



Feature Article  
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## Security and Military Cooperation Among the Turkic States in the 2020s

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*There has been a rapid intensification of Turkish relations with Turkic states in Central Asia and the Caucasus in the past decade. The creation of the Organization of Turkic States in 2021 was a major milestone, but in the bilateral realm a significant shift has taken place as the Turkish defense and security ties to regional states have intensified – particularly with Azerbaijan, with whom Turkey has a defense treaty, but also with Central Asian states. This development could be a net strategic gain for the West in an era of Great Power Competition, if appreciated rather than ignored and engaged rather than sidelined.*

**K** Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkish diplomacy has sought to transform relationships with the Turkic states of Central Asia and the Caucasus into a serious geopolitical enterprise. In the years immediately following the independence of these states (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) Ankara engaged in ambitious

talk with meager results regarding pan-Turkic cooperation. None of the new states seemed keen to follow Ankara's lead in regional diplomacy, the Turkish military and security services possessed little power projection capability or defense technology appropriate to their needs, and exiting the Russian sphere of economic and cultural influence proceeded slowly. Commentators in Turkiye, the Turkic



*Presidents Erdoğan and Aliyev signing Declaration of Allied Relations in Shusha, Azerbaijan, June 2021. (Preisdent.az)*

states, and the West noted the yawning gap between aspiration and achievement.

The past decade has seen a renewed and far more successful, though still partial, effort to develop robust defense ties among the Turkic states. Five regional security dynamics motivated the several participants in this process to take it more seriously. First, economic and industrial development turned Türkiye into a G20 economy with a first-class defense industrial establishment, with widely-exported unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or “drones”) as the brand-defining product.<sup>1</sup> Second, military reforms led to a more professional,<sup>2</sup> lethal,<sup>3</sup> and outwardly-oriented Turkish military establishment that could provide training, education, doctrine, and equipment to partner militaries struggling to replace Russia’s role in these areas. Third, Russia became more aggressive in re-asserting influence in post-Soviet Republics,<sup>4</sup> launching wars against Georgia and Ukraine, supporting Armenian occupation of a

fifth of Azerbaijan’s territory, and hinting at possible interventions elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Fourth, generational change in all six countries reduced elite and public perceptions that Russian leadership in the former Soviet space was natural or inevitable.<sup>6</sup> Fifth, failure of the U.S.-led NATO effort to stabilize Afghanistan, coupled with the failure of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to resolve conflicts among its members, made it clear that no external coalition or hegemon would be a security provider - and that the Turkic states would have to carry some of the load themselves.<sup>7</sup>

This paper will examine the nodes and linkages in this thickening network to assess just how much military and security convergence has been achieved. Drone sales are far from the only form of cooperation: other strands include the training of OTS-member state personnel in Turkish military institutions, joint exercises, specialized training and advisory missions, and political-military

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<sup>1</sup> Can Kasapoglu, “Transforming From Arms Importer to Trendsetter: Assessing the Growth of Turkey’s Defense Industries,” *Defense Journal of the Atlantic Council in Turkey*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.atlantic-council.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/transforming-from-arms-importer-to-trendsetter-assessing-the-growth-of-turkeys-defense-industries/>.

<sup>2</sup> Rich Outzen, “Turkey’s Global Military Footprint in 2022,” *Defense Journal of the Atlantic Council in Turkey*, December 22, 2022 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/turkeys-global-military-footprint-in-2022/>.

<sup>3</sup> Noah Ringler, “Turkey’s New Joint Operational Concepts Foreshadow the Future of Armed Conflict,” *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, March 16, 2021 <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2021/03/16/turkeys-new-joint-operational-concepts-foreshadow-the-future-of-armed-conflict/>.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Hodge, “Restoration of Empire is the Endgame for Russia’s Vladimir Putin,” *cnn.com*, June 11, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/10/europe/russia-putin-empire-restoration-endgame-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Andrius Sytas, “Russian Military in Belarus Threatens Baltics and Poland, Says Lithuanian President,” *reuters.com*, February 17, 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-military-belarus-threatens-baltics-poland-says-lithuanian-president-2022-02-17/>.

