

From Cultural Cooperation to Military Integration: The Significance of the OTS's Planned 2026 Joint Military Exercise

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The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has transformed, since its establishment, from a cultural and language-based cooperation platform into a multidimensional international intergovernmental organization encompassing politics, economy, transportation, energy and security. One of the most concrete indicators of this transformation is the proposal for a joint military exercise to be held in Azerbaijan in 2026, as voiced by Azerbaijan's President İlham Aliyev at the 12th OTS Summit held in Gabala, Azerbaijan, on October 7, 2025. Although it has not yet been implemented, this proposal reflects the organization's strategic will to enhance its collective security capacity. This study aims to analyse the potential benefits that this military exercise would provide to the OTS member states from a multidimensional perspective. In this context, the study examines, in addition to the military gains from the exercise, such as interoperability, joint command structure and the development of a joint operational doctrine, its potential to evolve into areas such as intelligence sharing. Furthermore, the study focuses on the positive effects that would result from extending the successful military alliance model between Türkiye and Azerbaijan to the other OTS members. It evaluates the advantages to be gained from the joint use of strategic technologies, such as armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and the relevance of deterrence factors in relation to the security of energy lines and the Middle Corridor in the context of rising Iran-US tensions. The proposal to hold the exercise in Azerbaijan also reflects an effort to reinforce regional stability and long-term peacebuilding in the South Caucasus through enhanced cooperation among Turkic states. In conclusion, it is anticipated that, if the 2026 exercise is successfully carried out, the OTS will significantly increase its international weight as a regional security actor.

Keywords: Organization of Turkic States, joint military exercise, energy security, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), Azerbaijan.



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Introduction

The Organization of Turkic States has undergone several transformations in the nature of its institutional existence. Initially functioning as an entity based on language and culture, the organization has today become an institution in which multidimensional cooperation is a regular feature. Within the organization, cooperation occurs in more than 30 fields, ranging from politics to economy, customs to transportation, education to tourism, energy to health, and agriculture to space cooperation.¹ The areas of cooperation established by member states within the organization are increasing daily. Arguably, the most important of these is in the military sphere. Although bilateral military cooperation already exists between countries within the organization – namely Azerbaijan and Türkiye – engaging in a comprehensive programme of cooperation is also of great importance. In this context, the military exercise planned for Azerbaijan in 2026, resulting from President Ilham Aliyev's proposal, is valuable in terms of the organization attaining a more institutional structure and demonstrating that it has reached a level at which it is capable of serving as a centre of influence in its region.

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Azerbaijan's military deterrence capacity gained following the Second Garabagh War and the *de facto* alliance model it has established with Türkiye. Furthermore, the joint utilization of unmanned aerial vehicles and other military technologies developed by Türkiye over the past decade within the framework

of a military exercise with OTS member states carries the potential to qualitatively enhance the organization's collective defence capability. In this respect, the exercise is the most concrete manifestation of the OTS's effort to move beyond the classical cultural cooperation platform and become a source of regional security. Based on the strategic framework outlined above, this study aims to systematically analyse the multidimensional benefits that the joint military exercise in 2026, proposed by President Ilham Aliyev at the 12th OTS Summit, would provide to OTS member states. Within the scope of the study, the value that the exercise will add in areas such as interoperability, deterrence, defence industry standardization, security of energy and transportation

¹ Turkicstates.org, *Areas of Cooperation*, Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/en/areas-of-cooperation> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

corridors, and intelligence coordination will be addressed. In this context, the article argues that this step that the OTS is taking in the field of military cooperation constitutes a turning point on the path to transforming the organization into a regional power hub.

A Brief History of the OTS

The historical background of the Organization of Turkic States is rooted in the new era that emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the Turkic states in Central Asia, along with Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. The political, cultural and diplomatic interactions that developed among these newly independent states in Central Asia laid the foundation for the establishment of the OTS. The process of communication that began following the declarations of independence by those Turkic states constitutes the foundation of the OTS. During this process, initiatives aimed at developing political, economic and cultural relations among Turkic states accelerated within the framework of shared historical, linguistic and cultural elements. Notably, the Summit of the Heads of State of Turkic Speaking Countries, held in Ankara in 1992, marked the first significant step in the institutionalization process. The summits held throughout the 1990s transformed the pursuit of cooperation among the Turkic states into a more systematic structure. The most significant milestone of this process was the Nakhchivan Agreement, signed on October 3, 2009, by Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This agreement established the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, also known as the Turkic Council. The agreement granted the organization a legal personality and served as a founding document aimed at fostering joint action among the contracting states in the fields of political solidarity, economic cooperation, security, transportation, education, culture and communication. Thus, the summit process gained an institutional structure, and cooperation within the Turkic world began to take shape under the framework of an international organization.

