



Feature Article
December 11, 2025

Brokers on the Bloc: Central Asian Alignment through Collective Security

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Russia's diminishing influence in the South Caucasus, highlighted by the nascent Azerbaijan-Armenia rapprochement, has opened political and security space for new actors to shape the regional order not just in the South Caucasus, but across Eurasia—including, most notably, in Central Asia. Türkiye's expanding military-industrial presence and institutional influence give it the unique opportunity to develop a strong relationship with the Central Asian states. But it cannot do so alone. Azerbaijan, positioned between Türkiye and Central Asia, can serve as a bridge between the two, translating Turkish capacity into Central Asian contexts.

While economic connectivity via the Middle Corridor framework has already advanced considerably, the region's security dimension remains underdeveloped. Greater Turkish engagement, anchored in closer coordination among Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian republics, could accelerate the region's movement toward a more institutionalized partnership. Realizing this potential, however, will require a shared willingness to move beyond the comfort of bilateral arrangements or narrow, issue-based cooperation and toward a more durable framework for collective security and coordination. Russia's diminished reliability and Türkiye's technological outreach make

limited multilateralism less risky and more attractive. By leveraging Türkiye's expertise in modern warfare, Azerbaijan has become an attractive defense partner for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Azerbaijan's evolving trilateral defense partnerships, supported by Turkish defense expertise, signal the potential to institutionalize a broader, security-



OTS Heads of State meet in Astana.
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oriented regional bloc aligned with the [Greater Central Asia Strategy](#).

Expanding cooperation beyond trade and transit could eventually transform the C6+1 format into a unifying regional framework. However, this process would need to balance growing Turkish influence in the Caucasus with Central Asian states'



cautiousness toward formal multilateral commitments. Azerbaijan thus provides the connective framework, translating Turkish strategic ambition into practical, regionally secured cooperation.

Strategic Context

Azerbaijan's military modernization extends beyond hardware acquisition. Assisted by Turkish advisors, Baku has restructured its training curricula, officer development pathways, and operational command systems to integrate a flexible, technology-enabled doctrine. The Second Karabakh War and Azerbaijan's 2023 reassertion of control over Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrated its ability to combine unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) with ground maneuvers in complex terrain—an operational model increasingly studied by Central Asian militaries facing similar geographic constraints.

Country Partnerships

The Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan relationship stands out as the most mature of Baku's Central Asian partnerships, representing a deep and multi-layered defense alignment. Joint exercises such as Caspian Breeze 2025 (naval

operations), Birlestik-2024 (multilateral counterterrorism command-post exercise), and Altyn Kyran-2024 (mountain warfare and reconnaissance) have strengthened interoperability across land, sea, and special operations domains. A five-year military intelligence cooperation agreement (2024), combined with Kazakhstan's participation in Azerbaijan's ADEX defense exhibition, has further institutionalized defense-industrial and strategic coordination.¹ Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have likewise deepened cooperation through the 2024 Treaty on Allied Relations, which establishes mechanisms for joint defense-technical modernization, coordination on UAV and mountain warfare doctrine, and cooperation on regional industrial planning.² Kyrgyzstan's partnership with Azerbaijan reflects a similar pattern of strategically targeted cooperation: its 2025 defense cooperation plan emphasizes military-technical exchanges, officer education, and special forces training adapted to high-altitude environments.³ Taken together, these cases demonstrate that Azerbaijan's bilateral defense networks, reinforced through the evolving frameworks of the Organization of Turkic

¹ These include *Caspian Breeze 2025*, focused on naval operations in the Caspian Sea; *Birlestik-2024*, a multilateral command-post exercise emphasizing counterterrorism involving Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; and *Altyn Kyran-2024* – a mountain warfare and reconnaissance exercise. Teymur Atayev, "Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan Military Vector in Bilateral Relations," *Caliber*, April 22, 2025. (<https://caliber.az/en/post/azerbaijan-kazakhstan-military-vector-in-bilateral-relations>); Eldaniz Huseynov "Trilateral Dimensions of Azerbaijan's Military Cooperation with the Central Asian States," *Cronos Central Asia*, July 29, 2025. (<https://cronos.asia/mir/azerbaijan-military-cooperation-central-asia>).