<sup>6</sup> Banyan (pseudonymic columnist) “Central Asian Countries Are Subtly Distancing Themselves From Russia,” *The Economist*, October 22, 2022 <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/10/20/central-asian-countries-are-subtly-distancing-themselves-from-russia>.

<sup>7</sup> Kanat Altynbayev, “Russia-led CSTO is Facing its End Amid Various Conflicts,” *Caravanserai*, September 30, 2022 [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2022/09/30/feature-02](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/09/30/feature-02).

consultations. The first and most mature case is Turkiye-Azerbaijan, a relationship which has been referred to as “one nation, two states, one army.”<sup>8</sup> Kyrgyzstan provides another interesting case in that it has used Turkish military equipment in active combat against neighboring Tajikistan, unlike OTS states which have so far deployed and trained on such equipment for in peacetime only.<sup>9</sup> The other countries of the OTS have cooperative programs at a far more preliminary stage of development, but progress has been evident and will be reviewed.<sup>10</sup>

After a fuller discussion of the regional dynamics that provided the context for defense convergence, the paper will examine each bilateral case. It will then lay out problematics and challenges related to the phenomenon, and likely implications for regional and international geopolitical balances and stability.

### **Critical Context: Regional Dynamics Changing in Central Asia**

Somewhat counterintuitively, steps toward greater security cooperation have occurred in parallel to, but separately from, the political and

cultural convergence achieved via the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The main reason for this is the membership – for now – of various OTS members in countervailing alliances (NATO and CSTO). Turkiye is a primary military contributor to NATO. While Turkmenistan has refrained from joining alliances and Uzbekistan has withdrawn from CSTO, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remain within the CSTO.

A multilateral military or security alliance at this stage would likely discomfit NATO, CSTO, Russia, or China, and perhaps all at once, without yet providing a guarantee of greater security.<sup>11</sup> For that reason, military-to-military relationship building has been bilateral and outside of the framework of the OTS, which has focused instead on cultural, economic, and political convergence rather than security.<sup>12</sup> The growth of the non-military OTS and the deepening of a network of separate bilateral military ties among the Turkic states both reflect the tension between Russia’s intent to maintain influence over the Central

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<sup>8</sup> Ihsan Sefa, “Bir Millet, İki Devlet, Bir Ordu,” *Aydinlik* (newspaper), 6 July 2021, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/haber/bir-millet-iki-devlet-bir-ordu-249886>.

<sup>9</sup> Fehim Tastekin, “Are Turkish Drones Complicating Disputes in Central Asia?” *al-Monitor*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/are-turkish-drones-complicating-disputes-central-asia>.

<sup>10</sup> Blue Domes, “Turkey and Central Asian military cooperation: more than just drones,”

May 25, 2022, <https://bluedomes.net/2022/05/25/turkey-and-central-asian-military-cooperation-more-than-just-drones/>.

<sup>11</sup> Nurettin Akcay, “Does the Organization of Turkic States Worry China and Russia?” *The Diplomat*, November 23, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/does-the-organization-of-turkic-states-worry-china-and-russia/>.

<sup>12</sup> Marriam Javed, “Organization of Turkic States, 10<sup>th</sup> Summit Fact Sheet,” *The Diplomatic Insight*, November 10, 2023, <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/factsheet-on-the-organization-of-turkic-states-and-the-10th-summit-in-astana/>.

Asian states by keeping them weak and isolated,<sup>13</sup> and the reality that Moscow's grip is weakening in practical terms.<sup>14</sup>

Ankara's reconnaissance and strike drones represented a breakthrough because they were the first military system that could be offered to Turkic states at a better quality/price point than competitors, were at or near the frontier of current warfighting technology, and could be integrated without requiring a complete overhaul of operational and logistical systems. The performance of Turkish drones in Libya, Syria, Nagorno-Karabagh, and Ukraine was enough to convince potential customers to invest in them.<sup>15</sup> Turkish firms and officials adroitly turned sales into training, maintenance, and advisory presence - military diplomacy in the broad sense.<sup>16</sup> Not only the sales but demonstrated Turkish commitment to stand by defense partners stoutly when they faced crises and conflicts catalyzed strategic convergence, which has caused concern in Moscow and Beijing.<sup>17</sup> The changing nature of Turkish military forces from conscript-heavy and domestically-focused to more professionalized and ex-

peditionary has made it easier to send detachments for training and exercises to the Turkic states, where their presence may cause less concern than Russian or other advisors would. Turkish Minister of Defense Yaşar Güler recently testified to the Turkish parliament that the balance between professional and conscript forces within the Turkish military has now reached parity (50/50).<sup>18</sup>

