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Northern Cyprus and the Organization of Turkic States: Symbolic Recognition or Strategic Integration?

Północny Cypr i Organizacja Państw Turkijskich: symboliczne uznanie czy strategiczna integracja?

• Abstract •

This report analyses Organization of Turkic States's (OTS) Samarkand Summit Declaration of 2022, which granted observer status to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The analysis covers whether this move by Turkic states was more of a symbolic recognition or a step toward strategic integration. As a contested state which is only recognized by Türkiye, TRNC's inclusion in the OTS sparked negative reactions alongside critical questions around the limitations and potential of such symbolic recognitions. The article utilizes constructivist international relations theory and qualitative case study method while analyzing official statements, policy documents, discourses, and reactions. The article further analyses the benefits OTS can provide to TRNC and if TRNC's involvement in OTS can have a broader impact on widespread recognition and legitimacy. Finally, this study emphasizes how such symbolic gestures can be less effective in resolving the legal and political disagreement around contested statehood but can offer a great soft power tool.

• Abstrakt •

W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono analizę deklaracji uchwalonej na szczycie Organizacji Państw Turkijskich (OTS) w Samarkandzie w 2022 roku, w której przyznano status obserwatora Tureckiej Republice Cypru Północnego (TRPC). Analiza dotyczy tego, czy decyzja państw turkijskich miała charakter symbolicznego uznania, czy też stanowiła krok na drodze do strategicznej integracji. Włączenie TRPC – państwa kwestionowanego, uznawanego jedynie przez Turcję – do OTS wywołało negatywne reakcje oraz głosy krytyczne, dotyczące ograniczeń i potencjału takich symbolicznych gestów. W artykule wykorzystano konstruktywistyczną teorię stosunków międzynarodowych oraz jakościową metodę studium przypadku do analizy oficjalnych oświadczeń, dokumentów politycznych, dyskursów i reakcji. W dalszej części artykułu zbadano korzyści, jakie OTS może przynieść TRPC, oraz to, czy zaangażowanie TRPC w działania OTS może mieć większy wpływ na uznanie i legitymizację Tureckiej Republiki Cypru Północnego. Na koniec podkreślono, że choć gesty symboliczne nie rozwiązują konfliktów prawnych i politycznych wokół spornego statusu państwowego, mogą jednak stanowić istotne narzędzie *soft power*.

Keywords: Organization of Turkic States; contested statehood; symbolic recognition; regionalism

Słowa kluczowe: Organizacja Państw Turkijskich; sporna państwowość; symboliczne uznanie; regionalizm

Introduction

Discussions around the geopolitical status of Northern Cyprus – officially the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) – have been an interesting subject of disputation in international relations. TRNC has been only recognized by the Republic of Türkiye after the island's de facto partition in 1974 and following the unilateral declaration of independence of TRNC in 1983. The United Nations (UN) Security Council did not recognize TRNC's independence declaration and called on all states to reinforce diplomatic isolation toward TRNC as per Resolutions 541 and 550. Therefore, Northern Cyprus lacked widespread legal recognition, including from other Turkic states since 1992, and exercised internal self-governance with full reliance on Türkiye's support. This long-standing status issue has pushed TRNC's leadership in search of legitimacy and engagement beyond formal interstate dialogue.

For the last four decades, authorities of Türkiye and TRNC have tried to overcome Northern Cyprus's isolation via the “engagement without recognition” route (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Turkish Cypriots have participated in various regional and international platforms under alternative names, but all engagements have only reached the level of being observers at these organizations. In particular, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have given Northern Cyprus observer status under the “Turkish Cypriot State” name for the first time. Such steps provided symbolic acknowledgement of the government of the Turkish Cypriot community despite the absence of de iure recognition. Considering the persistent issue around the status, Türkiye recently changed its policy toward advocating for a “two-state solution” and called on other countries to recognize TRNC as a sovereign state.

