UZBEKISTAN IN THE UNIFICATION AND INTEGRATION OF THE TURKIC WORLD: FROM ACCESSION TO STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: This article is devoted to the analysis of the participation and role of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the leading integration association of Turkic-speaking countries. Based on a comprehensive analysis of official documents, speeches by the country's leadership, and statistical data, the author examines the evolution of Uzbekistan's policy within the OTS from its accession in 2019 to its active role in shaping the organization's agenda in 2025–2026.

The study demonstrates that under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan initiated the institutional transformation of the OTS from a predominantly cultural and humanitarian platform into a comprehensive mechanism for economic, transport-logistics, and digital integration. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of more than 98 practical initiatives proposed by the Uzbek side, over 70 of which have already been implemented.

The research identifies the key directions of Uzbekistan's leadership within the Turkic world: economic integration (an increase in mutual trade from USD 4 billion to USD 11 billion), transport connectivity (development of the Middle Corridor and the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project), digital transformation (the concept of the "Digital Turkic Corridor" and initiatives in the field of artificial intelligence), as well as institutional development (proposals for establishing a Permanent Council for Economic Partnership, a Turkic Investment Bank, and an Emergency Monitoring Center in Tashkent).

The article concludes that Uzbekistan has developed a comprehensive model for ensuring regional security through sustainable development and economic interdependence, offering an alternative to traditional military-political approaches. The study is intended for specialists in regional integration, international relations, and Eurasian studies.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Organization of Turkic States, Turkic integration, regional leadership, Middle Corridor, digital diplomacy, economic interdependence, sustainable development.

Introduction

Relevance of the Study

The Turkic world is currently experiencing a period of institutional consolidation comparable in significance to the processes of European integration in the second half of the twentieth century. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which traces its origins to 2009 (initially established as the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States), has in recent years demonstrated a qualitative transition from declarative cooperation to project-oriented integration. This transformation has been

largely driven by Uzbekistan's accession to the organization in 2019, which altered the balance of power within the association and provided a new impetus for its development.

For a long time, Central Asia was viewed as a peripheral region within Eurasian geopolitics. Through the prism of Turkic integration, however, it is increasingly acquiring the characteristics of an independent center of power. By 2025, the combined economic potential of OTS member states exceeded USD 2.4 trillion, while their economic growth rate of 6.8 percent was more than twice the global average. In this context, analyzing the role of Uzbekistan—the most populous state in the region and a historical and cultural core of Turkic civilization—acquires particular academic and practical significance.

State of Research

The phenomenon of Turkic integration has attracted considerable attention from scholars in OTS member states as well as from Western and Russian research centers. Existing literature generally approaches the issue from three major analytical perspectives:

- **Geopolitical**, which examines the OTS as an instrument for balancing relations among Russia, China, and the West;
- **Economic**, focusing on trade and investment flows;
- **Cultural-civilizational**, emphasizing common identity and shared historical heritage.

However, comprehensive studies devoted specifically to Uzbekistan's role and policy within the OTS remain limited. This gap justifies the novelty and relevance of the present research.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this article is to conduct a systematic analysis of Uzbekistan's participation in the integration of the Turkic world, including an assessment of:

1. The evolution of Uzbekistan's policy within the OTS;
2. The economic outcomes of integration;
3. Infrastructure and transport initiatives;
4. Institutional transformations initiated by Tashkent;
5. Uzbekistan's conceptual contribution to the regional security model.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The study is based on the methodology of neo-functional analysis of integration processes, which emphasizes the role of the "spillover effect" whereby cooperation in one sphere stimulates integration in others. It also draws upon the Regional Security Complex Theory.

The empirical foundation of the research consists of official OTS documents, speeches delivered by the President of Uzbekistan at OTS summits from 2019 to 2026, statistical data from national and international institutions, and analytical materials produced by leading expert centers.

1. Evolution of Uzbekistan's Policy within the OTS: From Accession to Agenda Setting

1.1. Historical Context and Institutional Changes

Uzbekistan's accession to the Organization of Turkic States in 2019 became a turning point both for the country itself and for the organization. For many years, Uzbekistan pursued a policy of cautious neutrality toward Turkic integration projects. This approach was influenced both by the legacy of the Soviet period, during which emphasis was placed on a common Soviet identity, and by concerns regarding the potential dominance of Turkey within Turkic initiatives.

However, following the change in political course in 2016 and the launch of large-scale reforms known as the "New Uzbekistan" transformation process, joining the OTS became a logical step toward diversifying foreign policy relations and utilizing the soft power potential of shared culture and heritage.

