

Adjusting to the “New Normal” of Post COVID-19: The Role of Organization of Turkic States in Multilateral Cooperation

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Abstract

The article explores the role of the Organization of Turkic States in enhancing cooperation among its Member and Observer States and across the region in the post-COVID-19 era. It also examines the changing postures of multilateralism before and after the pandemic, while referring to the significance of functionalism, the original parameters of which persist even today. After the theoretical introduction, the article first analyzes the ways in which the Organization has responded to the pandemic and provides concrete examples of its efforts. Next, it touches upon the peculiarities of the structure of the Organization, its working system and its decision-making process, which have allowed it to respond rapidly to the needs of its Member and Observer States and their people. In line with this aim, it examines the role of the Organization in bringing the foreign policies of the Turkic States into convergence, fostering multidimensional connectivity with a sectoral approach and supporting people-to-people cooperation. Finally, it focuses on the contributions of the Organization to the capacity-building of its Member States and its support for international cooperation. Taken together, these features provide a basis to check the efficiency of the organization in terms of today's contested multilateralism.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has functioned as an important “wake-up call” for the entire international system. This unexpected development has reminded us of the necessity of adding new components, such as health care and security, to the priority list of global affairs. The pandemic reaffirmed that a virus does not have any “passport” or any “border” from the global economy to our daily life, it affects all aspects of the current global order, in which multilateralism has already faced severe challenges. Robert Keohane had defined multilateralism in 1990s as “the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions.”¹ Although this definition remains valid for today, the needs that give rise to multilateralism have changed enormously; we now face a multi-polar system that is more unpredictable than ever, and teeming with a complex, inter-related variety of threats in areas ranging from security, the economy and health to environmental disasters. Together with this chaotic picture, there is another undeniable fact: the tremendous increase in the number of multilateral organizations worldwide. While the number of multilateral intergovernmental organizations was fewer than 100 in 1945, today it has reached 7,804.² Whether this skyrocketing increase has brought with it an equivalent rise in efficiency is of course a big question that needs to be addressed.

Multilateralism had already come under a lot of stress and criticism before the outbreak of COVID-19; many were interrogating the effectiveness of international organizations, their representativeness, the rapidity of their decision-making system, and questioning whether it was their nature to be value-based or to remain stuck in pure realism. The creator of the theory of functionalism in international relations, David Mitrany, in his pamphlet titled, “A Working Peace System: An Argument for the Functional Development of International Organization,” dated 1943, explains why the League of Nations system failed, and sketches out the broad lines of a functional organization of international

activities. In his foresightful pamphlet, he points out that “these activities would be selected specifically and organized separately each according to its nature, to the conditions under which it has to operate, and to the needs of the moment.”³ So, before the establishment of UN and its system, the necessity to address “the needs of the moment” was an important criterion for the effectiveness of international organizations to ensure a robust international order. Actually, the UN and Bretton Woods Institutions had been structured in line with this aim. However, over the years, they became less responsive to changing needs. Thus, in the present day, in which we are experiencing globalization 4.0 together with “the challenges associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) that also coincides with the rapid emergence of ecological constraints, the advent of an increasingly multipolar international order, and rising inequality,”⁴ we are obliged to equip international organizations with adequate means to provide shared global governance for the future. While doing so, we must not forget that despite the fact that the world has become a “global village,” nationalism has spread again worldwide in a way reminiscent of its profusion between the two World Wars.

Nationalism, coupled with globalization, has triggered “an environment of mistrust toward all things foreign,” resulting in the enforcement of protectionist measures, disruptions vis-à-vis supply chains, the building of walls between countries and the closing of borders when deemed necessary.⁵ As Kissinger recently elaborated, “nations cohere and flourish on the belief that their institutions can foresee calamity, arrest its impact and restore stability.”⁶ Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that even the “strongest” nations and their institutions were lacking in preparedness in the face of such a global threat. The pandemic has also amplified the already existing mistrust toward the ongoing international order and its institutions. It has opened once again the “Pandora’s box” concerning the immediate need to strengthen multilateral cooperation in an effective, comprehensive and resilient way. Just after the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, states inherently launched the most Hobbesian measures to protect their borders and their people. How to develop vaccines and share them with other countries or not has become a matter of serious discussion all over the world. Hence, with the emergence of state behaviors based on elements of pure realism, a protectionist approach immediately became

predominant worldwide. This even spawned the emergence of “vaccine wars,” together with their strong geopolitical connotations. However, it soon became clear that the implementation of isolationist/protectionist measures is not sustainable; the world needs multilateral cooperation more than ever to combat this scourge. Thus, the decisions taken at both the national and international levels to tackle the pandemic will play significant role in shaping the world order and international system in the post-COVID-19 era.⁷