Russia's re-assertion in former Soviet Republics has changed the calculus of national leaders in the Turkic states, too. For Azerbaijan the issue dates to the early post-Soviet period: Russian troops aided and supported Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territory in Nagorno-Karabagh and the seven surrounding districts. Russia launching wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014 and 2022) has greatly deepened concerns that Russian leaders would not hesitate to launch new operations into the Turkic states on various pretexts. Even the CSTO mission dispatched – with rapidity – to help suppress protests against Kazakhstan's President in January 2022 seems to have raised alarm bells over vul-

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<sup>13</sup> Sinan Tavsan, "Turkic World Sees Risks and Opportunities as Russia Stumbles," *Nikkei*, November 30, 2022 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkic-world-sees-risks-and-opportunities-as-Russia-stumbles>

<sup>14</sup> Maximilian Hess, "Russia is Down, but not Out, in Central Asia," *Central Asia Papers*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 17, 2023 <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/02/russia-is-down-but-not-out-in-central-asia/>

<sup>15</sup> Lucas Morvan, "Turkey Continues Exporting Drones to Central Asia," *novastan.org*, April 21, 2023 <https://novastan.org/en/kyrgyzstan/turkey-continues-exporting-drones-to-central-asia/>

<sup>16</sup> Can Kasapoglu, "Türk dünyası askeri jeopolitiğinde 'SİHA' faktörü," *Anadolu Agency*, November 30, 2021 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/turk-dunyasi-askeri-jeopolitiginde-siha-faktoru/2434467>

<sup>17</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/does-the-organization-of-turkic-states-worry-china-and-russia/>

<sup>18</sup> Veli Toprak, "Milli Savunma Bakanı Yaşar Güler: 40 tane Eurofighter uçağı alacağız," *Sozcu* (Turkish daily), November 16, 2023 [https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2023/gundem/milli-savunma-bakani-yasar-guler-40-tane-eurofighter-ucagi-alacagiz-7864118/?utm\\_source=daha-fazla\\_haber&utm\\_medium=free&utm\\_campaign=daha-fazlahaber](https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2023/gundem/milli-savunma-bakani-yasar-guler-40-tane-eurofighter-ucagi-alacagiz-7864118/?utm_source=daha-fazla_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=daha-fazlahaber)

nerabilities to the big neighbor, rather than gratitude for the speedy response.<sup>19</sup> The Turkic republics appear to have concluded that they need a “third neighbor” besides Russia and China, and one with cultural ties and military prowess, fits the bill nicely.

Another factor creating openness to Turkic military cooperation has been the failure of U.S. will and capability to function as a regional security provider. The abrupt collapse of the 20-year U.S.-led stabilization effort in Afghanistan was a seminal moment in this process.<sup>20</sup> Yet the relative low priority for the region for Washington, and the consequent growth of Chinese influence both predate the disaster in Kabul.<sup>21</sup> It has been hard to discern a clear vision or statement of American interest, reducing the prospects for regional governments to seek security cooperation or geopolitical cooperation.<sup>22</sup> In fact, several of the governments have labored, or still do labor, under a variety of U.S. sanctions. Most recently, the U.S. paused its relationship with Azerbaijan after it reasserted control over Nagorno-Karabagh, and may allow sanctions imposed in 1992 at the behest of the Armenian lobby, waived yearly since 2002, to resume.

