

## THE POSSIBILITY OF COOPERATION BETWEEN THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES (OTS) AND SOUTH KOREA

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**DONG SEOK KIM**

Doctoral Researcher, Department of Eurasian Studies, Istanbul University

**Abstract:** *This study aims to analyze the prospects for cooperation between the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and South Korea. It examines the formation and development of the OTS and reviews the existing diplomatic relations between Turkic states and South Korea. Furthermore, by exploring the various cooperation discourses currently unfolding as well as the institutional and policy frameworks underpinning them, the study provides a comprehensive assessment of the extent to which cooperation between the OTS and South Korea may be institutionalized and realized in practice. The findings indicate that, beyond the widely discussed linguistic, historical, and cultural ties, the OTS and South Korea possess multiple foundations for advancing toward substantive cooperation, including the accumulation of friendly diplomatic relations, concrete examples of cultural collaboration, the continuity of high-level political exchanges, and the emergence of formats such as the "OTS+" format.*

**Keywords:** *Organization of Turkic States (OTS), Turkic states, South Korea, Turkic world, international relations, regional cooperation, multilateral cooperation.*

### Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 profoundly reshaped the international order and the global geopolitical landscape. It led to the emergence of newly independent Turkic states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye, which emerged as sovereign actors and drew renewed attention to cooperation among them. These states possessed strong potential for regional cooperation based on shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties. Following independence, they maintained cooperation through regular participation in the Summits of the Heads of Turkic-Speaking States, culminating in the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (Turkic Council) in



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2009. Subsequently, in 2021, the organization was renamed the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and has since evolved to broaden its institutional scope and deepen cooperation. Today, the OTS plays a central role in cooperation among the Turkic states and has become the core institution in this regard.

The independence of the Turkic states was perceived by South Korea as a new strategic opportunity to complement its traditionally great-power-centered diplomacy and diversify its diplomatic channels. Based on this perception, South Korea actively promoted cooperation with Eurasian and Central Asian regions from the 1990s, laying the groundwork for friendly relations not only with Türkiye but also with the newly independent Turkic republics. The Turkic states, in turn, regarded South Korea as a partner with advanced technology and development experience, and this complementarity of interests facilitated the expansion of bilateral cooperation. In particular, South Korea's lack of hegemonic ambitions and its emphasis on mutually beneficial relations led the Turkic states to perceive it as a stable and pragmatic partner.

The Turkic states and South Korea share discourses about linguistic, cultural, and historical ties to some extent. These include narratives such as the Altaic language family and the Silk Road; cultural commonalities such as family-centered social structures and respect for elders; historical connections between the Göktürks and Goguryeo; shared experiences related to the Korean War; and the presence of Koryo-saram (the ethnic Korean diaspora in the former Soviet Union). Together, these elements form shared narratives and mutual perceptions that symbolically and emotionally link the two regions. Given that the OTS is an international organization founded on shared linguistic, historical, and cultural identities, South Korea may likewise be seen as having the potential to develop closer cooperation with the organization.

In this context, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive review of the existing relations that have developed between the Turkic states and South Korea and, on this basis, to discuss the prospects for cooperation between the OTS, which serves as the central axis and plays a core role in cooperation within the Turkic world, and South Korea. Through this analysis, it aims to deepen understanding of Turkic World-South Korea relations and to serve as a scholarly and policy-relevant reference for future cooperation.

## **Formation and Development of The Organization of Turkic States**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Turkic states began holding regular summit-level meetings from 1992 onward through the Turkic-Speaking States Heads of State Summits, formally initiating discussions on intra-Turkic cooperation. This process culminated in 2009 at the Nakhchivan Summit, where Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan signed the Nakhchivan Agreement establishing the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council), transforming the summits into a formal international organization. Subsequently, Hungary joined as an observer in 2018, Uzbekistan became a full member in 2019, and Turkmenistan joined as an observer in 2021. At the Istanbul Summit in 2021, the organization was renamed the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The scope of participation further expanded with Northern Cyprus joining as an observer in 2022 and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in 2023. In addition to regular summits, the OTS has strengthened cooperation through informal meetings and extraordinary summits. (Organization of Turkic States, 2025b)

The primary objective of the OTS is to foster comprehensive cooperation among Turkic States. Guided by four pillars—common history, language, identity, and culture—the OTS seeks to transform existing bilateral cooperation into multilateral cooperation across various fields for the benefit of the region as a whole. To this end, it pursues cooperation in more than thirty policy areas. In practice, the OTS has steadily expanded the scope and functions of its cooperation by adding new areas at each summit. This pattern suggests that the OTS is not confined to a fixed framework but has significant potential to evolve into a more complex regional cooperative entity through continued functional expansion.