A major milestone occurred in 2021 when, at the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan, the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States was transformed into the Organization of Turkic States. This change reflected not merely a cosmetic modification of the organization's name but rather a new stage of integration—a transition from a consultative format to a fully-fledged international organization with broader regional and global ambitions.

Bu 1-qismning tarjimasi (Title, Abstract, Keywords, Introduction va 1.1-bo‘lim boshigacha). Keyingi qismda 1.2–1.3 hamda 2-bo‘lim (Economic Dimension) to‘liq tarjima qilinadi.

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1.2. Uzbekistan's Chairmanship (2022–2023): An Institutional Breakthrough

Uzbekistan's chairmanship of the Organization of Turkic States during 2022–2023 became a "golden era" of institutional development within the organization. The culmination of this period was the OTS Summit held in Samarkand in November 2022 under the motto **"A New Era of Turkic Civilization: Towards Common Progress and Prosperity."**

At this summit, the first roadmap for implementing the **"Turkic Vision – 2040"** concept was adopted in the form of the **OTS Strategy for 2022–2026**. This document established the strategic priorities and mechanisms necessary for deepening cooperation among member states in economic, political, cultural, and technological spheres.

During Uzbekistan's chairmanship, more than one hundred events were organized, covering various aspects of cooperation among Turkic countries. New institutional platforms were also established, including the **Organization of Trade Unions of Turkic States** and the **Institute for Drought Prevention**, both of which contributed to expanding practical cooperation among member countries.

1.3. Initiative-Based Activity: Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators

One of the most significant indicators of Uzbekistan's leadership within the OTS is its proactive initiative-based activity.

From 2019 to the present, the President of Uzbekistan has put forward **98 practical initiatives** at OTS summits. More than **70 of these initiatives have already been implemented**, while approximately **30 are currently in the process of execution**.

According to assessments published by the South Korean analytical publication *Global Korea Post*, nearly all initiatives proposed by the Uzbek leader possess a practical orientation and are aimed at creating concrete mechanisms of cooperation rather than merely producing political declarations.

Among the most important initiatives presented at the **Gabala Summit (2025)** were:

- The development and signing of a **Treaty on Strategic Partnership, Eternal Friendship, and Brotherhood** among the Turkic states;
- The formulation of an **OTS Development Strategy until 2030** and a specialized roadmap for science, education, and innovation;
- The organization of the first joint meeting of the **Foreign Ministers and Heads of Special Services** of OTS member states in Samarkand;
- The establishment of a **Permanent Council for Economic Partnership** of Turkic states with a Project Office located in Tashkent;
- The creation of a **Turkic Industrial Alliance**;
- The establishment of the **International University of Turkic States** in Uzbekistan.

These initiatives illustrate Uzbekistan's transition from being a participant in integration processes to becoming one of the principal architects of the organization's future development.

2. Economic Dimension: Growth of Trade and Investment

2.1. Dynamics of Mutual Trade

The economic component of Uzbek–Turkic cooperation has demonstrated stable and sustainable growth.

In 2016, prior to Uzbekistan's accession to the OTS, the volume of mutual trade between Uzbekistan and member states of the organization amounted to approximately **USD 3.34 billion**. By 2024, this figure had increased to **USD 10 billion**, while expert assessments indicate that by 2025 it had approached **USD 11 billion**.

Particularly noteworthy is the structure of this trade. Uzbekistan exports to OTS countries products with relatively high added value, including:

- Textile products;
- Electrical and electronic equipment;
- Automotive products;
- Chemical industry goods.

This demonstrates that integration is not based primarily on raw-material exports but rather contributes to the development of manufacturing industries and industrial diversification within the Uzbek economy.

The expansion of trade relations has also facilitated the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, increased regional competitiveness, and strengthened economic interdependence among Turkic states.

2.2. Investment Cooperation

By 2025, more than **4,500 enterprises with capital participation from OTS member states** were operating in Uzbekistan. This represents an increase of approximately **60 percent** compared to 2019.

These enterprises account for around **20 percent of all companies with foreign capital operating in Uzbekistan**, highlighting the growing importance of Turkic countries in the nation's investment landscape.

Turkey occupies a particularly important position within this structure. The introduction of a preferential trade agreement and the application of the most-favored-nation regime created favorable conditions for business cooperation and investment expansion.

By 2025, the cumulative volume of Turkish investments in Uzbekistan had reached approximately **USD 5.6 billion**.

