

## **OTS summit in Turkestan: the “Digital Corridor” and the crisis in Kazakh-Turkish relations**

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*Abstract*

*ARVAK analyzes the results of the informal summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) held in the Kazakh city of Turkestan in May 2026. The evolution of the Turkic integration project is explored – from cultural and humanitarian cooperation in the 1990s to Ankara’s attempts to transform the bloc into a full-fledged military-political alliance. The paper examines in detail the emerging strategic contradictions between Ankara and Astana, caused by the desire of the Kazakh leadership to maintain a multi-vector balance of power and avoid being drawn into confrontation with the Russian Federation and the PRC. Particular attention is paid to the academic shift in Kazakh historiography toward the “Steppe Culture”, which disavows Turkish pan-Turkist narratives, as well as Beijing’s role in modeling a moderate integration structure in Central Asia.*

**Keywords:** *Organization of Turkic States (OTS), Turkey, Kazakhstan, K.-J. Tokayev, R. T. Erdoğan, Pan-Turkism, Pan-Turanism, “Digital Corridor”, “Steppe Culture”, geopolitical balance, Central Asia.*

### **1. Turkestan summit: the technological dimension of Turkic integration**

On May 15, 2026, an informal summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) took place in the Kazakh city of Turkestan, with artificial intelligence, digitalization, and deepening regional cooperation as its main agenda for discussions and negotiations. The event thus marked the formation of yet another dimension of integration for the Turkic countries, known as the “*Digital Corridor*”. The leaders of the OTS member states present at the summit emphasized in their speeches the need for expedited measures to create a unified digital development platform within the framework of integration, which includes sharing experience, co-financing, and transferring advanced technological developments to one another.

The topic of corporate work in the field of space exploration was also discussed, for which the participating countries possess all the financial and technical capabilities. The main message of the summit was the idea that without combining efforts in advanced technological sectors, Turkic integration cannot become a full-fledged and effective structure capable of solving the ambitious tasks set before it. Digital progress is the main guarantee of success for individual states and integration platforms in the modern world, where economy and military strength become uncompetitive without linkage to rapidly developing advanced technologies. The OTS leaders recorded this postulate, expressing readiness to deepen technological integration with the prospect of a collective emergence as one of the global centers of the digital industry.

The organization of the Turkestan summit was distinguished by a special solemnity that, as analysts note, surpassed the scale of all previous OTS meetings. Such an event could have claimed a more prominent place on the global information agenda, but its media resonance was somewhat limited by coinciding in date with Donald Trump’s visit to Beijing, which took place from May 13 to 15, the details of which remained undisclosed for a long time.

### **2. Astana’s external attributions as a tool for diplomatic maneuvering**

Experts suggest that Kazakhstan’s leadership deliberately sought to give the summit exceptional pomp, aiming to ensure wide international resonance and a significant diplomatic

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effect for the event. A meeting for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who arrived in the country on May 13, 2026, was organized with particular grandeur. The Turkish leader's aircraft was escorted by fighters of the Republic's Air Defense Forces even before entering Kazakh airspace, and this honor guard continued until landing in the capital. Emphasizing the guest's status, president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev personally arrived at the airport to formally greet his counterpart.

Astana had previously accorded such honors only to Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, which led experts to suggest that Tokayev thereby included Turkey among the most important states for Kazakhstan, whose interests Astana particularly considers when formulating its foreign policy. Opinions were also voiced that Tokayev played on Erdoğan's ambition and vanity, seeking to mitigate the Turkish leader's anticipated discontent regarding the messages in the prepared policy speech of the Kazakh leader at the summit.

In this context, the version that the special attitude toward Erdoğan's visit and the lavish ceremonies honoring him are actually connected to serious contradictions that have arisen in Kazakh-Turkish relations regarding the prospects of Turkic integration deserves attention. Recently, these contradictions have deepened even further, which is why president Tokayev seeks to compensate for the negative effects of the divergence of his positions from Turkish interests on several fundamental issues with the external attributes of mutual understanding and brotherhood. These contradictions are mainly due to the anxieties of the Kazakh elites regarding Ankara's efforts to achieve asymmetrical dominance within the framework of the Turkic integration project and transform the OTS into a tool for geopolitical struggle between global centers of power.

