

ON AFTERMATH OF SAMARKAND SUMMIT OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES

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01.12.2022

On November 11, the IX Summit of the Organization of Turkic States (hereafter OTS) was held in Samarkand. OTS was established on October 3, 2009, under the name of the Turkic Council, and on November 12, 2021, it was renamed to its current title. The organization includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan, and as an observer - Hungary and Turkmenistan.

We must admit that, like any other interstate organizations created in the Eurasian space, the OTS has yet to show itself as a well-established and capable institution. The only justification for this is that it is still a relatively young organization, younger than the CIS, the SCO, the CSTO or the Eurasian Economic Union. Despite OTS member-states having joined each other thanks to their common historical and cultural roots and a corresponding desire for unification, so far, their expectations remain from the category of wishful thinking. There are at least two reasons for that:

1) The economies of the member-states countries are themselves rather weak (except Turkey and, to some extent, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan - see the table of GDP per capita by country) and still do not complement each other much and therefore are poorly interrelated. For example, in terms of the supply of high-tech products, all participating countries depend on imports from economically developed countries. As Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev admitted at the summit, the share of trade between participating countries constitutes only 4% of their foreign trade turnover. Countries such as China, Russia and others still dominate as their trading partners.

2) Until now, the countries of Central Asia have been forced to act with an eye on Moscow when dealing with third countries, particularly Turkey, as well as Western countries, and especially in the defense sphere. Despite the collapse of the USSR, Moscow has retained its leverage and control over the region's countries, both directly and through regional organizations, created and controlled by it, such as CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union.

But this state of affairs may be beginning to change gradually, especially against the background of the Russian Federation's geopolitical, military-strategic and economic weakening due to defeats it suffered in the war it waged against Ukraine. This shift in attitudes of the Central Asian states has been due to the strengthening of their mutual interest and desire to create alternatives to Russia's leadership in the region and their search for a new geostrategic order.

Table 1. Gross domestic product per capita by countries of the region

Country	Year	In US dollars
Azerbaijan	2021	5,384
Kazakhstan	2021	10,041
Kyrgyzstan	2021	1,276
Turkey	2021	9,586
Turkmenistan	2019	7,612
Uzbekistan	2021	1,983
For comparison:		
Latvia	2021	20,642
Lithuania	2021	23,433
Estonia	2021	27,280

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

This mutual interest is particularly strong in two areas: first, in the development of trade and logistics routes, an alternative to those that passed before the war in Ukraine through the territory of the Russian Federation but, due to Western sanctions, has become dysfunctional for the countries of Central Asia; and secondly, in strengthening their defense capabilities which can be achieved with the assistance of Turkey as a conductor of NATO standards.

At the summit, a significant place was given to issues of economic cooperation, especially trade relations between the participating countries and regions outside of Eurasia, mainly Europe, with its vast market space. Shavkat Mirziyoyev also said at the summit that today, only 10% of Uzbekistan's foreign trade turnover passes through the trans-Caspian trade and logistics route. There is significant potential for cooperation in this sphere, but it still needs to be realized. The OTS members could help develop these trade routes, as noted at the summit, by reducing their customs duties, given that commodity cargoes pass through the territory of several states before reaching the rich European market.

Investing in the infrastructure of this trans-Caspian route is also necessary to ensure a much larger flow of commodities than it is now. Turkey could play a unique role in this respect, not only in terms of investments but also in terms of security, given the increased risks for the passage of cargo through the Georgian Black Sea ports. These risks unquestionably come from the Russian Black Sea Navy. There is a hope that Turkey can act as a guarantor minimizing these security-related risks by putting pressure on Moscow.