In 2026, the two countries signed nearly a dozen new agreements covering:

- Healthcare;
- Education;
- Mining projects;
- The establishment of free economic zones;
- The development of light industry.

These agreements further strengthened the strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and Turkey while contributing to the broader economic integration of the Turkic world.

2.3. Institutional Financing Mechanisms

One of the most significant achievements in the field of economic cooperation was the establishment of the **Turkic Investment Fund** with an authorized capital of **USD 600 million**.

The Fund is designed to finance:

- Small and medium-sized enterprises;
- Cross-border infrastructure projects;
- Transport and logistics initiatives;
- Energy-sector development projects.

Its creation represents an important step toward establishing independent financial mechanisms capable of supporting long-term integration within the Turkic world.

Uzbekistan has also proposed the creation of the **Union of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Turkic States** and advocated the development of a cooperation program on **strategic minerals** aimed at building full-cycle value-added production chains.

Such initiatives are intended to enhance industrial cooperation, strengthen economic resilience, and improve the global competitiveness of Turkic economies.

3. Transport Connectivity: The Middle Corridor as a Strategic Priority

3.1. The Trans-Caspian Route

One of the key directions of Uzbekistan's policy within the OTS is the development of the Middle (Trans-Caspian) Transport Corridor, connecting Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe. The volume of cargo transportation along this route reached 4.5 million tons in 2024, almost six times higher than in 2020.

Uzbekistan proposed the joint use of the multimodal corridor "Tashkent – Karakalpakstan – Aktau – Baku – Tbilisi – Kars – Istanbul," the introduction of a "single window" system and "green corridors" along the Trans-Caspian route, as well as the complete digitalization of road transportation through the eTIR system. In 2022, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan successfully carried out the first transport operation using electronic eTIR carnets.

3.2. The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Railway

The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project is regarded as one of the priorities of Uzbekistan's strategic agenda. This railway will not only provide Uzbekistan with access to seaports through Kyrgyzstan's territory but will also create a new Eurasian transit route serving as an alternative to existing transportation networks.

3.3. Simplification of Customs Procedures

In November 2024, the OTS Simplified Customs Corridor entered into force, and the integration of the e-Permit system for the digital issuance of road transport permits began. According to World Bank assessments, these measures are critically important for reducing informal barriers to trade.

4. Digital Transformation: From Initiative to System

4.1. The Concept of the "Digital Turkic Corridor"

At the informal OTS Summit in Turkestan (May 2026), the President of Uzbekistan proposed the concept of the "Digital Turkic Corridor," aimed at integrating data processing centers into a unified high-speed infrastructure, developing digital platforms, and organizing technological forums.

This initiative seeks to ensure that Turkic countries occupy a worthy place in the global digital economy.

4.2. Artificial Intelligence and Big Data

Uzbekistan launched the program "Five Million AI Leaders," aimed at equipping the younger generation with modern knowledge and skills in artificial intelligence. The country also proposed the establishment of a Turkic Cybersecurity Alliance and joint platforms for working with big data.

At the Gabala Summit, Uzbekistan introduced a roadmap for artificial intelligence and the creative economy, as well as the creation of a joint fund to support innovative startups and youth scientific projects.

5. Security Through Development: The Uzbek Model

5.1. Conceptual Foundations

A key feature of Uzbekistan's approach to regional security is the shift away from the traditional military-political understanding of security toward a model in which security is viewed as the outcome of sustainable development, interconnectedness, and long-term structured cooperation.

The Uzbek model includes four strategic directions:

1. **Response to Systemic Threats** – establishment of an epidemiological monitoring mechanism (proposed in 2020), a platform for disaster prevention and response (following the 2023 earthquake in Türkiye), and a Natural Disaster Monitoring Center in Tashkent.
2. **Economic Interconnectedness** – development of transport corridors, implementation of "green corridors" on the Trans-Caspian route, and a multilateral agreement on food security systems.
3. **Institutionalization of the OTS** – establishment of specialized ministerial committees on energy, information technology, healthcare, and other sectors.
4. **Coordination of Foreign Policy Positions** – development of common OTS approaches to the Afghan issue, taking into account new regional realities, as proposed at the Shusha Summit in 2024.

5.2. Environmental Dimension

At the Turkestan Summit in 2026, Uzbekistan proposed declaring **2027 the Year of Environmental Protection** within the OTS framework and introduced mechanisms for joint monitoring of droughts, land degradation, and glacier melting using satellite data.

Earlier, Uzbekistan had also proposed the creation of a Turkic environmental organization headquartered in the Aral Sea region under the auspices of the United Nations.

