

POLICY BRIEF:

Summit of the Organization of Turkic States in Samarkand: Development Prospects and Challenges



On November 11, 2022, Samarkand hosted the first summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which had previously operated in the format of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (CCTS). Against the background of turbulence in world politics, the inauguration of the OTS was an ambitious event, especially in the approach of the main player: Turkey. However, the different priorities expressed by the summit participants and some discrepancies between expectations and reality emphasized that for the OTS to succeed, the participating countries would have to develop much more mutual understanding, mutual respect, and effective dialogue than they have developed at this stage.

A New Alliance amidst Global Turbulence and Active Challenges

The Samarkand summit had a symbolic meaning, as the leaders of Turkic-speaking states gathered in a new format within the Organization of Turkic States for the first time. In recent years, there have been successes in the development of cooperation within the CCTS - the previous format - as evidenced by the organization's expansion in 2019 to include Uzbekistan, and the admission of Hungary and Turkmenistan as observers in 2018 and 2021, respectively.

Unlike the previous summit, this meeting of the OTS' heads took place in the context of major changes in global politics, the geopolitical layout in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, and the economic and political consequences arising from these events. In particular, the escalation of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia in February 2022 and the sanctions that followed these events affected the economies of all the countries in the region. Under these conditions, the foreign policies of Central Asian states have sought to diversify transit, trade, and logistics routes. The Ukrainian crisis has strengthened the partnership between the Central Asian countries, Turkey, China, and other regional centers.

As for the intra-regional situation, by the time of the summit, with the increased attention of the international community to the Ukrainian crisis, the problem of solving the Afghan crisis had moved into the background.

Meanwhile, during the year-long period, relations among Central Asian countries have had both positive and negative trends. Uzbekistan has made progress in the processes of delimitation of borders with neighboring republics, and there has also been an improvement in trade and economic cooperation. At the same time, during the past year after the 8-Summit of the CCTS, there was another clash on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

With the turbulence of the world order and increasing conflict around the world, the Central Asian region has increased its attention to security issues. Turkey has successfully used this context. In 2022, Ankara signed framework agreements on military cooperation with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and deepened military and technical cooperation with Kyrgyzstan.

Emphasis and priorities of the participating countries: conservative and superficial so far

During the Samarkand summit, most of the leaders of the participating states noted the current geopolitical and geo-economic confrontation in their speeches. At the same time, the proposals of the participants of the summit were mainly related to cooperation in the transport and logistics sphere. Thus, Kazakhstan's President K.-J. Tokayev spoke of the importance of developing the transit and logistics potential of the OTS, strengthening cultural and humanitarian ties among the Turkic peoples, and the need to leverage opportunities in the IT industry.

The President of Uzbekistan, Sh. Mirziyoyev noted the importance of developing the competitiveness of transit corridors in Central Asia, the creation of transport infrastructure, and the importance of full use of the transport and transit potential of the Turkic states, noting, in particular, the potential of the Trans-Caspian international corridor.

The President of Kyrgyzstan, S. Japarov, also spoke about the need to strengthen transport links between the states. Japarov also shared about the commencement of the practical implementation of the construction of the China - Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan railroad. Most of the speech of the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, was in an accusatory tone concerning Armenia, which he also accused of "Islamophobia" and "Turkophobia". Afterward, I. Aliyev spoke in detail about the need to support his compatriots living outside of the countries of the OTS.

Hungarian Prime Minister, V. Orban, said Hungary respects and preserves its Turkic roots and noted that Budapest has already established a strategic partnership with Kazakhstan and is ready to expand cooperation with other Central Asian states.

The former president of Turkmenistan and head of the upper house of parliament, Berdymukhamedov, spoke about the need to intensify partnerships in the transport and energy sectors. Berdymukhamedov also addressed the case of Afghanistan, calling for increased efforts to provide economic and humanitarian support to the people of Afghanistan.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan dwelled on the construction of transport corridors and energy. He expressed support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh crisis and traditionally emphasized the threats posed by terrorism, including by FETO. Thus, most participants expressed conservative proposals with a predominantly economic aspect. Turkey and Azerbaijan, for their part, stressed military and political issues in addition to the above-mentioned areas.

The final document of the summit was the Samarkand Declaration, which included plans for multifaceted cooperation among the participants of the OTS.

Curiosities from Turkey: Inconsistencies regarding Northern Cyprus and Turkmenistan

The key event and reason for further comments through the diplomatic channels was the offer of Turkish President, R. Erdogan, to invite Northern Cyprus as an observer in the OTS and the statement of the Turkish Foreign Minister at a press conference after the summit that Northern Cyprus became an observer of the organization.

Kazakh President Tokayev emphasized during the summit that Kazakhstan "strongly supports the territorial integrity of all states and also considers it necessary to steadfastly adhere to the UN Charter." Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, V. Norov, at a press conference following the summit, denied that Northern Cyprus was accepted as an observer at the OTS summit and also noted that there could be no question of recognizing Northern Cyprus as an independent state.

Thus, the statements of the Turkish leader and the Turkish foreign minister, which were not really backed by the general agreement of the members, shifted the news coverage of the summit towards discussions about how Turkey is trying to lobby the Cyprus issue through the OTS. There were opinions that by lobbying for observer status for North Cyprus in the OTS, Erdogan sought to strengthen his position domestically ahead of Turkey's general elections in 2023.

Another serious yet unfulfilled statement in the run-up to the summit was Turkey's announcement of Turkmenistan's admission to the OTS as a full-fledged participant. In 2022, OTS Secretary General B. Amreyev and Vice President of Turkey F. Oktay visited Turkmenistan. During his visit, the latter expressed the hope that Turkmenistan would join the OTS in time for the upcoming summit in Samarkand. It is obvious that, contrary to expectations, Ankara failed to convince Ashkhabad. One of the reasons for this is Turkmenistan's desire to remain neutral and its reluctance to be part of integration structures under the leadership of a strong actor.

In turn, the economic relations between Turkey and Turkmenistan have always been non-linear and, as a rule, mainly depended on Ashgabat. For many years Turkmenistan has rejected Turkey's conditions for transporting gas through Azerbaijan. Thus, Turkmenistan remains thus far the only Turkic-speaking republic in Central Asia that is not a member of the OTS and prefers to be at an equidistant distance from Turkey, based on its own doctrine of protection of sovereignty.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The transformation of the OTS format into the Organization of Turkic States in recent years, with the inclusion of Uzbekistan as a full-fledged participant, Hungary and Turkmenistan as observers, creating the basis for economic and cultural cooperation, show the interest in the organization as a way to diversify foreign policy and economy. With the proper level of partnership, the OTS has every chance and right to exist.

Along with the prospects for development, the summit also highlighted the existing challenges in the OTS, which are related to the clash of different priorities of the organization's members. Turkey, unlike the Central Asian states, sees the OTS not just as an economic and cultural union but also as an opportunity to lobby for political interests.

Meanwhile, the guarantee of the long-term and stable functioning of such platforms is an effective dialogue among the participants based on mutual agreement, mutual respect for sovereignty, and consideration of national interests. The countries of Central Asia need to find balanced solutions with Turkey in order to have a coordinated approach in announcing statements to be made at the summit. To avoid excesses, such as Turkey announcing decisions that are not supported by the majority, the foreign ministers of the member states and observers of the OTS need to consider the agenda of the upcoming summits carefully.

In doing so, the Central Asian countries need to take a common and principled position on regionally sensitive issues that may be brought forward by Turkey. To discuss and agree on common values and principles in their interaction with regional actors, Central Asian leaders should make maximum use of the existing platform in the form of the summit of the heads of state of Central Asia.