### **3. The genesis of the Turkic project: from cultural identity to geopolitical alliance**

Turkey first proposed the idea of institutionalizing ties and cooperation among Turkic state formations within an international organization. In 1992, at the initiative of Turkish president Turgut Ozal, the first summit of Turkic-speaking states was held in Ankara, attended by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, in addition to Ozal. In the same year, 1992, the "Joint Administration of Turkic Arts and Languages" was established in Alma-Ata. In July 1993, again in the Kazakh capital, an agreement on the creation of the "International Organization of Turkic Culture" was signed. In 1998, the "Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Countries" was formed in Baku.

Initially, the aforementioned structures were mainly focused on establishing deep cultural ties between Turkic countries, taking the linguistic, genetic, and partly confessional identity of their main population as the basis. Initiatives in this area were positively received by the societies and elites of the post-Soviet Turkic republics, who were experiencing the euphoria of the USSR's collapse and were in dire need of new geopolitical and mental-civilizational reference points. Cooperation in the field of joint cultural and educational programs developed with great success and at a fast pace, which prompted Turkey to convert the achieved results into a political dimension starting in the early 2000s.

Ankara began consistently promoting the idea of creating a political platform for integration, which, in turn, would elevate economic interaction between the Turkic countries, which had already recovered from post-Soviet de-industrialization and decline to a new qualitative level.

On October 3, 2009, an agreement on the creation of the international organization

“Turkic Council” was signed in Nakhchivan between the heads of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Thereby, the integration clearly acquired the contours of a geopolitical project whose functionality and scope extended beyond the cultural and linguistic unification of the Turkic countries. Out of fear of the relationship transforming into something more than cultural ties, Turkmenistan refused to participate in the organization, citing its UN-recognized neutral status, while Uzbekistan left the proposal to join the format unanswered. Ashgabat and Tashkent saw the “Turkic Council” as a threat to turning Central Asia into an arena of sharp geopolitical struggle, especially against the background of the radical-ideological movements of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Turanism, affiliated with the government in Turkey, which were already intensifying at that time.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan shunned the Turkish line of escalating relations with Russia, which, in turn, had virtually proclaimed at the 2007 Munich Security Conference (V. Putin’s speech) that it intended to revise its relations with the West and viewed the territories of the detached former republics of the USSR as a zone of its exclusive strategic interests.

#### **4. Dynamics of OTS expansion and Ankara’s institutional goals**

However, in September 2019, Tashkent nonetheless submitted an official application for membership with the council. Obviously, a determining role in this was played by the desire of the new president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, to fundamentally reformat Tashkent’s course towards self-isolation, practiced by the former elites led by Islam Karimov. This was also facilitated by a noticeable weakening of Moscow’s influence in Central Asia, increasing destabilization in Afghanistan, where the Americans were also gradually losing control over the situation, and finally, the growth of Chinese financial and economic expansionism in the region. Uzbekistan was in acute need of geopolitical support that would allow it to stop the Islamic radicalism penetrating from the south and the strengthening Chinese influence from the east. Furthermore, the country’s isolation from the Turkic community stimulated the growth of Astana’s influence in Central Asia, with which Tashkent had engaged in a hidden rivalry for regional leadership after the collapse of the USSR. Uzbekistan’s accession to the “Turkic Council” significantly increased the potential of the Turkic integration project, paving the way for the formation of a full-fledged geopolitical alliance.

Again, mainly at Ankara’s initiative, in November 2021, the “Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States” was renamed the “Organization of Turkic States” (OTS) at the Istanbul Summit, which, according to analysts, signified the emergence of a new geopolitical construct on the continental arena, claiming the role of organizer of the security architecture in the vast area from the Eastern Mediterranean to the borders of China. Following this, Turkmenistan joined the OTS with observer status – with the prospect of full membership – as did the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Hungary, which significantly expanded the geopolitical planning space of the alliance and its potential zone of interest.

Considering the contradictory experience of the “League of Arab States” (LAS) – an association also built on the principle of ethno-linguistic kinship of countries – Turkey, as the initiating country for the OTS, sought to achieve maximum flexibility in the mechanisms of the alliance’s vital activities. Ankara was unwilling to be content with the OTS’s role as a purely supranational consultative body with symbolic functions, whose decisions are not mandatory for its participants to implement.

Turkic integration was initially intended to systematically elevate the principle of collective interests and coordinated actions to the level of an OTS imperative, naturally, with the unspoken recognition of Turkey's status as the coordinator and leader of the supranational entity.