² Rasina Gasimova, "Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan Set to Enhance Military Cooperation," *Azernews*, October 30, 2019. (<https://www.azernews.az/nation/157915.html>; <https://aircenter.az/uploads/fHrkV6n9jOFE.pdf>); Huseynov "Trilateral Dimensions."

³ In 2024, both countries adopted a joint military-technical and educational cooperation plan for 2025, under which Kyrgyzstan will further participation in Azerbaijani defense exhibitions, modernization projects, staff exchanges, and mountainous warfare training with Azerbaijani special forces. "Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan Discuss Defense Ministry Cooperation" *Azernews*, July 7, 2023. (<https://www.azernews.az/nation/212005.html>; <https://sia.az/en/news/politics/1161711.html>).



States (OTS) and OTS+⁴, are gradually forming the scaffolding for a flexible, interoperability-oriented regional security architecture.

Türkiye and the OTS

The OTS is a regional intergovernmental body that promotes political, economic, and cultural cooperation among Turkic-speaking nations. It evolved from the Turkic Council, a cooperative framework originally initiated by Kazakhstan and supported actively by Azerbaijan to promote cultural and diplomatic coordination among Turkic-speaking states. The transition to the OTS format in 2019 was enabled in large part by Uzbekistan's accession, which broadened the grouping's regional relevance and operational capacity. While Türkiye plays a significant role today due to its economic and defense capabilities, the OTS has developed through a shared Central Asian initiative, not as a Turkish-led project. Simply put, the institutional development of the OTS has been a collective process. Though still relatively young and limited in formal institutional capacity, the OTS has increasingly developed mechanisms for coordination in trade, transport, education, and security.⁵

Through the OTS, member states collectively have the opportunity to expand structured defense, intelligence, and military industrial collaboration among Turkic states. Türkiye's partnership with Azerbaijan—anchored in shared doctrine, co-production, and training—provides the enabling model, but institutional evolution remains a shared project rather than a unilateral initiative.⁶ Ankara has supplied advanced weaponry (including Bayraktar TB2 drones), facilitated training and joint operations, and helped modernize Azerbaijan's battlefield effectiveness. Formal treaties between the two countries underpin extensive technical transfer, defense-industrial co-production, and political-military collaboration.⁷ This cooperation has laid the groundwork for Türkiye's broader security engagement across Central Asia.

Azerbaijan as the Bridge

The vision of a coherent Greater Central Asia security bloc remains aspirational. These defense partnerships, supported by Azerbaijani capacity and Türkiye's institutional influence, indicate an emerging shift toward structured

⁴ Refers to the newly-emerging external engagement format of the Organization of Turkic States that is designed to allow non-member states to participate in structured cooperation without becoming full members or being classified simply as observers.

⁵ At present, the OTS serves as a platform for fostering policy alignment and capacity-building among its members while advancing a shared vision of Turkic solidarity and regional connectivity.

⁶ Vasif Huseynov, "The Organization of Turkic States Seeks Defense Cooperation" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 21, no. 35, March 6, 2024, The Jamestown Foundation. (<https://jamestown.org/program/the-organization-of-turkic-states-seeks-defense-cooperation/>); Faud Shahbazov,

"Turkey Supports Azerbaijan's Operation in Karabakh," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 20, no. 151, October 2, 2023, The Jamestown Foundation. (<https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-supports-azerbajians-operation-in-karabakh/>). It should be noted that Azerbaijan was heavily criticized for the aggressive nature of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, as well as the re-annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Despite this, Türkiye's provision of technology, doctrine, and political backing played a transformative role in Azerbaijan's success.