Following Erdoğan's speech at the United Nations, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) admitted the TRNC as a third observer after Turkmenistan and Hungary. The OTS, previously the Turkic Council, was founded in 2009 as a regional intergovernmental organization consisting of Turkic-language nations. With its five member states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan), the OTS aims to foster cooperation and solidarity among Turkic nations. During the ninth summit in Samarkand, the OTS collectively agreed to give observer status to TRNC. Notably, it was the first time the Turkish Cypriot community was represented

in one of the organizations under its constitutional name. Both Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu and TRNC President Tatar acknowledged the Samarkand decision as a symbolic breakthrough for Northern Cyprus (Daily Sabah, 2022).

OTS's Samarkand summit also raised critical opinions and questions about the motivations behind this decision and its practical circumstances. OTS's move to grant observer status to TRNC under its constitutional name has been considered a form of either symbolic recognition or strategic integration by many political analysts (Krzyżanowska, 2024). Many of them see this move as most likely forced by Ankara to showcase the Turkic world's support, despite other Turkic states' governments continuing not to recognize TRNC as an independent state. To date, no OTS member states apart from Türkiye have established formal diplomatic relations with TRNC. Furthermore, TRNC was not invited to the tenth summit of OTS in Astana by the host country – Kazakhstan. On the other hand, some analysts argue that the decision was made to go beyond symbolism and carry Türkiye's wider geopolitical aim to challenge international norms.

The separation between symbolic recognition and strategic integration contains this article's research problem. The main aim of this study is to examine OTS's decision to grant observer status to TRNC – whether it predominantly acts as symbolic recognition without the aim of changing Northern Cyprus's unrecognized status, or whether it is part of a wider strategic decision to lay the groundwork for more substantial support to the isolated northern part of the island. Answering this dichotomy requires analysis of both the long-standing Cyprus dispute and situating the Samarkand decision. To pursue this aim, the article sets the following objectives:

To study TRNC's international status from a historical and geopolitical perspective in relation to the Turkic world, including Türkiye. This also includes TRNC's previous engagements with other regional organizations (e.g., ECO and OIC) under various names.

To examine the OTS's Samarkand decision to grant observer status to TRNC in 2022. The key reason for this step is to analyze push and pull factors behind Türkiye's and other Turkic states' policy shifts and how these changes are reflected in official discourses.

To assess the reactions from various stakeholders to the OTS's decision to allow TRNC as an observer state under its constitutional name. This analysis will focus on evaluating whether such reactions suggest that this move is perceived as symbolic or potentially strategic.

To study and apply international relations' constructivist theories and the concepts of symbolic diplomacy in order to analyze symbolic recognition theory in diplomacy.

To be able to address these objectives, a wide range of primary and secondary sources have been utilized. Primary sources include official charters and policy documents, public speeches and statements, and press releases from officials of OTS, Turkic states, other relevant entities, and TRNC representatives. These sources provide first-hand insight into the motivations and justifications surrounding TRNC's inclusion in the OTS. In addition to primary sources, secondary sources have been used to provide comprehensive analysis. The research studies traditional and digital media coverage and commentaries related to the Samarkand summit and OTS–Turkic states relations. Moreover, this article engages with a number of academic works on diplomatic or symbolic recognition, regionalism, and *de facto* states. This review of secondary sources covers both sides of the narrative: “strategic integration versus symbolic recognition”.

A qualitative case study approach has been adopted for this research. TRNC's observer status in the OTS is analyzed as a case study within the wider phenomenon of regional integration/symbolic diplomacy of contested states. The research methodology includes textual analysis of official speeches and documents and tracking diplomatic events before and after the OTS's Samarkand summit. This methodology will allow the identification of potential sequences of events which might have influenced the diplomatic move to grant TRNC observer status.