As for cooperation in the defense sector, there was silence on this topic at the summit, indicating it was taboo, at least open to the public. This is despite the apparent interest of the Central Asian countries in this sphere of cooperation. They most likely look with envy at the example of Azerbaijan, which, thanks to the collaboration with Turkey and surpassing the Soviets and adopting NATO military standards and technologies, has succeeded in regaining control over a large part of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Central Asian countries are still managing their defense systems with an

eye on the Kremlin, especially since Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remain tied by their membership in the CSTO. At the same time, military cooperation with Turkey is already being carried out on a bilateral basis, especially by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The defense alliance based on the OTS would be tangible progress in this organization's development. To protect the national sovereignty of the Central Asian states that face a threat from the economically and militarily much more powerful northern neighbor, it is not enough to improve their military-strategic capabilities. Acting alone, each of these countries will not be able to defend itself in the event of aggression by the Russian Federation. The solution in this respect would be building a collective defense alliance, which requires systematic cooperation and coordination between the armed forces of the countries concerned, provided they are serious about asserting their national sovereignty. Building such collective defense will take years and the corresponding political will.

Let's see how long it will take to see a shift in this direction. Suppose we assess the situation realistically among the OTS members. In that case, fears are too strong that creating a defense alliance based on this organization can provoke hostile and subversive actions on the part of Moscow.

Instead of discussing the idea of collective defense, the OTS summit discussed and agreed on cooperation in the field of security, considered not in terms of countering a military threat from the Russian Federation but in the context of combating real and imagined terrorism and extremism. Without denying the need for cooperation in this area, I would nevertheless express concern that the participating countries can use this cooperation to persecute their political opposition and dissent. For example, opposition figures from some Central Asian states have found refuge in Turkey. The authorities of these countries have attempted to force Turkey to deport these figures, and when this failed, some of them resorted to assassination attempts on the lives of their opponents. For example, in 2015, Tajik security services [assassinated](#) one of the opposition leaders, Umarali Kuvvatov, and this happened on the territory of Turkey. To Ankara's credit, it did not succumb to such pressure from Central Asian authoritarian regimes. For example, one of the leaders of the Uzbek opposition, Muhammad Solih, still resides in Turkey, and Uzbekistan stopped demanding his deportation.

In turn, the Erdogan ruling regime itself pursued its citizens residing in Central Asia, who were suspected of having links with Fathullah Gulen, and demanded that the respective countries deport them to Turkey. For instance, in July 2021, the founder of a network of educational facilities, Orhan Inand, whom the Turkish authorities considered one of the opposition figures in Turkey, was kidnapped from Kyrgyzstan. Suspicion of this abduction fell on the Turkish special services, in connection with which the Kyrgyz authorities [handed](#) a note to the diplomatic mission of Turkey in this country.

Another risk of OTS developing in an undesirable direction would be the admission of Hungary as a full member. Hungary, headed by Viktor Orban, has demonstrated a pro-Russian position on the ongoing war in Ukraine and is strongly opposed to the supply by the EU and NATO of weapons to Ukraine. At the OTS summit, Orban, invited to take part in it, tried to turn the participants against the European Union, [criticizing](#) its policy regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine. If Hungary becomes a member of OTS, it will only undermine the prospects for cooperation with the EU and NATO. But even Erdogan, with his sometimes hostile rhetoric against the European Union and the United States, can complicate relations between the countries and the West. Central Asian states should consider these risks and ensure Turkey and Hungary do not manipulate their foreign policies.

Given said above, is it in the interests of the Central Asian countries to participate in the OTS? As for economic cooperation, the answer is obvious – yes. Regarding cooperation in the political and military-strategic spheres, one should take into account the risks reflecting that human rights problems exist in each participating country. Yet, in my opinion, there is a rationale for following the principle of checks and balances, without which the countries of Central Asia would not be able to achieve their national sovereignty. To protect their sovereignty and resist the neo-imperial dictate from Moscow, they have no other choice but to rely on strong global and regional players, one of whom is Turkey.

Thus, it remains to be hoped that soon the OTS member-states, apart from giving priority to economic cooperation, will also make progress in cooperation in the defense sphere too, and, at the same time, will not compromise on issues of human rights and their cooperation with the collective West.