⁷ These treaties include the 2010 Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Agreement and the 2021 Shusha Declaration.



regional security cooperation, rooted in interoperability rather than formal alliance building. While this cooperation is largely bilateral and exploratory—rather than fully institutionalized—it signals a shift toward an architecture that prioritizes inclusivity, sovereignty, and interoperability under shared Turkish and Azerbaijani facilitation. These engagements share a common pattern: Azerbaijan functions as a facilitator of interoperability by translating Turkish-developed doctrine and technology into settings compatible with Central Asian military structures. Azerbaijan's advantage is that it is neither perceived as a hegemon nor as an external power, positioning it as a politically acceptable conduit for cooperation among sovereignty-conscious Central Asian states.

Strategic Outlook

Central Asian states have historically preferred bilateralism in security cooperation to preserve strategic flexibility and avoid binding defense commitments that signal exclusive alignment. This approach has enabled them to manage great power competition without incurring geopolitical consequences. Yet, the regional environment has shifted. With Russia increasingly less reliable, an institutional framework facilitated by Azerbaijan's intermediary role and Türkiye's resources can offer a proven model for successful defense collaboration and collective benefits without requiring formal alliance commitments. By leveraging Azerbaijan's established defense

networks, Türkiye can expand its influence in Central Asia through a trusted intermediary, replicating the successful model that has already transformed Baku's own military modernization.⁸

Russia's war in Ukraine has disrupted arms supply chains, diverted strategic focus, and weakened Moscow's perceived reliability as a security guarantor. Central Asian states have responded by diversifying defense partnerships: Kazakhstan has expanded defense-industrial cooperation with Central and Eastern European manufacturers, while Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have pursued parallel defense modernization tracks with Azerbaijan. This is diversification, not realignment, but the strategic effect is cumulative.⁹ As such, for Central Asia, diversification of defense partnerships is not optional, but imperative.

Principles for Effective Cooperation

Central Asian states have long been treated as peripheral actors within great-power spheres of influence—first imperial Russia, then the Soviet Union, and now Russia and China. Türkiye's credibility will depend on proving it is a different kind of partner: one that respects sovereignty and autonomy while providing tangible benefits. The sustainability of this approach depends on Türkiye avoiding hegemonic postures. To build trust, Ankara and Baku can promote flexible frameworks that provide security benefits without imposing

⁸ Namely, its effective UAV deployment in mountainous terrain. Huseynov "Trilateral Dimensions."

⁹ Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Lisa Curtis, Kate Johnston and Nathaniel Schochet, "Russia and China in Central Asia:

Cooperate, Compete, or De-conflict?", CNAS, 12 November 2024.

(<https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/russia-and-china-in-central-asia>).



political alignment or formal obligations. Such pragmatism will generate goodwill and encourage gradual institutional confidence.

Member states collectively continue to strengthen the OTS, with Türkiye playing a significant facilitative role through its economic scale and defense-industrial capacity. Collective institutionalization has progressed gradually, including the establishment of the Permanent Secretariat in Istanbul and the expansion of coordinated economic and cultural cooperation mechanisms among member states.¹⁰ Embedding incremental security coordination within this framework would further strengthen it, provided the OTS evolves beyond cultural identity to include practical and inclusive mechanisms for defense and intelligence collaboration. While the existing OTS framework remains narrowly focused on

Turkic identity, it is most viable when it remains flexible enough to engage non-Turkic partners where strategic interests converge. A parallel or complementary framework—co-led by Türkiye and Azerbaijan—could create this inclusivity, allowing other Central Asian states to participate without compromising their distinct identities or external partnerships.¹¹

Regional Prospects

Kazakhstan has spearheaded this shift, suspending military exports to limit Russian access, pursuing defense-industrial collaborations with Serbia, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, and enhancing drone and intelligence cooperation with Türkiye.¹² Azerbaijan's joint operations and intelligence-sharing with Kazakhstan provide a working model of diversification that other Central Asian states could replicate. Kyrgyzstan, while reaffirming ties with Russia (2025), has

¹⁰ “Gabala Declaration of the 12th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States,” *Organization of Turkic States*, October 7, 2025. (<https://turkicstates.org/en/news/gabala-declaration-of-the-12th-summit-of-the-organization-of-turkic-states/>); “Right to Freelance Work for Citizens of Turkic States,” *MFY Legal News*, October 15, 2025. (<https://mfylegal.av.tr/en/news/right-to-freelance-work-for-citizens-of-turkic-states/>). The 12th OTS Summit (Gabala, October, 2025) prioritized expanded economic and cultural cooperation, including labor mobility. Türkiye subsequently eased employment access for citizens of Turkic states, advancing these integration aims with standard security exclusions.