It may be sound policy for the U.S. not to prioritize Central Asia, given its various interests in many other regions of the globe. Yet it is entirely feasible, at prudent cost for the U.S., to encourage these countries seek local security solutions, bringing in a NATO member to help the process. As S. Frederick Starr put it, “a discussion with the countries that honestly includes security, sovereignty, self-government and self-determination is what's been missing.”<sup>23</sup>

Finally, taboos that applied for Turkiye and for the post-Soviet Turkic states have greatly eroded over the past two decades. Under the AKP government of President Erdogan, Turkish foreign policy has become less risk-averse and more open to bilateral hard power interventions. For the younger generation of Central Asians, the idea of security dependence on Russia – or China, for that matter – seems less and less attractive. There may be a catalyst effect involved here, too, through the cultural and economic convergence of the OTS. Once non-security collective and multilateral cooperation has begun to seem “normal” for the current generation of national leaders and publics in the region, the evolutionary path to greater military and security cooperation becomes normalized as well.

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<sup>19</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Learning from Kazakhstan’s January Crisis,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 18, 2022. (<https://cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13715>)

<sup>20</sup> Iskander Akylybayev, and Nurtas Janibekov “What Does the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan Mean for Central Asia?” *The Diplomat*, May 25, 2021 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/what-does-the-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-mean-for-central-asia/>.

<sup>21</sup> Navbahor Imamova, “China’s Influence Spreads as U.S. Lags,” *Voice of America (VOA)*, website, April 22, 2023 <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-influence-in-central-asia-spreads-as-us-lags/7061325.html>

<sup>22</sup> Alex Little, “What is U.S. Central Asia Policy?” *National Interest*, November 2, 2023 <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-us-central-asia-policy-207131>.

<sup>23</sup> Navbahor Imamova, “Experts Urge U.S. to Update its Central Asia Strategy,” *Voice of America (VOA)*, February 2, 2022 <https://www.voanews.com/a/6424466.html>



None of these factors incline the six states to pursue collective security in the full sense, but they do create fertile ground for growing bilateral cooperation in military, intelligence, and related fields. We are thus witnessing the emergence of a series of incremental, discrete security relationships below the threshold of collective security. There may not be a “Turan Army” in the works, but the series of thickening Turkish bilateral defense and security relationships with its cousins to the East has great geopolitical import, and the potential to grow in time to something more formal.<sup>24</sup>

### Country by Country

Azerbaijan is *sui generis* for the degree of not just cooperation, but integration with the Turkish military and security services. After its early post-independence military proved unable to defend national territory against Armenian forces in the early 1990s, Baku essential shifted from the Soviet model of training and operations to the Turkish model. Turkish trainers and equipment

came to Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani officers studied in Turkish military schools, and the two sides paid close attention to joint doctrine and interoperability.<sup>25</sup> These two states are more ethnically similar than either is with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Uzbekistan, with both rooted in the Oğuz ethnolinguistic group – this has led to popularization of the term “one nation, two states.” By 2020, the degree of military integration – and battlefield success – prompted some observers to modify this to “one nation, two states, one army.”<sup>26</sup> Drones, ground vehicles, command and control systems, advisors, and logistical support all supplemented longstanding training and educational ties as Baku moved towards ejecting Armenian forces from Azerbaijani territory in 2020 and 2022.<sup>27</sup>

Kazakh President Kassy-Jomart Tokayev appears to have appreciated shortly after assuming power from predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev the need to diversify his support base away from Nazarbayev loyalists domestically<sup>28</sup> and the CSTO regionally.<sup>29</sup> His moment of epiphany with

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<sup>24</sup> David Biro, “The Turan Army: Opportunities for a New Military Cooperation Led by Turkey,” *Nuova Antologia Militare*, Vol. 8 No. 2 (2021), pp. 333-359, <https://hal.science/hal-03389110/document>.

<sup>25</sup> Josephine Freund, “Strong Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations Reinforced Through Guler’s Visit to Azerbaijan,” Caspian Policy Center Research, August 29, 2023 <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/strong-azerbaijani-turkish-relations-reinforced-through-gulers-visit-to-azerbaijan>.

<sup>26</sup> Can Kasapoglu, “Can Turkish Drones Bolster NATO’s Eastern Flank Against Russia?” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 18, No. 100, June 23, 2021 <https://jamestown.org/program/can-turkish-drones-bolster-natos-eastern-flank-against-russia/>.

<sup>27</sup> Haldun Yalcinkaya, “Turkey’s Overlooked role in the Second Nagorno-Karabagh War,” Insights on Turkey, German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 21, 2021 <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-overlooked-role-second-nagorno-karabakh-war>.