Meanwhile, the OTS does not seek cooperation solely among the Turkic states. Although the organization brings together a particular group of countries, it does not take an exclusive approach. (Organization of Turkic States, 2025c) This orientation is also reflected in practice. Hungary's participation as an observer and the ECO's acquisition of observer status demonstrate that the OTS maintains an open stance toward cooperation not only with non-Turkic states but also with regional organizations. This suggests that the OTS intends to further expand and deepen its

cooperative framework beyond its immediate region, including other regions and international organizations.

### **Existing Diplomatic Relations Between the Turkic World and South Korea**

Among the Turkic world countries, Türkiye was the first to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea on March 8, 1957. (Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Republic of Türkiye, 2025) Rooted in the “brotherhood” discourse that emerged during the Korean War, the two countries have maintained close cooperation in political, diplomatic, and economic spheres. This relationship was further institutionalized through its elevation to a strategic partnership in 2012 and the conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2013. High-level exchanges have continued in recent years, and in November 2025, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung described the two countries as “brotherly nations bound by blood,” underscoring the close nature of South Korea-Türkiye relations. (Anadolu Agency, 2025)

Kazakhstan established diplomatic relations with South Korea on January 28, 1992, and the two countries have since developed friendly relations based on shared values and cultural affinity. In 2009, their relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership, thereby strengthening the institutional foundations for cooperation across multiple fields. Kazakhstan is South Korea’s largest trade and investment partner in Central Asia. In addition, around 120,000 Koryo-saram, forcibly relocated in 1937 during the Soviet period, reside in Kazakhstan and serve as a bridge for bilateral exchanges. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2024b)

Uzbekistan and South Korea established diplomatic relations on January 29, 1992, and have since developed close relations through active high-level exchanges and broad cooperation. Bilateral ties were elevated to a strategic partnership in 2006 and further to a special strategic partnership in 2019. Uzbekistan hosts around 180,000 Koryo-saram, who serve as an important bridge between the two countries. As of 2024, 94,893 Uzbek nationals reside in South Korea, making them one of the country’s top five foreign resident groups. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2024d) They also contribute to deepening relations and expanding substantive cooperation between Uzbekistan and South Korea through people-to-people exchanges and socio-economic linkages.

Turkmenistan and South Korea established diplomatic relations on February 7, 1992, though early exchanges were limited. Relations gradually developed after President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow's inauguration in 2007, and in 2008, the two countries defined their ties as a mutually beneficial partnership. South Korea's presidents made successive visits to Turkmenistan during their terms in office, beginning with Park Geun-hye in 2014, followed by Moon Jae-in in 2019, and Yoon Suk Yeol in 2024. Turkmenistan likewise demonstrated a strong commitment to developing bilateral relations, including President Berdimuhamedow's 2015 visit to South Korea. As of 2023, 659 Koryo-saram resided in Turkmenistan. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2024c)

Kyrgyzstan and South Korea established diplomatic relations on January 31, 1992. Although relations were limited initially, cooperation has gradually expanded through increased high-level exchanges. While no South Korean president has visited Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz presidents—including Askar Akayev (1997), Almazbek Atambayev (2013), and Sadyr Japarov (2024)—have paid official visits to South Korea. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2024a) During President Japarov's visit, the two countries agreed to elevate their ties to a comprehensive partnership. (Son, 2024) As of 2023, approximately 18,953 Koryo-saram reside in Kyrgyzstan. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2024a)

Azerbaijan was the last among the Turkic states to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea, with the two countries formalizing ties on March 23, 1992. Compared to South Korea's relations with other Turkic states, bilateral diplomatic engagement has been relatively limited; nevertheless, high-level exchanges have occurred in various forms, including South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun's visit to Azerbaijan in 2006 and President Ilham Aliyev's visits to South Korea in 2007 and 2012. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2019)

A review of diplomatic relations between the Turkic world and South Korea shows that the two sides have generally maintained friendly ties without major historical frictions.

### **Foundations and Prospects for Cooperation Between the Organization of Turkic States and South Korea**

The Turkic states that share linguistic, cultural, and historical ties with South Korea and maintain friendly and close diplomatic

relations are all members of the Organization of Turkic States. This structural characteristic suggests that cooperation between the OTS and South Korea could potentially be formed at the organizational level. Although no formal cooperation framework has yet been established between the OTS and South Korea, the realistic possibility of such cooperation becoming more concrete in the future is increasingly evidenced through various cases.