After its establishment, the organization ceased to be merely a platform aimed at cultural rapprochement and evolved into a multidimensional structure operating in the fields of economic integration, transportation networks, digital transformation and regional cooperation. The most significant stage of this transformation took place at the 8th Summit held in Istanbul, Türkiye, on November 12, 2021.

The Istanbul Summit was a historic event in that the leaders decided to officially change the name from the Turkic Council to the Organization of Turkic States. At the same summit, President Ilham Aliyev was awarded the Supreme Order of the Turkic World for Azerbaijan's liberation of its occupied territories as a result of the 44-day war that took place in 2020. The Turkic World Vision document that was also adopted at the Istanbul Summit was regarded as an important step towards institutionalization.²

The name change marked a significant turning point as it demonstrated that relations among the Turkic states were not confined merely to the level of cultural solidarity but were evolving towards a stronger understanding of cooperation aimed at political and economic integration. Today, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are full members of the OTS, while Hungary, Turkmenistan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus hold observer status. The total population of the OTS member states exceeds 150 million. Moreover, they have a GDP of around \$1.2 trillion.³

The Significance of the 12th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States

The 12th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), hosted by Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, was held on October 7, 2025, in Gabala, Azerbaijan, with the theme 'Regional Peace and Security'. In addition to the leaders of the OTS member states, representatives of observer countries, the OTS Secretary General, members of the Council of Elders and heads of Turkic cooperation organizations attended the summit. The summit served as a significant diplomatic platform in terms of strengthening political dialogue within the Turkic world, developing an understanding of regional security and deepening multilateral cooperation mechanisms.

At the summit, particular attention was given to the new political and security environment that emerged in the South Caucasus following the Joint Declaration signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Washington, D.C., on August 8, 2025. The OTS leaders assessed this

2 Guliyev, V. "The Reinvigoration of the Organization of Turkic States amid Ongoing Geopolitical Unrest and Economic Uncertainty", *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2024, pp. 40-41.

3 *Ibid.*

development to be an important step for regional peace, stability and prosperity. They reiterated their collective will to establish a peaceful, secure and prosperous regional order in the Turkic world. Furthermore, the need to enhance cooperation in the fields of politics, foreign policy, security, economy and people-to-people relations was emphasized. Various decisions aimed at strengthening the institutional capacity of the organization were taken at the Gabala Summit. These included the establishment of the 'OTS+' format, paving the way for the organization to develop more flexible and multidimensional cooperation with external partners. Further decisions included strengthening the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY) and welcoming Turkmenistan's participation as an observer in the Turkic Academy and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation. It was stated at the summit that the OTS conducts cooperation in more than forty fields, including economy, security, education, innovation and space; this was regarded as an indicator of the organization's increasingly expanding institutional and international effectiveness. At the conclusion of the summit, the OTS chairmanship was transferred from Kyrgyzstan to Azerbaijan.⁴

The 12th OTS Summit held in Gabala in 2025, hosted by Azerbaijan, adopted the Gabala Declaration. This represented a new stage in the organization's transformation process. The declaration emphasised strategic issues such as regional security, defence industry cooperation, the Middle Corridor, the Zangezur Corridor, digital transformation, energy security and international coordination. This demonstrated that the OTS had evolved from a platform centred on cultural cooperation into a multidimensional international organization with increasing regional geopolitical and geo-economic effectiveness.⁵

In particular, the active role undertaken by Azerbaijan in the fields of regional transportation, energy and peace diplomacy in the aftermath of the Second Garabagh War has significantly contributed to the increase of the OTS's strategic effectiveness in the South Caucasus. In his speech delivered at the 12th OTS Summit held in Gabala, Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev stated:

4 Turkicstates.org, *The 12th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States Convened in Gabala, Azerbaijan*, October 07, 2025, Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/en/news/the-12th-summit-of-the-organization-of-turkic-states-convened-in-gabala-azerbaijan> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

5 Organization of Turkic States, *Gabala Declaration*, Gabala, Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025.

Today, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has evolved from merely a platform for cooperation into one of the significant geopolitical centers. It is gratifying to see our Organization's prestige grow on the international stage... Internal political and economic stability, a strategic geographical location, positive demographics with a young population, vast potential in transport and logistics, rich natural resources, and growing capabilities in the military and defense technology sectors position the OTS as a significant actor on the global stage.... Today, peace and security are essential foundations for the development of any country. The Nakhchivan Agreement, the founding document of our Organization, highlights the safeguarding of peace and security as primary goals. Given the current geopolitical and security challenges worldwide, it is crucial that the Turkic states unite as a single center of power...⁶