Ankara built the project sequentially and gradually, acting extremely cautiously at the initial stage and avoiding open politicalization of the integration platform, since it considered the scale of residual influence of post-Soviet Russia in the region, the ambitions of a strengthening China, and the interests of the West, which was gradually penetrating the space of the Black Sea-Caspian Basin and Central Asia.

On the other hand, Turkey tried not to irritate local traditional elites with excessive activity, allowing them to take exactly as much from the Turkic integration initiative as was necessary to guarantee the preservation of political positions and the capital concentrated in their hands after the collapse of the USSR. Therefore, Ankara preferred not to force the agenda of the military-political dimension of the Turkic alliance but to solve this task in stages, achieving its ultimate goals through systematic work on spreading the ideas of the ethno-linguistic identity of the Turkic republics, their cultural-civilizational and mental commonality, as well as initiatives for introducing a unified alphabet, educational programs, and a scientific base. Parallel initiatives included deep economic integration, the creation of joint investment funds and financial structures, logistical and energy convergence, common customs and duty standards, collective cooperation in space exploration, and ensuring the technological breakthrough of the Turkic space.

##### **5. Astana's deterrent factors: the Russian Federation, the PRC, and internal stability**

Ankara rightly believed that the cumulative effect of the successful implementation of these programs would logically lead the integration project to the final stage – the formation of a military-political alliance. The Istanbul Summit in November 2021, when the “Turkic Council” was officially renamed the “Organization of Turkic States”, should be considered the symbolic start of entry into this stage. However, the real starting point for the integration's claim to geopolitical status, apparently, should be considered the Karabakh War of 2020, which revealed Turkey's direct military intervention in the South Caucasus agenda and defined the contours of the geographical space through which Turkey intends to solve the most difficult problem on the path to the establishment of Turkic unity: the establishment of a land corridor with Azerbaijan and the countries of Central Asia.

It was these events that served as a signal for Kazakhstan to exercise extreme caution and try to limit the accelerated pace of actions set by Turkey to formalize Turkic integration into a military-political alliance. It is evident that the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, which resulted in Nursultan Nazarbayev's final departure from the political arena and the reformatting of elites, were largely directly related to Turkey's unprecedented activation in Central Asia and Russia's counter-reaction. The events in Kazakhstan provided a reason for experts to reconsider the mistaken opinion that Kazakhstan embraced the idea of Turkic integration without much hesitation and that its participation proceeded quite smoothly.

Starting from the 1990s, when the Turkish initiative was still in the stage of contemplation and development, Alma-Ata saw in it the danger of undermining the balance in Central Asia. At the

second Istanbul Summit of Turkic states in October 1994, Kazakhstan's president N. Nazarbayev called for expanding the format of the integration proposed by Turkey to include the Russian Federation, the PRC, and Eastern European countries. A conflict between Turkish politicians and Russian representatives observing the summit occurred at the same meeting, which only intensified Alma-Ata's fears that the Turkish initiative could destabilize both the republic itself and the region as a whole. Kazakhstan welcomed the prospect of Turkey's involvement in the region, as this would contribute to creating a counterbalance to Russia. However, on the other hand, the excessive enthusiasm of elites and society for the ideas of creating a geopolitical alliance on the basis of ethno-linguistic commonality raised concerns about the radicalization of nationalist sentiments in the republic and the prospects of inter-ethnic conflict, threatening the loss of sovereignty over significant Russian-speaking territories in the north of the country.

Another deterrent factor was China, which is increasing its presence in Central Asia. Given the PRC's problems with Uyghur nationalism, excessive activity by Kazakhstan on the issue of "Turkification" of public sentiment and the popularization of a pro-Turkish political vector could extremely negatively affect relations with Beijing.

## **6. Kazakhstan's economic sovereignty against the radicalism of Pan-Turkism**

For nearly two decades since the launch of the first integration mechanisms, Kazakhstan sought to capitalize on the Turkic project as a tool to contain Russian revisionism and Chinese expansion, but at the same time tried to limit Turkey's growing influence within the Council and keep under control the fragile line beyond which the idea of Turkic solidarity could transform into aggressive forms of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Turanism. The more intense economic growth of the Kazakh elites, compared to other Turkic countries, contributed to restricting Turkey's excessive influence within the integration framework.

