

A Defense Network Stretching Into Central Asia.. What Is the Story of the “Turkish NATO”?



In the spring of 2026, a striking phrase appeared in the Russian press: “a Turkish defense Schengen,” coined by newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, likening the growing military cooperation between Ankara and members of the Organization of Turkic States to the European Union’s efforts to create an area allowing the free movement of forces between European countries.

According to this logic, if Europe is seeking a “military Schengen,” then Ankara—according to the newspaper—is building a “defense NATO” that facilitates its military passage across Central Asia through the organization founded in 2009 to strengthen identity, culture, and the economy, and which has carried the name “Turkic States” since 2021.

This metaphor raises an important question: Is the organization moving toward forming a security and logistics network led by Ankara? What practical steps are shaping this network, and what are its limits?

Map of the member states of the Organization of Turkic States

What steps are building the network?

1- Military transit agreement

The most prominent building block in talk of a “defense Schengen” is the agreement on the transit of military personnel, equipment, and cargo signed between Ankara and Astana on September 11, 2024.

The agreement allows military aircraft to transport troops, equipment, and cargo—including humanitarian supplies or materials used in exercises—through the airspace of both parties, but only with prior authorization for each flight.

In April 2026, the Kazakh lower house approved the draft law, and the Senate ratified it in the same month, bringing the agreement into force.

The agreement opens a reciprocal legal framework for the transit of military personnel, equipment, and cargo through the airspace of Turkey and Kazakhstan. It is an important logistical step for Ankara, as the air corridor across the Caspian Sea complements a geographic stretch that begins in Azerbaijan and reaches Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and perhaps Afghanistan.

As for Kazakhstan, which is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, the agreement does not amount to a full alignment with Ankara, as Kazakh officials stress that every flight remains subject to approval by the authorities.

2- Defense industries platform

Alongside transit, July 2025 saw an important step with the first meeting of the heads of defense industry institutions of the organization’s member states held in Istanbul.

The meeting discussed expanding cooperation in defense industries and exchanging expertise, cemented Turkey’s role as the industrial leader, and gave the other states an avenue to benefit from Turkish technology, especially in drones and radar systems.

Then came the Gabala summit in Azerbaijan in October 2025, held under the slogan “Peace and Regional Security,” which built on the previous meeting and underscored the need to use the potential of cooperation in defense and military industries.

During the summit, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev proposed hosting joint military exercises for the organization’s member states in 2026, noting that his country had carried out more than 25 joint drills with Turkey in 2024. The proposal has not yet been translated into a formal decision, but it indicates Azerbaijan’s readiness to support multilateral security integration.

3- Growing bilateral cooperation

On January 20, 2026, Turkey and Uzbekistan signed a military cooperation plan for 2026 that includes joint exercises, exchange of expertise, technical cooperation, and programs in military medicine.

The signing came within the framework of a four-way meeting bringing together the foreign, interior, and defense ministers along with the heads of security agencies, reflecting the strategic dimension of the partnership.

September 2025 also saw the signing of a memorandum of understanding in cybersecurity between Turkey and Kazakhstan during the KazHackStan conference in Almaty, with representatives from the organization’s member states taking part, in a step that adds a new dimension to cooperation beyond conventional weapons and into the digital sphere.

The secretaries of the national security councils of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan also held their fourth meeting in Bishkek in September 2025, where they discussed regional threats and signed a protocol to strengthen cooperation mechanisms.

4- Multiple drills and exercises

The outlines of joint training among the organization’s member states began to emerge early in the Sparta exercises in Turkey in 2022, when forces from Turkic states took part in an anti-terrorism drill, before later expanding into larger and more diverse exercises that we review in the following infographic:

Despite the practical importance of these drills in enhancing interoperability, they are conducted within a framework that is bilateral or trilateral and is not subject to a unified military command. Thus, the “exercise network” remains one link in cooperation without yet constituting a unified Turkic army.

Still, it can be said that these steps—the transit agreement, the industries platform, bilateral cooperation plans, and training exercises—lay the foundations for a flexible network that allows the movement of personnel and equipment, the training of armies, and the development of industries.

The map of power within the Turkic world

Turkey: the arms factory and the network’s brain

Turkey is the main driver of the presumed defense network. Thanks to the rise of its military industries over the past decade, it now offers a defense package that includes drones, radar systems, electronic warfare, air defense, and smart munitions.

Figures from Turkish companies, led by Baykar, show a major rise in drone

exports, with the latter alone announcing \$2.2 billion in exports in 2025.

The success of Turkish drones in theaters from Karabakh to Ukraine has also made them a sought-after commodity for Central Asian and African states.

Azerbaijan: field experience and a geographic bridge

Azerbaijan, for its part, has an army that fought in the Karabakh wars and possesses advanced combat experience, while it continues to expand its own defense industry in munitions and drones.

The Shusha Declaration signed in 2021 between Ankara and Baku laid the foundation for a bilateral military alliance and enabled the construction of joint training facilities and the development of defense industries.

Its location on the Caspian Sea also makes it a link between Turkey and Central Asia and gives it a vital role in any future logistics network.

Kazakhstan: depth and logistics

Kazakhstan has one of the largest armies in Central Asia, a vast territory, and ports on the Caspian Sea, making it the geographic depth for any transit eastward.

The agreement signed with Turkey on the transit of military personnel highlights it as a logistical hub. There are also talks to produce drones in cooperation with Baykar under a local framework, as Kazakhstan’s Defense Ministry confirmed that the agreement is still under study and focuses on technology transfer.