Pointing out that development would not be possible without ensuring security, President Ilham Aliyev delivered the following assessment:

It is well understood that development cannot be achieved without ensuring security. In a time when the norms and principles of international law are being gravely violated, cooperation among our countries in military and defense-technical fields becomes one of the crucial factors. In this regard, we maintain strong cooperation with our ally, Türkiye. Just in the past year, over 25 bilateral and multinational military exercises have been carried out jointly with Türkiye. Considering the extensive cooperation between our countries in military, defense, and security areas, we propose holding joint military exercises for the member states of the Organization of Turkic States in Azerbaijan in 2026.⁷

In this speech, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that, in today's world, military strength is a crucial element in safeguarding the independence and territorial integrity of any country, recalling the country's victory achieved in the 44-day Patriotic War of 2020 and counter-terrorism measures in 2023, which restored Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

⁶ President.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the 12th Summit of the Council of Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States held in Gabala*, October 7, 2025, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70315> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

⁷ *Ibid.*

President İlham Aliyev also stated that “One of the key outcomes of the Washington summit was the opening of the Zangezur Corridor. This is significant as a new transport artery and serves as a second route within both the Middle Corridor and the North–South Corridor.”⁸ Touching upon the importance of energy security, President İlham Aliyev thanked the OTS countries that have built schools, mosques and other infrastructure in the provinces of the Garabagh and Eastern Zangezur regions of Azerbaijan liberated from occupation, and emphasized that the country will never forget this brotherly support.

A New Stage in OTS Military Cooperation: The 2026 Military Exercise

In an era when regional security is being redefined, OTS is evolving from a cultural platform into a geopolitical centre of gravity. The joint military exercise planned for Azerbaijan in 2026 is regarded as the most concrete and strategic manifestation of this evolution. This initiative, proposed by Azerbaijan’s President İlham Aliyev at the 12th OTS Summit held in Gabala in October 2025, constitutes one of the most critical steps toward achieving the security cooperation objectives outlined in the organization’s Turkic World Vision 2040 document.

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This exercise is not just a symbolic initiative. It is also stated to be a well-considered, practical and strategic step towards the institutionalization of security integration within the OTS.⁹ Türkiye-based newspaper *Yeni Şafak* described the proposal, announced by President İlham Aliyev, to organize a joint military exercise with the participation of OTS member countries as not merely a defence cooperation move, but also a strategic step aimed at achieving a more advanced level of military integration among the Turkic states.¹⁰ Indeed, an initiative aimed at the member states of the OTS conducting joint military exercises stands out as among the most concrete indicators of the organization’s transformation.

8 Trtavaz.com.tr, *Aliyev proposed that TDT countries conduct a joint military exercise in Azerbaijan*, October 07, 2025, Available at: <https://www.trtavaz.com.tr/haber/tur/turkistandan/aliyev-tdt-ulkelerinin-azerbaycanda-ortak-askeri-tatbikat-yapmasini-onerdi/68e4ec1b8a46314d2325c59c> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

9 Modern.az, *Turkic NATO is coming - after 2026...*, October 08, 2025, Available at: <https://modern.az/en/dunya/537450/turkic-nato-is-coming-after-2026/> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

10 Yenısafak.com, *Aliyev’s proposal for the Turan military exercise*, October 07, 2025, Available at: <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/aliyevden-turan-tatbikati-teklifi-4756665> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

President Ilham Aliyev's proposal carries multilayered meanings, such as the institutionalization within the OTS of the strategic weight his country gained through its victory during the Second Garabagh War and the presentation of its de facto military integration with Türkiye as a model for the other members of the organization to follow.