The financial and economic self-sufficiency of the Kazakh elites strengthened their ability to control Turkey's latent attempts to popularize nationalist and Islamist ideologies among the most vulnerable segments of society. Given the country's successful economic development and the strengthening of multi-level ties with Russia, China, and the collective West, the ideas of geopolitical and geo-economic integration of the Turkic world have noticeably lost their relevance for Astana. At the same time, Turkey persistently tried to exert pressure on the Kazakh elites through the radical nationalist sentiments of certain segments of society, capitalized over two decades, and certain population groups dissatisfied with Astana's social policy. The January 2022 events directly echo Turkey's geopolitical activation in Kazakhstan, although both Ankara and Astana subsequently tried to avoid mutual accusations as much as possible and not demonstrate the existence of serious contradictions regarding the future of their relations within the OTS format.

## **7. Astana's academic shift: the "Steppe Culture" concept and the role of the PRC**

If, before 2022, Kazakhstan made efforts to torpedo Turkey's plans for the politicalization and militarization of the integration project, after these events, Astana began to show clear signs of losing interest in the narratives about the extremely close ethno-linguistic connection and historical-civilizational commonality of Kazakhs with the Turkish people. Despite formally implemented programs for creating a unified alphabet, a scientific and educational terminological base, and promoting theses about the existence of broad historical and cultural

layers that allegedly prove the common history of Turks with the peoples of Central Asia, Astana is simultaneously and actively promoting the idea of the unique historical path of the Kazakhs into public consciousness.

In recent years, Kazakh historians, archaeologists, geneticists, and anthropologists have persistently promoted the discourse in the scientific and educational environment about the Kazakhs' belonging to the so-called "*Steppe Culture*", their historical and civilizational origin from the Golden Horde era, and a direct connection with the Genghisids. In these academic works, scientific articles, and educational lectures, Kazakh history on a global scale, starting from the early Middle Ages, practically does not intersect with the historical path of the tribal formations that gave rise to the Turkish nation.

Objectively, these studies do not contain sensational conclusions, but the very fact of their widespread dissemination in the Kazakh environment and in international scientific circles inflicts significant damage on the entire construct of Turkic integration, the foundation of which was the scientifically debatable narrative of the historical and civilizational commonality of the Turkish and Kazakh peoples.

Turkey cannot fail to notice that, in a broad sense, this is not about the objective search for historical identity by the Kazakhs, but about choosing a political and civilizational vector turned towards the East. This is a geopolitical orientation that excludes the Turkish projection of uniting the Turkic peoples. This choice is highly contradictory to the OTS project, as it deprives Ankara of the opportunity for geopolitical consolidation of related peoples of Central Asia on its own terms and for its global interests.

It is also possible that Ankara sees the results of Chinese activity behind Kazakhstan's actions. Perhaps it is Beijing, proceeding from its interests on the "Uyghur issue", that is modeling its own vision of the Turkic integration structure through Astana, in which the moderate Kazakhstan, tightly integrated into the "Great Silk Road", is assigned the role of the dominant player and leader among the related peoples and states.

### **Summary: the limits of the Turkic defense alliance**

Experts suggest that the content and key messages of the speech by Kazakhstan's president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on May 15, 2026, at the Turkestan summit were primarily addressed to R. T. Erdoğan. Tokayev made it clear to his Turkish colleague that Astana still adheres to the idea of maximizing cooperation among the Turkic republics in all areas of the integration agenda. However, Kazakhstan is not ready to move to the next stage of the format. Astana does not rule out cooperation in defense and the defense industry but opposes the transformation of the OTS into a military-political alliance, thereby intending to prevent the escalation of struggle in the region and the disruption of the emerging balance of power. Tokayev clearly outlined the limit of the integration's potential, going beyond which threatens the association with dismantling. Judging by the policies of recent years, Astana has an alternative to Turkish plans, the implementation of which is likely not deprived of the support of one of the main players in the region – China, and possibly Russia.

It should be assumed that the Turkish president left Kazakhstan without the most significant achievements. The solemn reception held in his honor only emphasized the existence of serious problems in Turkey's strategy in Central Asia. A notable step by the

Russian president may serve as indirect confirmation of this. V. Putin, on the eve of his visit to Kazakhstan, published an article in which he expressed gratitude to his Kazakh counterpart for participating in the May 9 parade and for unreserved assistance to the Russian-Kazakhstan “*union in the heart of Eurasia*”. According to analysts, this is a demonstration of the Kremlin’s satisfaction with the actual “breakdown” of the Turkish game in Central Asia.