The theoretical framework guiding this research is predominantly constructivist. Constructivism in international affairs argues that actors' behavior is formed by intersubjective factors and is not restricted by hard power or legal proceedings (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). This framework addresses the issue of recognition in terms of ideational acceptance and the social perception of the entity. In the case study of TRNC, the article analyses the ideas of Turkic and Islamic solidarity and social norms regarding territorial integrity in regional or international settings. At the same time, the theoretical concepts of regionalism and institutionalism are examined to assess whether the OTS can use its resources to push for the recognition of TRNC at the international level. Understanding the limitations and potential of OTS as an organization will strengthen the analysis of whether “strategic integration” is a viable outcome or merely a rhetorical claim.

Historical and political background of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)

The political crisis and subsequent armed conflict on the island of Cyprus have resulted in the emergence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). In 1974, Greek Cypriot nationalists decided to unite the island with Greece, which triggered Türkiye to launch a military intervention by justifying its rights as a guarantor power according to the 1960 treaty (Akgün, 2010). The Turkish Armed Forces gained control of the northern part of the island, resulting in a de facto partition along the commonly known “Green Line”. Turkish Cypriot authorities formed an interim administration in search of a comprehensive settlement of the issue. However, after repeated failures of reunification attempts, in 1983, the Turkish Cypriot parliament issued a unilateral declaration of independence to establish TRNC as an independent entity. Türkiye recognized the TRNC immediately; however, other international actors reacted mostly negatively. UN Security Council Resolution 541 condemned the declaration as illegal and urged all states not to recognize any other Cypriot state other than the Republic of Cyprus. Pakistan and Bangladesh were the only two states that recognized TRNC as an independent state; however, they quickly withdrew their recognition due to international pressure. Other countries followed the UN stance and did not formally extend their recognition to the TRNC. This approach resulted in total political and diplomatic isolation of TRNC, as its statehood was only acknowledged by Türkiye.

In the decades following the declaration of independence, TRNC’s survival has become entirely reliant on its relationship with Türkiye. Besides economic subsidies in various sectors, Türkiye maintains a substantial amount of military personnel in Northern Cyprus and provides security guarantees. Between 1974 and 2004, Türkiye provided 3.07 billion USD in financial aid to TRNC to cover budgetary shortfalls. By 2008, two-fifths of the TRNC’s total revenues were direct credits or aid from Türkiye (Bozkurt, 2013). Consistent financial support from Türkiye allowed TRNC to survive at the cost of deep dependence. Özdemir (2025) summarized the relationship between Türkiye and TRNC as a “patron-client” dynamic of unrecognized states, in which the client’s sovereignty is limited by the patron’s interests and policies. This power dynamic has led many scholars to describe TRNC’s sovereignty as “illusory”.

Diplomatically and economically isolated, TRNC has looked for alternative routes for external engagement under Türkiye’s guidance. TRNC has participated in the OIC and ECO as an observer under unofficial names, such as “Turkish Cypriot

State”. Nevertheless, such statuses at regional organizations did not lead to full diplomatic recognition. Efforts to solve the dispute around the island, including the UN-initiated Annan Plan, highlighted the paradox of Northern Cyprus’s existence. The Turkish Cypriot community approved the reunification plan during the 2004 referendum, but the Greek Cypriots’ rejection of the plan kept the status quo alive. This non-recognition of TRNC had a substantial impact on its economy and society due to sanctions and trade barriers.

Even though TRNC has unique characteristics, it also fits the pattern of other *de facto* states in other geopolitically conflicted regions. Similar to other *de facto* self-proclaimed states, Northern Cyprus has managed to survive for decades without any recognition. Furthermore, similar to the self-proclaimed states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and the self-proclaimed republic of Transnistria (Pridnestrovie) in Moldova, which rely on Russia, TRNC depends on Türkiye for sustenance and protection (de Waal, 2018). A contradictory case among self-proclaimed states is Kosovo, which has received partial recognition by around one hundred UN member states. However, Kosovo still faces challenges from Serbia and several major powers, which limits its presence in some international forums. Compared to Kosovo, TRNC is placed among the isolated and marginalized category of contested states, which maintain internal sovereignty in practice but lack widespread recognition. What sets the Northern Cyprus case apart is its close ties to Türkiye’s strategic policy and the broader Cyprus peace process.