¹¹ As envisaged in the Greater Central Asia Strategy, these include Mongolia, Tajikistan, Armenia, Georgia, and Afghanistan. While some of these states possess minority segments of the population that fit the ‘Turkic’ identity, it is currently unclear as to whether that would satisfy admission criteria for the OTS. It is also worth noting that Georgia and Armenia, clearly situated in the South Caucasus, largely identify as European and not Central Asian. So they could be more comfortable as members of the OTS than the Greater Central Asia.

¹² Matthew Stein, “Kazakhstan Suspends Defense Exports, Defying Russia Purchases,” *T2COMG2*, October 1, 2022. (<https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/kazakhstan-suspends-defense-exports-denying-russia-purchases/>); Chan Young Bang and Anar Shaikenova, “Three Years of War in Ukraine: The Impact of Kazakhstan and the Uncertain Way Forward,” *The Geopolitics*, April 5, 2025. (<https://thegeopolitics.com/three-years-of-war-in-ukraine-the-impact-on-kazakhstan-and-the-uncertain-path-forward/>); Asyl Bekov “Миссия ООН и офицерский декрет: что не так с армией Казахстана,” [The UN Mission and the Officer’s Decree: What is Wrong with Kazakhstan’s Army], *ULYS Media*, January 25, 2024. (<https://ulysmmedia.kz/news/25986-missiia-onn-i-ofiterskii-dekret-cto-ne-tak-s-armicii-kazakhstana/>); Aigerim Tukusheva, “Минобороны РК следит за войной в Украине и западной техникой, которую в ней используют,” [The Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan is Monitoring the War in Ukraine and the Western Technology, Which They Use in It,] October 12, 2023. (<https://kz.kursiv.media/2023-10-12/tksh-minoborona-vooruzhenie/>).



simultaneously deepened co-production and modernization cooperation with Azerbaijan (2024), explicitly prioritizing military education and joint development, balancing long-standing obligations with new opportunities.¹³ Uzbekistan has followed a similar trajectory. Though economically entangled with Russian energy firms, the Uzbeks have refrained from deepening defense cooperation with Moscow since 2022, progressing a defense-industrial roadmap with Azerbaijan.¹⁴

Tajikistan, though most dependent on Russian military support, is exhibiting a growing awareness of Moscow's security limitations. Already engaged diplomatically and economically, Baku's strategic outreach could offer a complementary security partner.¹⁵ Returning to the South Caucasus, Armenia's abandonment by Russia between 2020-2023 offers a cautionary tale for Central Asian states still relying on Moscow's security guarantees.¹⁶ While it is unrealistic to expect Russia's complete exclusion from the region's security landscape,¹⁷ diversified engagement with

Türkiye and Azerbaijan strengthens regional autonomy.

Build a Collective Security Architecture

A parallel mechanism co-led by Türkiye and Azerbaijan could provide a flexible platform for coordination. Key elements might include:

- Phased interoperability and joint counterterrorism exercises
- Intelligence-sharing against terrorism and organized crime
- Staff exchanges and modular defense-industrial projects enabled by Turkish technology

This prospective architecture allows for standards-based cooperation without formal membership, avoiding provocation of Russia and China, and allowing Central Asian states to modernize on their own terms.

