilateral agreements, not by the decisions of the Joint Committee, a supranational body

established by the member states¹. On the whole, the Central Asian countries prefer to reach bilateral transport agreements with Turkey and to use the national prerogatives as a bargaining tool in their relations with the neighbors.

In the area of rail transport the mechanism of OTS countries national rail companies directors' meetings have been launched. A pilot project to transport cargo on the basis of electronic permit exchange was implemented by Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan in December 2022. The system has been launched by Uzbekistan and Turkey on the bilateral basis. In June 2024 a memorandum of understanding was signed which envisages that all the OTS member states would join this system.

Humanitarian Cooperation

The meetings of OTS countries education ministers have become regular. However, Kazakhstan's initiative on the establishment of the Turkic States Network University has not moved closer to implementation, as Ankara seeks to exercise control over the multilateral educational cooperation, an intention running against Kazakhstan's ambition to be leader in the development of the Central Asian Higher Education Area. The OTS stipend program "Orhun" coordinated by Turkey through the Turkic Universities Union has been implemented in the minimal scope of several dozen academic mobilities per year for seven years already.

The International Turkic Academy functioning under the OTS aegis has developed teaching manuals "Common Turkic History", "Common Turkic Literature" and "Geography of the Turkic World". It was agreed that the manuals would be applied at secondary education institutions for optional classes. It is noteworthy that Uzbek scholars did not take part in the work on the manuals and Uzbekistan continues to have an observer status at the International Turkic Academy.

Turkmenistan and the OTS

The permanent "intrigue" of the OTS is the issue of Turkmenistan's membership in the Organization. Ashgabat continues resisting Turkey's attempts (which from time to time go beyond what is diplomatically acceptable) to induce Turkmenistan to change the OTS observer status for full-fledged membership. In March 2024 Turkmenistan made a significant concession when the country's Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (in fact, a state institution that runs the economy) entered the Union of Turkic Chambers of Commerce and Industry. However, after making a step forward Ashgabat took two steps back. Turkmenistan ignored the OTS informal summit in Shusha, Azerbaijan, in July 2024. At the OTS Bishkek summit Turkmenistan was represented by the country's ambassador to Kyrgyzstan which became a direct affront to the Organization (at previous OTS summits Turkmenistan was represented either by the president or by the de facto head of state, Leader of the Nation Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov). The opacity of decision-making in Turkmenistan does not allow making a conclusion on what had triggered these

¹Agreement on international combined freight transportations among the governments of OTS member states. URL: https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=39378868&pos=4;-165#pos=4;-165&sel_link=1010217433

steps. It might be that this was Ashgabat's way of protesting against the new rules of hiring foreign workers that entered into force in Turkey in October 2024 and facilitated the employment procedures for foreign citizens¹. The wide-scale labor migration of Turkmen citizens to Turkey and the growth of opposition sentiments in the Turkmen diaspora in Turkey are a long-standing reason for Ashgabat's resentment.

Institutions

In 2023-2024 the development of new consultative bodies within the OTS framework continued. The first meetings of ministers of interior, justice, industry, science, technology and innovation and of heads of antimonopoly services took place.

2024 Bishkek Summit

Like the previous summit in Astana, the OTS Bishkek summit was stingy with decisions. Along with the summit declaration and a number of protocol and symbolic decisions (among the latter are the Charter of the Turkic World and the Turkic Green Vision), the Regulation on permanent representatives of member states to the OTS which added an essential element to the OTS institutional setting as well as the agreement on digital economy partnership and memoranda of understanding on the establishment of the Council of Central Banks and the Turkic Green Finance Council were signed.

Before the summit much media attention was attracted to the decision of the Turkish Ministry of National Education to change the toponym "Central Asia" to "Turkestan" in the history syllabus. The decision was publicly supported by President T.R. Erdogan². Soon the news came that the commission established by the International Turkic Academy had agreed on the common Turkic alphabet of 34 letters. This announcement was met with enthusiasm in Turkey and Azerbaijan but did not elicit a similar reaction from the OTS Central Asian states, with the two of them continuing to use the Cyrillic alphabet (some of the commission members referred to it as a "major problem"³). The point 93 of the Bishkek declaration just mentioned laconically that the heads of states "take note of the work performed by the...Commission"⁴. The commission's progress was reflected in the memorandum of understanding on the development of the Great Turkic Language Model implying that the efforts at working out the framework of the common language space will continue.