The Organization of Turkic States: evolution, goals, and observer status mechanism

the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), previously known as Turkic Council, is a regional intergovernmental organization which was founded in 2009 by four Turkic-speaking countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye). The idea of having such an organization was mentioned and championed by various previous leaders, specifically Kazakhstan’s previous President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The founding charter – Nakhchivan Agreement – laid down the common goals and policies of Turkic states for bolstering cooperation. The OTS was organized in a way that membership can be enhanced to other Turkic countries which share the same objectives. In 2019, Uzbekistan became the fifth member state after a year of being an observer. At the same time, due to the neutrality obligation in its constitution, Turkmenistan decided not to become a full member state. However, Turkmenistan engaged with OTS as a special guest and later became an observer. Rebranding of

the organization from Council to OTS and the “Turkic World Vision 2040” policy document agreed in the Istanbul Summit Declaration was the breakthrough moment for the Turkic World.

Strengthening mutual trust among Turkic-speaking states was one of the main missions of OTS highlighted in its founding charter – Nakhchivan Agreement. Furthermore, coordinating policies of Turkic states on international issues and promoting stability in the region were other key goals of OTS. Economic cooperation among member states has been one of the most essential parts of the OTS agenda and the organization aimed to increase intra-OTS trade and decrease economic dependence on Russia and China. The creation of the Turkic Investment Fund in 2022 was one of the main practical steps to simplify customs corridors and enhance coordination in energy, tourism, agriculture, and other sectors (Museyibov, 2022). Cultural cooperation is another element, where OTS member states are more aligned with the aim to promote common Turkic identity and heritage. The efforts of OTS have been focused on enhancing people-to-people ties in various social sectors. Despite not being a military alliance, OTS provides a platform for its member states to coordinate their positions on foreign policy and issues affecting the Turkic world. A notable example of such policy coordination was during the Second Karabakh War, where OTS voiced its member states’ support for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity.

OTS’s institutional structure has gradually shifted to allow its enlargement ambitions and changed policies. Similar to other regional intergovernmental organizations, OTS’s main organ is the Council of Heads of State, which is the decision-making body meeting on an annual basis and rotating format among member states. Furthermore, there are supporting Council of Foreign Ministers, senior officials’ committees and the Secretariat in Istanbul that coordinate day-to-day operations. Beyond the member states, observers play an important role in the OTS’s enlargement process. OTS’s foundation document, Nakhchivan Agreement’s Article 16, allows states, international organizations and fora to join OTS as observers. This observer status mechanism allows non-member participants to engage with other member states without full membership. The first country to join OTS as an observer was Hungary, which was a surprising step for many analysts as the Hungarian language is not part of the Turkic language group. However, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has frequently highlighted Hungary’s cultural proximity with Central Asian Turkic peoples and championed Hungary’s inclusion in OTS as an observer in 2018 (Makhanov, 2024). This move also showed OTS’s openness to partnership beyond Turkic-speaking nations. Due to its location and being a member of the EU, Hungary has coordinated OTS and other Turkic states’ relations with

the European Union in various initiatives. OTS's European office is located in Budapest, and Hungary prefers academic and economic cooperation with other OTS member states.

Three years after Hungary's inclusion, Turkmenistan joined OTS as an observer in 2021. This has been perceived as more surprising than Hungary due to Turkmenistan's constitutional policy of permanent neutrality. For the last three decades, Turkmenistan was the only country that did not join any multilateral structures gathering Turkic-speaking states. However, by joining only as an observer, contrary to full membership, Turkmenistan signalled its intention to limit cooperation within OTS to cultural and economic sectors. Turkmenistan's observer status had symbolic achievements for the Turkic world to showcase Turkic unity as all six Turkic-speaking Turkic states were now either member state or observer at OTS.

Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus's (TRNC) inclusion to OTS as an observer under its constitutional name was the most recent and contradictory addition. In November 2022, during the Samarkand summit, TRNC was accepted to the OTS as an observer member unanimously. This decision allowed Northern Cyprus to attend OTS summits and activities under its formal name and flag for the first time, which is an essential milestone for a *de facto* state. Significance of this can be observed from the volume of the positive and negative reactions. For TRNC and Türkiye, it was a diplomatic victory as OTS provides a platform to Turkish Cypriots to tackle isolation. OTS has framed the inclusion of TRNC as a part of natural enlargement considering the Turkish identity of Northern Cyprus's population. However, many political analysts underscored Türkiye and its ruling party's lobbying activities and influential role within OTS for TRNC's inclusion (Özdemir, 2025).

However, OTS's decision to grant observer status to Northern Cyprus received strong objections from outside of the Turkic world, notably from the EU, Greece, and the Republic of Cyprus. EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell denounced the decision as an attempt to legitimise an illegal secessionist regime and contradict the territorial integrity principles (European Union External Action, 2024). The Republic of Cyprus likewise reacted harshly to OTS member states and urged them to freeze TRNC's participation. According to Turkish Cypriot representatives, through the European Union route, Greek Cypriot and Greek diplomats have exerted their pressure on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to limit their engagement with TRNC within OTS (Darbaz, 2025). These pressures resulted from the Central Asian Turkic states being signatories of UN Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550 which were signed in the 1980s. By being signatories to these resolutions, Central Asian Turkic states supported the documents declaring the declaration of independence of TRNC illegal and invalid. Furthermore,

since 2020, Kazakhstan opened an embassy and Uzbekistan opened its consulate in Cyprus's capital Nicosia. Only Azerbaijan has continued its support for TRNC due to strong links with Türkiye. Bilateral meetings have been intensified and President Aliyev highlighted that Azerbaijan seeks to further increase the cooperation with TRNC (AZERTAC, 2025). Despite significant pressure, OTS has maintained to hold its observer status, and attended summits in Shusha, Azerbaijan and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

These three examples of observers have showcased that the mechanism of being observer within OTS is ad hoc and consensus-driven. The case of Hungary showed that OTS's observer status can be given to non-Turkic-speaking states and the case of TRNC showed that de facto states can be observers when there is political consensus among member states. Before the Taliban takeover, the Kabul government even applied for observer status as they have Turkic ethnic group, but then the prospect was halted (KabulNow, 2021). Compared to Hungary and Turkmenistan, TRNC's inclusion is largely politically and psychologically beneficial. Despite not meaning formal recognition, being an observer at OTS boosts TRNC's legitimacy in front of its Turkic partners. At the same time, the 2022 Samarkand Summit Declaration avoided explicit statement regarding TRNC's formal recognition and referred to Turkish Cypriot State in legal documents.

TRNC's inclusion in the OTS

The ninth summit of OTS in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, was a turning point for TRNC. At this meeting in 2022, Northern Cyprus became the official observer at the OTS. As emphasized in the previous section, TRNC and Türkiye hailed this decision as a momentous event, and both sides highlighted President Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu's continuous effort to lobby OTS members. In practice, observer membership allowed TRNC to enter an international stage to increase their visibility.

Despite the consensus reached and the decision made by OTS member states, Turkic states started to actively justify and share their rationales regarding the unprecedented inclusion. The Turkish MFA framed this process as remedying the injustice Turkish Cypriots have been subject to. Ankara further linked this decision with the "two-state solution" and called on other international actors to ensure equality for the two communities. OTS's Secretariat and member states largely highlighted the narratives of cultural solidarity. Ethnic, linguistic, and cultural proximity have provided straightforward justification for the inclusion of TRNC