<sup>28</sup> Shaun Walker, “Where is Kazakhstan’s former longtime leader Nursultan Nazarbayev?” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/16/where-is-kazakhstan-former-longtime-leader-nursultan-nazarbayev>

<sup>29</sup> Benno Zogg, “Observer Now, Beneficiary Later: China and the Unrest in Kazakhstan,” *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2022 <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/observer-now-beneficiary-later-china-and-the-unrest-in-kazakhstan/>

Russia came during what the uprising or failed coup attempt that he survived with Russian assistance, but which Moscow did not seem distressed to see unfold.<sup>30</sup> Tokayev has been forced to balance continued dependence, especially for trade, on Russia with growing popular disaffection for Putin and his war in Ukraine,<sup>31</sup> and has taken small steps toward strategic de-alignment from Russia.<sup>32</sup> The first real growth in military ties with Turkey came with a 2020 agreement for joint defense industrial projects.<sup>33</sup> A protocol for intelligence cooperation was signed in 2022.<sup>34</sup> Despite speculation in the West that the Russian “rescue” in 2022 might lead to deepened dependence and marginalize Turkish aspirations for a

bigger role,<sup>35</sup> Ankara’s patient and consistent approach led to a range of new projects and deals.<sup>36</sup> By 2022, the two sides agreed on an enhanced strategic partnership,<sup>37</sup> and Turkish drones are now being produced in Kazakhstan under license.<sup>38</sup>

The trajectory of Kyrgyz-Turkish defense ties bears some resemblance to the early stages of the Azerbaijan case, in that Bishkek was faced with a threat to sovereign territory by a Russian-backed force that initially held the upper hand, in the shape of Tajikistan. During several rounds of border fighting in 2021 and 2022, Kyrgyz forces struggled to stop incursions by more heavily armed Tajik units.<sup>39</sup> Bishkek has been preparing

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<sup>30</sup> Reuters News, “President of Kazakhstan Says He Has Weathered Attempted Coup d’Etat,” *nbcnews.com*, January 10, 2022

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/president-kazakhstan-says-weathered-attempted-coup-detat-rcna11567>. See also Dubnov, Arkady “Kazakhstan: a Coup, a Counter-coup, and a Russian Victory,” *Al Jazeera*, January 16, 2022 <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/1/16/a-coup-a-counter-coup-and-a-russian-victory-in-kazakhstan>.

<sup>31</sup> Bhavna Dave, “Ukraine Conflict: Kazakhstan’s Difficult Balancing Act Between Need for Russian Support and Popular Opposition to the War,” *The Conversation (UK)*, April 11, 2022 <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-conflict-kazakhstan-difficult-balancing-act-between-need-for-russian-support-and-popular-opposition-to-the-war-180210>.

<sup>32</sup> Isabel van Brugen, “Another Neighbor Turns its Back on Russia,” *Newsweek*, September 29, 2023 <https://www.newsweek.com/kazakhstan-russia-neighbor-sanctions-ukraine-1830862>.

<sup>33</sup> “Turkey, Kazakhstan Agree on Military Cooperation that Covers Intelligence Sharing, Defense Industry,” *nordicmonitor.com*, May 16, 2020 <https://nordicmonitor.com/2020/05/turkey-kazakhstan-agree-on-military-cooperation-that-covers-military-intelligence-defence-industry-and-joint-projects/>.

<sup>34</sup> Aybulat Musaev, “Kazakhstan Approves Military Intelligence Protocol with Türkiye,” *Caspian News*, August 11, 2022 <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakhstan-approves-military-intelligence-protocol-with-turkiye-2022-8-11-21/>.

<sup>35</sup> Cengiz Candar, “Kazakhstan Crisis Challenges Turkey’s Leadership of Turkic Union,” *Al-Monitor*, January 12, 2022 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/kazakhstan-crisis-challenges-turkeys-leadership-turkic-union>.

<sup>36</sup> “Kazakhstan Eyes Wide Range of military Cooperation With Türkiye,” *dailysabah.com*, March 1, 2023 <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/kazakhstan-eyes-wide-range-of-military-cooperation-with-turkiye>.