Potential for Broader Regional Participation

Full strategic coherence requires inclusion of non-Turkic partners. The May 2024 Strategic

¹³ The Kyrgyz Defense Minister signed the Strategic Partnership Program with Russia in 2025. Natasha Kuhrt, "Russia-China Relations in Central Asia," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, August 19, 2025. (<https://cepa.org/commentary/sino-russian-relations-in-central-asia/>); Anton Chepegin, "Russia Warns of Rising Security Threats in Central Asia During CSTO Talks in Bishkek," *The Times of Central Asia*, May 28, 2025. (<https://timesca.com/russia-warns-of-rising-security-threats-in-central-asia-during-csto-talks-in-bishkek/>); Gulnara Kerimova, "Азербайджан и Кыргызстан подписали План двустороннего военного сотрудничества на 2025 год" [Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan Signed a Plan of Bilateral Military Cooperation in 2025], *30 Trend News Agency*, October 23, 2024. (<https://ru.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3960427.html>).

¹⁴ This roadmap emphasizes interoperability in mountain warfare and drone technologies. Annette Bohr, "Playing Both Sides: Central Asia Between Russia and the West," *Chatham House*, March 26, 2025. (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/playing-both-sides-central-asia-between-russia-and-west>).

¹⁵ Kendall-Taylor et al. "Russia and China."

¹⁶ Though Armenia's official losses in both 2020 and 2023 carry significant weight, the breakdown of Russian collective security partnerships took place in 2022, when Azerbaijan occupied sovereign Armenian territory. Armenia invoiced the CSTO's mutual defense clause, only to be ignored by Russia.

¹⁷ As exemplified most recently during the Russia-Central Asia Summit, as well as the Putin-Aliyev meeting.



Partnership Declaration between Azerbaijan and Tajikistan establishes cooperation in counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and intelligence coordination—providing an early foundation for structured engagement even as Dushanbe remains closely tied to Russian security guarantees.¹⁸ Considering its projected economic growth, excluding Tajikistan would squander momentum and reopen avenues for Russian exploitation of border tensions.¹⁹ Mongolia's "third neighbor" strategy and existing defense cooperation with Türkiye create a viable channel for gradual security engagement. Expanding trilateral economic projects with Azerbaijan offers an incremental, low-risk entry point.²⁰ Türkiye already supports Mongolia's defense sector through training, technical cooperation, and counterterrorism exercises, setting a template for Azerbaijan to extend security cooperation.²¹ Inclusion of

these two consolidates eastern and southern flank security. Recent developments, including the emergence of the OTS+ engagement mechanism, now provide a structured format for dialogue and cooperation with non-member states without requiring formal accession.

This security architecture might also clarify engagement steps for states with complex security and political profiles. While Turkmenistan remains a constitutionally neutral state and therefore participates in the OTS as an observer rather than a full member, it has been an increasingly active participant in OTS summit discussions and transport and energy coordination. Its engagement suggests openness to selective integration where cooperation aligns with neutrality and national development priorities.²² Afghanistan, meanwhile, remains significant due to

¹⁸This includes the Birlestik 2024 military exercise. Khazar Akhundov, "Azerbaijan, Tajikistan Elevate Bilateral Relations Through Strategic Partnership Agreements," *Caliber*, May 24, 2024. (<https://caliber.az/en/post/azerbaijan-tajikistan-elevate-bilateral-relations-through-strategic-partnership-agreements>); "Azerbaijan and Tajikistan Forge Stronger Ties With 14 new Agreements," *Caucasus Watch*, May 26, 2024. (<https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/azerbaijan-and-tajikistan-forge-stronger-ties-with-14-new-agreements.html>).

¹⁹Tajikistan's projected economic growth includes 7.4% in 2025 and 5% in 2026, affording additional economic benefits to Azerbaijan, should defense investment enhance. "Real GDP Growth Rates across Caucasus and Central Asia Expected to Dip - World Bank," *Eurasianet*, January 23, 2025. (<https://eurasianet.org/real-gdp-growth-rates-across-caucasus-and-central-asia-expected-to-dip-world-bank>).