in OTS. As the closest ally of Türkiye, Azerbaijan has always avoided offering formal recognition due to another long-standing conflict in the Karabakh region within Azerbaijan. However, following the second Karabakh war and gaining full control over the territory, Azerbaijan started to strengthen its relationship with TRNC (Rahimov, 2021). Azerbaijan hosted TRNC's representatives several times after the Samarkand decision and framed this observer status as more than a symbolic move. Other OTS members, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, approached this move more cautiously; however, they did not object at Samarkand. In conclusion, the OTS discourse regarding the inclusion of TRNC was framed around cultural and humanitarian elements rather than a formal recognition of statehood. This justification allowed OTS members, specifically Central Asian republics, to defend their decision under exceptional cultural accommodation, which does not violate international regulations.

Reactions within Northern Cyprus were obviously predominantly positive, and TRNC's President Tatar presented observer status as a validation of his "new vision" about sovereignty. This move encouraged Foreign Minister of Northern Cyprus Tahsin Ertugruloglu to state that seeking wider recognition is more realistic now. (Kades, 2022). Pro-government media and civil society organizations joined the ruling party to celebrate this breakthrough moment for TRNC. However, the opposition party and independent media called this move largely symbolic and shared a sober appraisal. The opposition party – Republican Turkish Party (Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi, CTP) – noted that the observer status will not bring true international recognition and will not solve the Cyprus problem. The appointments of ambassadors by Central Asian Turkic states to the Greek Cypriot government have echoed this narrative.

Strategic motives and symbolism

OTS's decision to include TRNC as an observer must be examined and understood in the context of Türkiye's broader policy of multilateral platforms to enforce its and Turkish Cypriots' interests. Previous similar "observer status" cases at OIC and ECO under the name of Turkish Cypriot State also occurred due to Türkiye's continuous efforts. Compared to OIC and ECO, OTS is the organization where Türkiye is the economic and political leader, and it is more geopolitically aligned with Ankara's vision for TRNC's foreign policy. Furthermore, some analysts perceive this move as a reaction to unresponsive calls by Türkiye to Western-oriented institutions to accommodate the Turkish Cypriots' issues (Ahlawat, 2025). By granting observer

status to TRNC at OTS, Türkiye follows a form of symbolic state-building via multilateralism.

From Türkiye's viewpoint, utilizing OTS as a diplomatic tool for the TRNC case has a few drawbacks. This move costs little financially; however, it pleases and secures the support of the nationalistic segment of the population for the ruling party. For Turkish Cypriots, OTS means visibility, "soft recognition", and legitimacy. The display of TRNC's name and its flag alongside other OTS member states and observers is another symbolic validation of TRNC's presence. Beyond symbolic recognition, there are significant potential practical benefits to Northern Cyprus. The OTS leads cooperation talks in various sectors, including education, culture, tourism, and trade among member states and observers. TRNC's status means it can join these multilateral initiatives and events at the ministerial or working group level to access knowledge-sharing and technical cooperation opportunities. By being an observer at OTS, TRNC becomes eligible to apply to the Turkic Investment Fund for development projects.

Another more tangible benefit of OTS for TRNC is the prospect of expanding economic and cultural links with Turkic states. Türkiye remains by far TRNC's dominant economic partner. The Turkish Cypriots' small economy is deeply integrated with Türkiye's market, with the annual trade volume of \$1.8–2 billion. Furthermore, Türkiye also serves as the almost exclusive lifeline for travel and tourism to Northern Cyprus – direct flights operate only via Türkiye, and Türkiye provides electricity and water through undersea pipelines, as well as substantial budgetary support to the TRNC. One-third of Northern Cyprus's budget is supported by Türkiye via direct investment and humanitarian aid. By being an observer at OTS, TRNC could find new sources of investment, tourists, and students from Azerbaijan or Central Asian Turkic states.