In an interview in January 2026, President Ilham Aliyev provided a comprehensive explanation of the military exercise being planned by the OTS. First, the President noted that he personally proposed the exercise and emphasized that it is a necessity. He based this on the argument that every country must strengthen its own military security and the notion that, ultimately, “might is right.”¹¹ Stressing that the practical implementation of the military exercise is essential, President Ilham Aliyev also noted that joint military exercises carry significant symbolic meaning. He argued that – against a backdrop of weakening international law – power, cooperation, alliances and mutual support have come to the forefront. For this reason, he maintained that overall national capabilities, including military capacity, should be enhanced. Stating that cooperation with Türkiye is conducted within the framework of a formal alliance and mutual military assistance, President Ilham Aliyev expressed the view that it would be appropriate for the other Turkic states, which he described as a “family”, to begin cooperating in the same direction. At the same time, he specifically emphasized that the proposal for a military exercise should by no means be interpreted as a suggestion to establish a military organization and that such interpretations would be unfounded. Pointing out that cooperation has already been established in many areas, including energy, transportation, trade and investment, President Ilham Aliyev declared that there is no obstacle to cooperation in the military sphere as well, and questioned why such cooperation should not be pursued.¹² Moreover, for Azerbaijan, which has increasingly emerged as a regional actor in the fields of defence modernization and strategic coordination, the proposal for a joint military exercise constitutes a significant step towards enhancing the OTS's role as a platform for collective power projection and security cooperation.¹³

11 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev was interviewed by local TV channels*, January 5, 2026, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/71213> (Accessed: May 17, 2026).

12 *Ibid.*

13 Huseynov, V., “Azerbaijan Calls for Deeper Cooperation within the Organization of Turkic States”, *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, October 20, 2025, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-calls-for-deeper-cooperation-within-the-organization-of-turkic-states-1930> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

Assessments indicate that the planned military exercise will enhance security cooperation among OTS member states. Accordingly, this military exercise not only strengthens the institutional foundation of the OTS but also constitutes a tangible indicator of the organization's strategic determination to become a strong regional actor.

Military Cooperation Between Azerbaijan and Türkiye

Among the member states of the OTS, the most significant and advanced example of military cooperation can be identified as that between Azerbaijan and Türkiye.¹⁴ After the Second Garabagh War, the military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye evolved into a new phase. The two countries have oriented themselves towards an understanding that involves a joint military structure capable of acting in coordination in potential crisis and conflict scenarios.¹⁵ The extension of this military cooperation model among the OTS member states is of strategic importance for strengthening the organization's collective security capacity. In this framework, the defence and military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye serves as a model for the security architecture that is targeted for establishment within the OTS.

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Türkiye has been allocating significant resources to its domestic defence industry in recent years. In this context, it can be stated that drones, in particular, have assumed a strategic role in the modern conflict environment, altering the course of armed conflicts. Armoured vehicles, missile systems, and electronic warfare platforms developed by Türkiye are being widely exported, including to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ The outcome of the Second Garabagh War, in which the armed forces of Azerbaijan achieved a decisive victory, demonstrated the effectiveness of the Azerbaijan–Türkiye military alliance.¹⁷

14 Ertem, A.V., "Reflections on Organization of Turkic States", Göçebe Journal, No. 18, 2023, p. 81.

15 Valiyev, J., "Azerbaijan-Türkiye military cooperation: One nation, one army", *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, December 23, 2022, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-turkiye-military-cooperation-one-nation-one-army-1093> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

16 Avdalani, E., "The Rise of the Organization of Turkic States", Gulf Research Center, March 15, 2026, Available at: <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/359> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

17 Shafiyev, F., "Azerbaijan and the Rise of Turkic Unity: The Journey of the Organization of Turkic States", *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, January

Therefore, Türkiye's sharing of these technological gains, particularly armed drones, with the member states of the OTS will make a significant contribution to the collective military capacity and deterrent power of the organization.

The Benefits of the Military Exercise

With the joint military exercise planned for Azerbaijan in 2026, the OTS is stepping into a new and strategic stage in its institutional transformation. Although the exercise is yet to take place, the proposal by itself demonstrates that the OTS is not merely a platform for cultural rapprochement but also possesses the will to become one of the constitutive elements of regional security. The fact that it was proposed to hold the exercise in Azerbaijan carries a symbolic and strategic message following Azerbaijan's decisive victory in the Second Garabagh War, as a result of which the country restored its territorial integrity.

That said, it is clear that the proposed military exercise should not merely consist of a display of firepower but must be grounded in a multidimensional cooperation framework. It is of great importance that joint activities in the military field evolve over time to encompass not only the operational level, but also areas such as intelligence sharing and joint early warning systems against hybrid threats. Indeed, training the armed forces of different countries under the same command structure, communication protocols and operational doctrine will create the possibility of rapid and coordinated intervention in the event of a potential crisis or regional threat. In this context, it is evident that the military cooperation model established in recent years between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, and embodied by multiple joint exercises, has had positive results. Sharing this model systematically with the other OTS member states will qualitatively enhance both their individual and collective deterrence capacities. In particular, the transfer and joint use of technological systems, such as drones, that are changing the course of war will both reinforce interoperability and reduce OTS countries' external dependency in the defence industry.