¹ Turkey Eases Work Permit Rules for Foreign Workers: All You Need to Know. URL: <https://travelobiz.com/turkiye-eases-work-permit-rules-for-foreign-workers-all-you-need-to-know/>

² Turkey changes the term "Central Asia" to "Turkestan". URL: <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2024/10/11/tursiya-menyayet-termin-tsentrlnaya-aziya-na-turkestan>

³ Philologists speak on the problems of the common language of Turkey and a number of CIS countries. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/23/09/2024/66e9dd659a79473960cd7b28>

⁴ Bishkek Declaration. URL: <https://www.turkicstates.org/en/news/bishkek-declaration-of-the-11th-summit-of-the-organization-of-turkic-states>

The Bishkek declaration makes many promises. It promises to launch negotiations on creating a number of common markets, such as finance, agriculture, industry, tourism, science, technology and innovation and education. The importance of establishing the OTS Working Group on Afghanistan is mentioned. A new body, the Council of ministers responsible for the environment and ecology, has been established. Kyrgyzstan's initiative to establish the OTS Council of Heads of Government has been noted (as Turkey does not have a head of government, the initiative is not as easy to implement as it might seem). The statement of the intention to open a joint Medical University of the OTS countries is notable.

Stagnation and Its Factors

It goes without saying that one should not expect every summit of an intergovernmental organization to result in breakthroughs. However, there are clear signs of the OTS stagnation and its shift from practically-oriented decisions to loud rhetoric, declarations and creation of symbols (the new OTS flag was approved at Bishkek summit). It is noteworthy that President Tokayev's program article "The Renaissance of Central Asia: Towards Sustainable Development and Prosperity" published in August 2024 on the eve of the Sixth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States mentions the OTS only once, at the end of the list of organizations where the regional countries participate¹.

The main factor of the stagnation is the multiplication of the problems in Turkey, the OTS leader and initiator. Within the Turkish elite, fissures are growing spurred by the weakening of Erdogan's personalistic regime undermined by the unprecedented defeat of the ruling party at March 2024 local elections, the prolonged social and economic crisis (in 2024, the economic growth lowered to 2.5 % while the inflation rate fell from 75 % to 49 % but remains exceptionally high²), the exacerbation of the Kurdish issue, the dim prospects of adopting a new constitution and assigning Erdogan the right to run for presidency again, the President's frail health and the succession struggle in Erdogan's family. Turkey's global ambitions are in an increasing dissonance with its limited foreign policy resources. Ankara's attempts to influence the Ukrainian crisis or the war in the Middle East have failed. The Armenia - Azerbaijan peace treaty negotiations that are projected to open the direct transport link between Turkey and Azerbaijan through the Zangezur Corridor remain stalled. It looks like the Central Asian OTS members are getting tired of Erdogan's vociferous rhetoric on the situation in Gaza, the Israel – Lebanon conflict, and the Cyprus problem which are largely irrelevant to the regional states' core national interests. Interestingly, the president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus which, though recognized by no country except Turkey, is considered an OTS

¹ Tokayev K-Zh.K. The Renaissance of Central Asia: Towards Sustainable Development and Prosperity. URL: <https://kazpravda.kz/n/renessans-tsentralnoy-azii-na-puti-k-ustoychivomu-razvitiyu-i-protsvetaniyu/>

² Turkey Economic Growth Slows to 2.5% in face of Rate Hikes. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-economy-grew-25-q2-below-forecasts-2024-09-02/>

observer state was not invited to the OTS Samarkand and Astana summits (however, he reappeared among the participants in Bishkek).

The second factor is the increased international actorness of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The Kazakh leadership aims at making Kazakhstan a “middle power”¹. With equal grounds, though without resorting to analogous phraseology, Uzbekistan pursues a similar line. Accordingly, the leading OTS countries have developed divergent trajectories of movement in the international system: Turkey seeks to leave the “weight class” of middle powers and to return to the category of great powers while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan aim at consolidating their positions as middle powers. For Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the OTS is an instrument of pursuing the policies of balancing whereas for Turkey it is one of the instruments of expanding influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

On the whole, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are succeeding in countering Turkey’s attempts to monopolize the leadership in the OTS, to establish control over its institutions and to endow the OTS with the supranational element. To strengthen the OTS as a tool of projecting Turkey’s leadership to Central Asia Ankara needs to overcome the protracted socio-economic crisis, to show readiness to significant investments in Central Asia or to score significant foreign policy success that would contribute to the advancement of the OTS countries common interests (it could be successful mediation between Russia and Ukraine, expansion of Turkey’s sphere of influence in the South Caucasus to Armenia and Georgia or the renaissance of the shattered US – Turkey alliance).

¹The head of state delivers a lecture “Kazakhstan and the Role of the Middle Powers Fostering Security, Stability and Sustainable Development”. URL: <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/glava-gosudarstva-vystupil-s-lekciy-kazahstan-i-rol-sred-nih-derzhav-prodvigaya-bezopasnost-stabilnost-i-ustoychivoe-razvitie-244173>