Regarding the trade and investment field, the benefits are not expected to be realized in the short term and are mostly potential. Direct trade between OTS member states and TRNC – except Türkiye – is limited due to legal restrictions. Even Türkiye's close ally, Azerbaijan, officially does not recognize TRNC passports, ports, or standards to avoid breaching international law. Despite goodwill, it is evident that international law restricts the TRNC's economic and trade benefits from OTS membership. Direct trade and economic ties between Central Asian countries and TRNC are currently minimal. However, Türkiye envisions OTS as a platform to showcase TRNC's tourism and economic potential to Central Asian Turkic states. In quantitative context, apart from Türkiye, the volumes are modest but not significant. There are a few hundred Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan nationals living and studying in Northern Cyprus, and vice versa. The trade volume between TRNC

and these states is not published publicly, as all trade occurs via Türkiye. However, statistics between TRNC and Türkiye show only a few million dollars of goods and services are imported from Northern Cyprus. In summary, OTS observer status has been a morale booster for Turkish Cypriots in their pursuit of sovereignty and gave a reason to Türkiye to continue their advocacy work for the “two-state solution”.

International and regional reactions

OTS’s Samarkand summit’s decision to include TRNC as an observer provoked an immediate negative reaction from Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, and the EU. The day after the summit, EU High Representative Borrell’s office condemned efforts by OTS to legitimize “the so-called, internationally not recognised” TRNC (European Union External Action, 2024). The Cypriot Foreign Ministry’s reaction was harsher and called the OTS move “meaningless”, claiming it had no legal effect (Kades, 2022). From Nicosia’s perspective, observer status does not change the fact that, in their view, the TRNC is an illegal entity on the island. Cyprus’s foreign policy has aimed to influence especially Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan as current and future OTS chairs to ensure they are aware of the EU’s displeasure. The Greek government has fully supported Cyprus’s demarches. Notably, the US State Department also joined the criticism a few days later and highlighted their support for a bizonal, bicomunal federation solution (Pitta, 2022). In the short term, OTS’s image in Europe radically diminished following the Samarkand summit.

This immense pressure on OTS and its members has impacted Central Asian members of OTS, who moved to reassure Cyprus and the EU that observer status to TRNC will not change their non-recognition. Via private channels, Central Asian Turkic states emphasized to Cypriot representatives that they are still tied to UN Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550. As a result of this balanced policy, Central Asian states managed to walk a diplomatic tightrope: while accommodating Türkiye’s request, they managed to align with the UN/EU line on the Cyprus issue. Despite the balanced policy of Central Asian countries, the Samarkand summit posed a potential credibility issue for OTS on the international platform. However, it should also be considered that OTS is a regional intergovernmental organization with its own agenda, and most probably symbolic inclusion was considered a manageable risk by the member states. Over time, especially during 2023–2024, it became clear that Central Asian Turkic states took steps themselves to mitigate potential risks the Samarkand summit could pose to their foreign relations.

The Samarkand summit's fanfare was followed by a division in approach by member states to TRNC. Azerbaijan and Türkiye remained firm in their support for Turkish Cypriots, whereas Central Asian Turkic states shifted toward a more cautious line. Even many analysts called this shift "serious" and linked this change to the perception of Türkiye among these countries (Shafiyev, 2025). The first example of such a change was observed during the 2023 OTS's Astana summit. The host country, Kazakhstan, declined to invite TRNC, and it was an unprecedented move, as all observers are usually invited to summits of the organization they observe. Central Asian Turkic states' radical foreign policy shift coincided with the 2022 and 2025 EU–Central Asia summits, where the EU unveiled a new €12 billion investment package for Central Asia (European Council, 2025). Particularly, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and even Turkmenistan signed a declaration confirming their support for UN Security Council Resolutions on Cyprus and only the Republic of Cyprus's sovereignty on the island. Furthermore, Central Asian Turkic states announced that they seek to upgrade their ties with the Republic of Cyprus and will either develop or open resident embassies in Nicosia.