Uzbekistan: demographic weight and a central location

Uzbekistan has one of the largest military and demographic blocs in Central Asia, and its central location borders Afghanistan. The country is also undergoing military reforms aimed at reducing dependence on Russian equipment.

The purchase of Turkish drones and the signing of the 2026 military cooperation plan represent two steps for Tashkent to benefit from Turkish technology, but it is not a member of regional alliances and follows a non-aligned policy, while its military budget is limited.

Kyrgyzstan and the observers

Kyrgyzstan has a small army that relies on Russian equipment, but it has begun purchasing Turkish TB2 drones.

Hence, the presence of Russian bases on its territory limits its room for maneuver, yet it participates in the organization’s security meetings and seeks to benefit from training without entering an alliance that would anger Moscow.

As for Turkmenistan, Hungary, and Northern Cyprus, they are observers in the

Organization of Turkic States.

Turkmenistan buys Turkish drones but adheres to permanent neutrality, while Hungary—a NATO member— participates for cultural and political reasons more than military ones, while the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus takes part in exercises as one way of supporting political recognition.

Obstacles and challenges facing the “defense Schengen”

1- Russian sensitivity

Russia sees the Organization of Turkic States as a geopolitical competitor challenging its traditional influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Reports by the American Yorktown Institute indicate that Kremlin-aligned media outlets have begun describing the organization as a “Turkish NATO” or a “Turkish sultanate,” with some even going so far as to call it a “military-political bloc under the patronage of Turkey and NATO.”

A commentator in Nezavisimaya Gazeta claimed that Ankara is “seizing” Central Asia’s foreign policy, reflecting Moscow’s concern over the erosion of its influence.

Russian sensitivity is not confined to the media. Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov affirmed at a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in 2026 his rejection of the presence of “external powers” in Central Asia, saying that Russia is monitoring attempts by other countries to gain a foothold there.

The 2018 Caspian Sea Convention also imposes an additional constraint, as it prohibits the presence of armed forces from non-littoral states in the sea, limiting any direct Turkish military presence in this space.

On the other hand, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remain members of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which imposes constraints on their military movements with other partners, while Uzbekistan is linked to Russia by a strategic partnership agreement despite suspending its membership in the organization.

This connection gives Russia leverage to pressure those states economically and in security terms, while most of the region’s armies still depend on Russian equipment and training.

2- Chinese constraints

The potential Turkish “defense Schengen” faces not only a Russian constraint, but also a quieter Chinese one. The Middle Corridor, which links China to Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and Turkey, forms one of the pillars of Turkey’s rapprochement with the region’s states.

But for Beijing, it is not merely an alternative trade route; it is part of a network of economic interests and infrastructure that China does not want militarized or turned into a security axis led by Ankara.

The crux here is that Turkey views the Middle Corridor as a sphere of influence, logistics, and connection to the Turkic world, while China sees it as a trade route that needs stability, not new military alignments.

For that reason, China does not appear to be a direct adversary to the Turkish track, but it has tools capable of constraining it. Since 2023, Beijing has strengthened the “China + Central Asia States” C+C5 mechanism and expanded its security cooperation in border management, counterterrorism, and infrastructure protection.

In this sense, the Chinese factor constitutes a double challenge : Beijing is building a low-profile security presence inside Central Asia, but it prefers that this presence remain in the service of trade and stability, not a new defense bloc.

Therefore, the region’s states can buy Turkish weapons and train with Ankara, but they will remain cautious about turning the Middle Corridor into an explicit defense route that could alarm China or affect its economic interests.

3- Hesitation among Central Asian states

The policies of Central Asian states are based on multi-vector balancing, making them hesitant to commit to a clear defense alliance with Turkey.

Kazakhstan: It seeks to be a “middle power” and balances between Russia, China, and Turkey.

Uzbekistan: It adheres to not joining military alliances or allowing foreign bases on its territory.

Turkmenistan: It pursues a policy of “positive neutrality” and refuses to join military alliances, focusing on keeping its economic relations open with all parties.

Kyrgyzstan: It depends economically and in security terms on Russia, and in November 2025 it signed a plan for military cooperation with Moscow that includes military training.

This hesitation stems from these states’ desire to benefit from Turkish technology and economic cooperation without burning bridges with Moscow and Beijing or entering into confrontation with them.

4- Absence of a defense institutional structure

The organization’s basic idea is founded on political, cultural, and economic cooperation, and it has not yet been designed to be a defense alliance, especially

since its official documents contain no collective defense clause.

The Gabala Declaration of 2025 included a solidarity clause, but it is “far from a collective defense clause,” as calls to strengthen security cooperation still fall short of establishing an alliance.

A report by the Azerbaijani website Caspianpost stresses that the organization’s charter lacks a collective defense article, comparing this to the European Union before the Lisbon Treaty, when solidarity was expressed in cautious language rather than as a binding commitment.

Meanwhile, the Ludovika Center for Turkish and Turkestan Studies explains that establishing a NATO-style defense mechanism is undesirable for most of the organization’s members, proposing instead a “security architecture” that includes joint exercises, coordination in defense industries, and intelligence sharing without creating a unified command or a collective defense clause.

The center warns of the absence of a “shared strategic doctrine,” and that cooperation may remain “scattered projects” if no unified threat assessment is agreed upon.

This institutional gap makes the organization closer to a flexible coordination network based on bilateral and multilateral agreements, without a command system, a unified defense budget, or a collective intervention mechanism.

Hence, the Organization of Turkic States is still moving between the ambition of forming a defense and logistics network and a complex reality of constraints, especially since Central Asian states themselves prefer multiple tracks and avoiding commitment to a clear alliance, while disparities in military capabilities and weak institutional structures create a gap between ambition and reality.