<sup>37</sup> “Turkey, Kazakhstan Agree on Enhanced Strategic Partnership,” *dailysabah.com*, May 11, 2022 <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-kazakhstan-agree-on-enhanced-strategic-partnership>.

<sup>38</sup> Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan Seals Deal to Produce Turkish Drones Under License,” *Eurasianet*, May 13, 2022 <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license>.

<sup>39</sup> Aijan Sharshenova, “More Than a Border Skirmish Between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” *The Diplomat*, September 19, 2022 <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/more->

for future potential clashes by expanding purchases of TB2 Bayraktar, Aksungur, and Anka drones from Ankara.<sup>40</sup> The Kyrgyz also purchased Russian drones, and are presumably benefiting from the “whole package” approach (trainers, advisors, logistical and technical support) that Ankara uses elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> With Russia devoting its military resources overwhelmingly to the war in Ukraine, Iran has stepped in as a patron of Dushanbe in this adversarial pairing, rendering Kyrgyz-Tajik tensions something of a proxy for broader Turkiye-Iran competition in Central Asia.<sup>42</sup>

Turkmenistan has preferred an entirely non-aligned and unencumbered strategic orientation since independence, and its relationship with Turkiye has remained mostly economic and cultural.<sup>43</sup> There have been fewer Turkmen cadets

and other trainees at Turkish military institutions, as it has a relatively small military establishment and has thus far refrained from serious outreach or partnerships in the defense and security space.<sup>44</sup> Yet there are signs this might be shifting to a more cooperative stance. After 2020 deals the Turkmen government expanded purchases of Turkish drones to its growing inventory of unmanned vehicles, which may lead to future deals and closer collaboration in training, logistics, and related fields.<sup>45</sup>

Uzbekistan alone among the Turkic states has yet to purchase Turkish drones.<sup>46</sup> Tashkent did, however, sign a 2022 defense cooperation agreement with Ankara that includes intelligence sharing, joint training, and logistics projects.<sup>47</sup> A further protocol was announced in November 2022, adding military education and defense industrial cooperation to the agenda.<sup>48</sup> Uzbekistan, while

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[than-a-border-skirmish-between-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan/](#).

<sup>40</sup> Svenja Petersen, “Perspectives: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Building Up For Another Potential Round of Fighting,” *Eurasianet*, August 28, 2023 <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-building-up-for-another-potential-round-of-fighting>.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Iddon, “Why Kyrgyzstan is Procuring Turkish and Russian Drones For Its Tiny Air Force,” *forbes.com*, November 1, 2021 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paul-iddon/2021/11/01/why-kyrgyzstan-is-procuring-turkish-and-russian-drones-for-its-tiny-air-force/?sh=4a5d51b328c4>

<sup>42</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, “Iran’s Stakes in the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Standoff,” *Gulf International Forum*, October 8, 2022 <https://gulfif.org/irans-stakes-in-the-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-standoff/>.

<sup>43</sup> “Turkey, Turkmenistan Sign Deals, Strengthen Ties in Erdogan’s Visit,” *Daily Sabah*, November 27, 2021 <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkey-turkmenistan-sign-deals-strengthen-ties-in-erdogans-visit>

<sup>44</sup> Blue Domes, *op.cit.* <https://blue-domes.net/2022/05/25/turkey-and-central-asian-military-cooperation-more-than-just-drones/>.

<sup>45</sup> Stijn Mitzer, and Joost Oliemans “Turkmenistan’s Path to Drone Power,” *Oryx*, October 17, 2022 <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/turkmenistans-path-to-drone-power.html>

<sup>46</sup> Devon Sealander, “Kazakhstan’s Drone Deal With Turkey Showcases Regional Security Focus,” *Caspian Policy Center Research*, June 8, 2022 <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/kazakhstans-drone-deal-with-turkey-showcases-regional-security-focus>.

<sup>47</sup> “Turkey, Uzbekistan Set For Intelligence Sharing, Joint Military Drills, Defense Cooperation,” *nordicmonitor.com*, July 4, 2022 <https://nordicmonitor.com/2022/07/turkey-uzbekistan-set-for-intelligence-sharing-joint-military-drills-defense-cooperation/>.