Central Asian Turkic states' policy shift was indeed viewed as an enormous setback, and Turkish and Turkish Cypriot representatives complained that the EU's economic incentives impacted this shift. However, the TRNC foreign minister also claimed that "this is not a disaster scenario" for TRNC while acknowledging their disappointment (Aslan, 2025). This intra-OTS rift was unprecedented, and Türkiye started to take its own actions to showcase its displeasure about other Turkic states' policy shifts. In March 2025, Kazakhstan's foreign minister attempted to fly to Cyprus to open an embassy in Nicosia, and Türkiye denied the overflight clearance in Turkish airspace, which complicated his journey (Kouroushi, 2025).

From OTS's unity perspective, the recent incidents were troubling. While Azerbaijan and Türkiye remained aligned on the Cyprus issue, Central Asian members demonstrated that they prioritize their own national interests over the common Turkic agenda when a conflict arises. Shafiyev (2025) claims that the EU's energy dependence on Azerbaijan has also paved the way for Azerbaijan's strong rhetorical support of TRNC without any harsh reaction by Greek officials. These also demonstrate how geopolitical pragmatism can work both ways: Central Asian Turkic states adjust policies to please the EU, and EU actors approach Azerbaijan because of Azerbaijani natural gas. Overall, TRNC's OTS observer status highlighted once again that such symbolic victories can be welcomed with counter-moves. The EU's outreach in Central Asian Turkic states with billions of dollars of investment and strategic partnerships provided a powerful incentive for OTS members to change their stance.

Conclusion

The analysis of the TRNC's observer status with OTS reveals a complex presentation of the enduring constraint of contested statehood and its way to gain their legitimacy via symbolic diplomacy. On the one hand, TRNC's membership clearly advances their quest for legitimacy, but only to a certain extent. It had definitely provided an international platform to Turkish Cypriots to increase their visibility. On the other hand, this symbolic resonance should not be overstated as formal recognition.

However, deeper analysis exposes the OTS's geopolitical and structural limitations of what they can provide to TRNC in terms of diplomatic recognition. Even events after the Samarkand summit revealed that Central Asian Turkic states are unwilling to present TRNC's observer status into any form of meaningful diplomatic engagement with Turkish Cypriots outside the OTS framework. They have even frequently highlighted the difference between formal acknowledgment of sovereignty and symbolic recognition. These developments underline geopolitical realities that even the strongest cultural affinity can be overridden by states' own national interests in international forums. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, which pursue multi-vector foreign policy, ultimately prioritize UN resolutions and are inclined to align with more powerful actors such as the EU.

Therefore, despite the observer seat being a diplomatic asset, it did not alter the TRNC's fundamental status. The symbolic victory, which was important for identity and propaganda, has not impacted the diplomatic isolation of the self-proclaimed entity. No new state has recognized TRNC following OTS's initiative. Even Azerbaijan, which is closer to formal recognition, has not done so yet due to potential international repercussions. Northern Cyprus's gains were mostly soft power instead of sovereign power. TRNC's OTS membership can be summarized with rich symbolism with the representation of flags, speeches, declarations of brotherhood. Usually, such narratives are not totally meaningless as they can contribute to reshaping narratives gradually. In international relations, for unrecognized states such as TRNC, symbolism is a key element of struggle for legitimacy. Yet, without concrete legislative and diplomatic change, there is a risk of creating "cosmetic change without any significant change". Compared to before 2022, now Turkish Cypriots are more integrated into a regional network due to OTS's observer membership, but are not any closer to neither widespread recognition nor UN membership.

In summary, Turkish Cypriots' inclusion to the OTS as an observer was a symbolic milestone following their long-standing quest for recognition. It provided a morale boost and quasi-recognition in a cultural context indicating that Türkiye's creative maneuvers can have gradual benefits. However, due to legal restrictions and

strict boundaries, it is not clear how far this policy can proceed. This analysis confirmed that contested statehood issues, such as the Cyprus issue, cannot be entirely solved via symbolic victories and require a comprehensive political approach. The article once again confirmed that formal diplomatic recognition cannot be replaced by symbolic diplomacy, and the latter can only complement.

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