Furthermore, the increasingly visible global-scale instability resulting from the war in the Middle East is placing energy shipments passing through the Strait of Hormuz at serious risk. This situation makes it

07, 2024, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-and-the-rise-of-turkic-unity-the-journey-of-the-organization-of-turkic-states-1338> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

strategically even more critical to deliver the energy resources in the Caspian basin to world markets through the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Oil Pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor. The joint military exercise to be conducted by the OTS, particularly with Azerbaijan as host, is likely to play a supportive role in enhancing deterrence and reinforcing cooperation related to the security of critical energy routes and transportation networks, such as the Middle Corridor and the Zangezur Corridor. In conclusion, the joint military exercise planned to be held in Azerbaijan in 2026 has the potential to transform the OTS from a mere regional cooperation organization into a collective power hub capable of having a major say in global geopolitical processes.

Furthermore, it is assessed that these exercises will encourage the standardization of military equipment used by different countries. This situation reduces costs by ensuring compatibility in spare parts, maintenance and logistics processes, and increases the effectiveness of the Turkish defence industry in the OTS market.

Military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye is multi-dimensional. There are various examples illustrating this cooperation, including the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Strengthening Mutual Military Security between Türkiye and Azerbaijan in 2025. The signing ceremony was held with the participation of Türkiye’s Minister of National Defense Yaşar Güler and Azerbaijan’s Minister of Defense Zakir Hasanov.¹⁸ Meanwhile, military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and between Türkiye and Kazakhstan, is also noteworthy. At the recent informal summit of the OTS held in Kazakhstan, an important agreement was signed to advance Türkiye–Kazakhstan defence industry cooperation to a higher level.¹⁹ In addition, a Kazakhstan military delegation led by Major General Baurzhan Abzhanov visited Azerbaijan, where they held high-level meetings, received briefings on military education reforms and observed key defence education institutions as part of efforts to strengthen

Military cooperation between states in the Turkic world, such as between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, is expected to deepen further through the planned OTS exercise.

18 Aa.com.tr, *Azerbaijan parliament approves MoU to strengthen mutual military security with Türkiye*, December 25, 2025, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbaijan-parliament-approves-mou-to-strengthen-mutual-military-security-with-turkiye/3780948> (Accessed: May 28, 2026).

19 Günyol, A. “Cooperation between Türkiye and Kazakhstan in the defense industry”, May 14, 2026, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/turkiye-ve-kazakistandan-savunma-sanayisinde-isbirligi/3937590> (Accessed: May 28, 2026).

cooperation in military training and experience exchange between the two countries.²⁰

Military cooperation between states in the Turkic world, such as between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, is expected to deepen further through the planned OTS exercise. Joint military exercises enhance the capacity for rapid and coordinated response to crises and regional threats by enabling the armed forces of different countries to train under a unified command structure, communication protocols and operational doctrines. Moreover, these exercises promote the standardization of military equipment, thereby ensuring compatibility in logistics, maintenance and spare parts supply chains. This increases cost efficiency while strengthening the competitiveness of Türkiye's defence industry within the OTS market. At the same time, the collective military visibility of OTS member states enhances deterrence against potential threat actors, functioning as a peaceful stabilizing mechanism that contributes to maintaining regional stability in the South Caucasus, the Caspian Basin and Turkistan.

Conclusion

The joint military exercise planned for Azerbaijan in 2026 is regarded as a significant turning point in the evolutionary process of the OTS. This development demonstrates the transformation of the Organization from a platform primarily based on cultural and linguistic solidarity into an institutional structure encompassing multidimensional areas of cooperation.

This planned exercise provides a suitable framework for establishing advanced interoperability and integrated command structures, and strengthening joint intelligence-sharing mechanisms. In this context, it becomes possible to improve the effectiveness of rapid, coordinated response capabilities against terrorism, border security threats and other asymmetric risks. Furthermore, the sharing of advanced Turkish defence technologies, particularly unmanned aerial vehicles, contributes to the consolidation of the collective security capacity of the OTS.

The extension of the bilateral military cooperation model between Türkiye and Azerbaijan into a broader institutional framework within the OTS will strengthen the organization's capacity for joint action and thereby make a meaningful contribution to regional stability and peace.

20 Poladova, U. "Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan discuss military cooperation", May 23, 2026, Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/258814.html> (Accessed: May 28, 2026).