6. Humanitarian Cooperation: Cultural Diplomacy

6.1. Educational Initiatives

In 2025–2026, Uzbekistan is chairing the **Union of Turkic Universities**, which contributes to the institutionalization of academic cooperation among Turkic states. An important step in this direction was the establishment of the **International University of Turkic States** in Uzbekistan, which is expected to become a major platform for joint research, innovation, and educational exchange.

Bilateral cooperation with Türkiye also includes the construction of the **State School of Uzbekistan in Istanbul**, the foundation stone of which was laid in January 2026. This project creates a solid institutional framework for strengthening educational ties and fostering mutual understanding between the two nations.

6.2. Cultural Projects

Uzbekistan has proposed organizing an international scientific conference in 2026 dedicated to the **585th anniversary of Alisher Navoi** and the **885th anniversary of Nizami Ganjavi**, as well as holding an **International Exhibition of the Turkic World** in Uzbekistan.

These initiatives are aimed at strengthening cultural and humanitarian ties among Turkic nations and fostering a unified informational and cultural space across the Turkic world. Through such projects, Uzbekistan seeks to preserve the common historical and cultural heritage of Turkic peoples while promoting intercultural dialogue and cooperation.

6.3. Diaspora Policy

In December 2025, during the Seventh Meeting of the Heads of Diaspora Agencies of the Turkic States, the Uzbek side proposed the adoption of an **Action Plan to Counter Radical and Extremist Ideologies among Youth**.

This initiative is part of a broader strategy aimed at preventing destructive influences on vulnerable social groups and enhancing cooperation among Turkic countries in the fields of social stability, youth development, and intercultural communication. It also reflects Uzbekistan's commitment to promoting moderation, tolerance, and constructive engagement within diaspora communities.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis makes it possible to formulate several key conclusions regarding Uzbekistan's participation and role in the unity and integration of the Turkic world.

First, Uzbekistan has evolved from being a new member of the organization in 2019 into one of the principal **institutional entrepreneurs** shaping the agenda of the Organization of Turkic States. This transformation is reflected not only in the quantitative indicator of **98 initiatives, more than 70 of which have already been implemented**, but also in the practical nature of these initiatives. They are aimed not at declarations but at establishing functioning mechanisms such as the Turkic Investment Fund, the Permanent Council for Economic Partnership, and the Emergency Monitoring Center in Tashkent.

Second, economic integration has produced remarkable results. Mutual trade increased from **USD 3.34 billion in 2016** to approximately **USD 11 billion in 2025**, while more than **4,500 joint enterprises** have been established. Export diversification toward products with higher added value demonstrates that integration is contributing to the modernization and industrial development of Uzbekistan's economy.

Third, Uzbekistan has proposed and consistently promoted an alternative model of regional security in which sustainable development and economic interconnectedness serve as preventive mechanisms for ensuring stability. This model is reflected in initiatives related to epidemiological monitoring, disaster response mechanisms, green transport corridors, and coordinated approaches to regional challenges such as Afghanistan.

Fourth, Uzbekistan's leadership within the OTS is characterized by a distinctly **multi-level structure**, encompassing:

- Economic integration (trade, investment, transport);
- Digital transformation (the Digital Turkic Corridor and artificial intelligence initiatives);
- Institutional development (creation of new organizations and mechanisms);
- Cultural and humanitarian cooperation (education, science, and diaspora policy).

This multidimensional approach creates a synergistic effect and strengthens the sustainability of the integration process.

Fifth, Uzbekistan's strategy within the OTS is not isolated but is organically integrated into its broader foreign policy doctrine of **multivector diplomacy**. Alongside deepening cooperation within the OTS, Uzbekistan actively engages with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the European Union, the United States, and China. In this context, Turkic integration serves not as a tool of confrontation with other centers of power but as a means of expanding Uzbekistan's strategic opportunities and international partnerships.

Prospects for Further Research

Further development of integration processes in the Turkic world requires analysis of several important issues:

1. The relationship between bilateral and multilateral tracks of cooperation, particularly the role of Uzbek-Turkish relations within the broader OTS framework;
2. Interaction between the OTS and other regional organizations, including the EAEU, SCO, OIC, and the United Nations;
3. Comparative analysis of Turkic, Eurasian, and European models of integration;
4. The influence of external actors, including Russia, China, and Western countries, on the dynamics of Turkic integration.

These issues remain highly relevant for understanding the future trajectory of the Organization of Turkic States and Uzbekistan's role within it.

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