²⁰The 2021 Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation established a mechanism for expanding and facilitating trade and investment, with growing trade volume in transport and logistics, small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and both agricultural and food industry exchanges. Azerbaijan is already benefitting from Mongolian exports (primarily livestock), which reached

\$1.6 million in 2024. Chinguundari Navaan-Yunden and Tuvshinzaya Gantulga, "Mongolia's Pivot to Central Asia and the Caucasus: Strategic Realignments and Implications," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, June 11, 2025.

(<https://centralasiacaucasusinstitute.substack.com/p/mongolia-pivot-to-central-asia-and>).

²¹Bolor Lkhaajav, "Growing Bilateral Relations Between Mongolia and Turkey," *The Diplomat*, September 30, 2024. (<https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/growing-bilateral-relations-between-mongolia-and-turkey/>); "Türkiye, Mongolia Eye Boosting Trade, Diplomatic Ties," *Daily Sabah*, March 13, 2023.

(<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/Türkiye-mongolia-eye-boosting-trade-diplomatic-ties>).

²²Turkmenistan's recent trilateral dialogue with Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan strengthened strategic ties in synchronizing transit corridors, advancing transport connectivity, and unifying economic space. "Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan Hold Trilateral Summit to Strengthen Relations," *Caspian Post*, August 23, 2025. (<https://caspiantpost.com/central-asia/azerbaijan-turkmenistan-and-uzbekistan-hold-trilateral-summit-to-strengthen-cooperation.%20>); Eldor Tulyakov, "Uzbekistan Positions Itself as Strategic Partner for the Gulf," *Bourse and Bazaar*, July 13, 2025.



geography, transit corridors, and energy infrastructure routes, but its political instability limits meaningful security cooperation at present. Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan remains unstable, and its application for OTS observer status is stalled.²³ However, its strategic location and recent cross-border economic engagements with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, increased electricity imports, and its growing role in transit corridors warrant opening dialogue.²⁴ While neither Afghanistan nor Turkmenistan represents an immediate candidate, a conditional roadmap, akin to NATO's Membership Action Plan, could define benchmarks for cooperation on counterterrorism, economic integration, and governance.

Conclusion

With global attention increasingly focused on Central Asia, the region stands at a strategic crossroads. Economic gains, while critical, are insufficient without accompanying defense and military safeguards to prevent disruption and counter international terrorism. The erosion of Russian influence and the rise of a Türkiye-Azerbaijan tandem create space for a more autonomous security architecture: Ankara providing the institutional and industrial engine, while Baku functions as the regional integrator. For Central Asian states, this evolution need not be formal or rapid, as

incremental coordination anchored in shared training, modernization, and intelligence can build trust and interoperability. By balancing Turkish leadership with Central Asian caution, Azerbaijan can translate this vision into practical regional cooperation. This dynamic creates a favorable environment for foreign direct investors and multinational corporations, as predictable security frameworks reduce risk and bolster economic confidence. As such, a gradual, sovereignty-respecting security framework has the potential to strengthen regional stability and reinforce Central Asia's emergence as a confident, self-reliant actor in the evolving global order.

(<https://www.bourseandbazaar.org/integrated-futures-initiative-articles/2025/7/14/uzbekistan-positions-itself-as-strategic-partner-for-the-gulf/>).

²³ "Statement of the Council of Heads of State on Afghanistan," *Organization of Turkic States*, May 21, 2025. <https://www.turkicstates.org/u/chs-statement-on-afghanistan.pdf>; "Turkic States Call for Inclusive Government and Stronger Anti-Terror Measures in Afghanistan," *KabulNow*, May 24, 2025.

(<https://kabulnow.com/2025/05/turkic-states-call-for-inclusive-government-and-stronger-anti-terror-measures-in-afghanistan/>).

²⁴ Shivan Shekhawat and Pupsa Kumari, "Assessing the Taliban's Connectivity Agenda in Afghanistan - Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, May 28, 2025. (<https://www.eurasiareview.com/28052025-assessing-the-talibans-connectivity-agenda-in-afghanistan-analysis/>).