First, a certain level of cooperation has already been established between the Turkic world and South Korea, particularly through cooperation with the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY). As an official cooperation body of the OTS and often referred to as the "UNESCO of the Turkic world," TURKSOY has maintained various forms of cooperation with South Korea. In 2015, TURKSOY concluded a cooperation agreement with Keimyung University in South Korea. (TURKSOY, 2015)

In 2017, a Memorandum of Understanding to Preserve and Activate the Value of Traditional Archery Culture was signed between TURKSOY and the World Traditional Archery Organization (WTAO), founded in Yecheon, South Korea. (TURKSOY, 2017) In 2024, a Turkic World photo exhibition sponsored by TURKSOY was also held at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul. (Asiatimes, 2024) Beyond these cases, the Turkic world and South Korea have continued cooperation through various cultural events. Overall, sustained cultural collaboration between TURKSOY and South Korea demonstrates the potential for broader cooperation between the OTS and South Korea. In particular, accumulated experience in cultural exchange provides an important foundation for future trust-building and the establishment of cooperative mechanisms.

Second, there have been direct references to South Korea's potential participation in the OTS. To date, two major cases can be identified in which this possibility was officially raised. The first occurred during South Korean National Assembly Speaker Moon Hee-sang's visit to Azerbaijan in 2019. During meetings with President Ilham Aliyev and National Assembly Speaker Ogtay Asadov of Azerbaijan, he expressed South Korea's intention to participate in the OTS, and the Azerbaijani side reportedly responded positively. However, the initiative was ultimately not carried forward, largely due to insufficient follow-up by South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (The Financial News, 2020) The second case took place during South Korean National Assembly Speaker Kim Jin-pyo's visit to Azerbaijan in 2023. At that time,

Azerbaijani National Assembly Speaker Sahiba Gafarova proposed South Korea's participation in the OTS, to which Speaker Kim responded that he would consult relevant government bodies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on linking the OTS with the existing "Korea-Central Asia Speakers' Meeting." (Yonhap News Agency, 2023) These cases are significant in that they demonstrate the possibility of OTS-South Korea cooperation as a concrete issue discussed within the context of high-level political exchanges, rather than merely an abstract discourse.

Third, attention should be given to the emergence of the "OTS+" format, which was mentioned at the 2025 Gabala Summit of the OTS. The Gabala Declaration, adopted at the summit, welcomed the establishment of the "OTS+" format as a flexible framework for cooperation with external parties. (Organization of Turkic States, 2025a) This indicates that the OTS is no longer confined solely to cooperation among Turkic states, but is institutionally open to cooperation with third countries and international organizations. Furthermore, it suggests that even states without a Turkic identity may cooperate with the OTS through the flexible "OTS+" framework. From South Korea's perspective, this development presents an important opportunity to establish and sustain cooperative relations with the OTS through the "OTS+" format.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's approval as a full member of the Consultative Meetings of Heads of State of Central Asia in 2025, the South Korea-Central Asia Summit, scheduled to be launched from 2026 onward, and the pre-existing friendly diplomatic relations between the Turkic world and South Korea are likely to interact, generating synergistic effects. These elements substantially overlap with the scope of cooperation and the configuration of participating actors pursued by the OTS, thereby implying that cooperation between the OTS and South Korea may emerge as a structurally natural extension of these existing frameworks.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the prospects for cooperation between the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and South Korea. By analyzing the OTS's guiding principles and its trend toward institutional expansion, the existing diplomatic relations between the Turkic world and South Korea, and a number of cases that may serve as

a foundation for cooperation between the OTS and South Korea, it finds that both sides possess sufficient momentum and institutional foundations to move beyond goodwill toward a more substantive and strategic partnership.

First, both sides developed cultural and emotional bonds through exchanges with TURKSOY, which serve as tangible assets for substantive cooperation. The mutual trust built through this cooperation provides an important foundation for future multilateral cooperation across political, economic, and social fields.

Second, at the high-level political tier, the possibility of cooperation between the OTS and South Korea has already been discussed as an official agenda item. South Korea's expressed interest, together with cooperation proposals from the Turkic states and positive responses, indicates that cooperation has moved beyond potential to a preparatory stage for a concrete policy agenda.

Third, the launch of the flexible "OTS+" cooperation format may serve as a key institutional catalyst for South Korea's engagement. Designed to include non-Turkic states, this format is expected to provide concrete momentum for building cooperative networks between the OTS and South Korea.

In conclusion, the OTS and South Korea have reached a stage at which they should actively leverage these geopolitical and institutional opportunities to formalize a forward-looking partnership oriented toward sustainable development.

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