<sup>48</sup> “Uzbekistan, Turkey Sign Agreement on Military Cooperation,” *Tashkent Times*, November 25, 2022 <http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/10064-uzbekistan-turkey-sign-agreement-on-military-cooperation>.



much more populous and militarily capable than Turkmenistan, is at a similar – very initial, but growing – stage of mil-to-mil ties with Turkiye.

Turkiye has more or less come to dominate the developing Central Asian drone market, but that is likely not the limit of ambition for Ankara, nor for its partners.<sup>49</sup> The fuller potential for cooperation lies in the growth of military education exchanges, training and exercises, a broader range of equipment and defense technologies, and perhaps most importantly, development of common doctrine and operational approaches. Turkiye and Azerbaijan are already there; the other four will develop ties at variable speeds and may never reach the same degree of integration. But they are clearly involved in the same sort of process at differing scales. It seems likely that the defense/security integration of these states will permanently lag their cultural and economic integration efforts within the OTS. Yet even as the loosest tie that binds these countries, and one outside the OTS framework for the foreseeable future, the building out of this network is a strategic development worth watching.

## Implications for the West

There are three main implications of these developments for Western strategists and policymakers. First, deepening Turkic cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus is a hedge against domination of the Eurasian “Heartland” by Russia, China, or Iran – a strategic tenet for Washington and the West for over one hundred years.<sup>50</sup> Were these countries – together or severally – to develop significant security capabilities under the tutelage of Beijing or Moscow, there would be strategic risk for the U.S.; having them do it with a NATO partner presents more opportunity than risk. The opportunity comes as a bargain for Washington which has little desire for direct engagement – but can be a distant friend and supporter. This grouping of six states share more than ethnolinguistic heritage - they share a geopolitical alignment against Iranian hegemony, religiously-motivated terrorism, Russian meddling, and domination by China – an alignment that accords with U.S. interests. Deepening trade, cultural ties, and policy coordination among these states – buttressed by gradually growing security coordination – relieves the U.S. and its allies of a potential concern.<sup>51</sup>

Second, the growth of security capabilities and coordination among these states has significant

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Iddon, “Turkey Likely to Get Upper Hand in Central Asia’s Drone Market,” *forbes.com*, December 22, 2022 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/12/22/turkey-could-dominate-central-asias-nascent-drone-market/?sh=247285491d1a>

<sup>50</sup> Torbjorn Knutsen, “Halford J. Mackinder, Geopolitics, and the Heartland Thesis,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 36 (2014), No. 5, pp. 835-857

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07075332.2014.941904>.

<sup>51</sup> Ali Mammadov, “The United States can’t offset its rivals in Central Asia alone. Turkey can help,” *TurkeySource*, Atlantic Council, August 14, 2023 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/the-united-states-cant-offset-its-rivals-in-central-asia-alone-turkey-can-help/>.

potential to bolster their internal stability. Bilateral and multilateral training and exchanges will produce more capable and professional military and security forces, better intelligence sharing will help identify and address emergent threats, and response assistance for internal unrest or natural disasters will potentially come from these mid-sized regional partners rather than Russia.

Third, and importantly for Washington and European capitals, anti-U.S. powers (China, Russia, and Iran) are not blind to these developments. The likelihood that they will seek to undermine, co-opt, or gain privileged / partnered access with the OTS – and with the emerging network of bilateral military partnerships – is high. As China and Russia invest money and soft power on trying to pull Turkiye away from the West, their potential success means pulling this entire network of Turkic states further away, too. The West can and should encourage the growth of the OTS

states as internally networked partners in trade, culture, regional diplomacy – and security. It should complement that by partnering itself with these countries through regional exercises, exchanges, disaster relief and, when appropriate, defense industrial cooperation. The rise of a Turkic security architecture, as well as a Turkic political and cultural bloc, in Central Asia and the Caucasus might be a net strategic gain for the West in an era of Great Power Competition, if appreciated rather than ignored and engaged rather than sidelined.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Sinan Tavsan, "Turkic World Wants a Voice in the New Global Order," *Nikkei Asia*, November 13, 2021

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkic-world-wants-a-voice-in-the-new-global-order>.