Being aware of such a responsibility, since its establishment in 2009 as a regional inter-governmental organization, the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council), the name of which changed into the Organization of Turkic States at the Istanbul Summit held on November 12, 2021 has worked for the enhancement of cooperation among its Member States and an increase of collaboration across the region; as a result, the Organization has contributed to the empowerment of multilateralism. Covering an area of 4.5 million km,² with an economic potential of over 2 trillion USD and a population of 160 million, the Organization of Turkic States is a rising regional power in Eurasia. Its outstanding performance during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a remarkable example to this end. In this regard, after analyzing the ways in which the Organization of Turkic States has responded to the pandemic, we will focus on (1) the peculiarities of the structure of the Organization, its working system, decision-making process, etc.; (2) its role in coordinating the foreign policies of the Turkic States; (3) its fostering of multidimensional connectivity with a sectoral approach; (4) its assistance with people-to-people cooperation; (5) its contribution to capacity-building as a cross-cutting responsibility; and (6) its support for international cooperation. The article will conclude with an assessment of the Organization’s efficiency in light of today’s contested multilateralism.

Addressing the Needs of the Times: COVID-19 and Beyond

The Organization of Turkic States, with its Member States, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan, and its Observer countries, Hungary and Turkmenistan, has been involved in intensive cooperation across a wide range of areas from foreign policy,

economics, transportation, customs, ICT, agriculture, tourism, media, education and diaspora to youth and sports. The pandemic has not stopped the Organization from engaging in these areas and even expanding into new essential sectors such as health and migration. Thus, just after the outbreak of COVID-19, at the request of H.E. Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, as the Chairman-in-office of the Organization of the Turkic States, the Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States came together for the first time at an Extraordinary Summit held on April 10, 2020 in a video-conference format with the theme of “Solidarity and Cooperation in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.” This timely Summit was the first regional gathering to take place after the G-20 Virtual Summit, and was attended by the Presidents of the Member States, the Prime Minister of Hungary and the Secretary General of the Organization of Turkic States. The Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, also took part in the meeting. At the Summit, the leaders of the Turkic World voiced their determination to engage in enhanced cooperation to fight the pandemic in all its aspects on the basis of a strong political will that would further strengthen solidarity among the Turkic-speaking peoples. They identified health, the economy & trade, transportation, customs and migration as priority areas in this fight, and tasked the relevant Ministries to collaborate in an innovative way to address these priorities.

Starting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Organization of Turkic States had already confirmed their capacity to react quickly and collaborate successfully in times of crises.⁸ They were the first to share hospital facilities, provide humanitarian aid and testing kits and exchange clinical expertise and medical support to each other, and to share information on containment and mitigation measures. Director-General Ghebreyesus praised this cooperation during the Extraordinary Summit, stating, “this is an example of the kind of cross-border cooperation we need to get through this pandemic.”⁹ The decisions taken at the Summit by the Heads of State laid the foundations for a turning point for cooperation within the Organization

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at such a difficult time. The Extraordinary Summit was followed by intensive consultations of among the Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Turkic States to draw a road map for the implementation of the Summit decisions. The meetings of the Ministers of Health (April 28), the Ministers of Transport (April 30), the Ministers of Economy and Trade and the Heads of Customs Administrations (May 6) and the Heads of the Migration Services and related Authorities (May 7) were the concrete outputs of this road map. Moreover, a task force at the level of Deputy Ministers dealing with health, transportation, customs, border control, migration and economy was established within the Organization as a mechanism of coordination.¹⁰

The Meeting of the Ministers of Health was essential to discuss measures to combat COVID-19 and to establish systematic cooperation for the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and epidemiological monitoring of other dangerous infections in the future. At the meeting, the countries of the Organization of Turkic States committed to continue sharing best practices, organizing capacity-building programs and intensify cooperation on the development of well-equipped modern hospitals. The Ministers agreed to establish the Health Coordination Committee, which will host a Supply Chain Group tasked with seeking areas for cooperation in the production of medical equipment and pharmaceuticals that the Member States require the most. A Health Scientific Group was also established within the Organization. Furthermore, through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on September 11, 2020, the Organization and the UN World Health Organization (UN WHO) engaged in active collaboration in the field of health, including areas such as “universal health coverage, protecting against health emergencies and promotion of the well-being of the populations in the Member States of the Organization of Turkic States.”¹¹ Overall, the cooperation in the era of COVID-19 is an example of how the Organization can mobilize itself quickly in time of crisis to address emerging needs. Its values, structure, working system and decision-making mechanism facilitate such mobilization.

Institutionalization of Cooperation through Adequate Means

Since its establishment in 2009, the Organization of Turkic States has played a crucial role in establishing structured and systematized coop-

eration among the Turkic States. The existence of the Organization as a regional mechanism has institutionalized cooperative relations between the Turkic States within a multilateral framework. This institutionalization was achieved as an outcome of efforts dating back to the 1990s, and constitutes a perfect tool with which to set the rules of collaboration in the Turkic region, to secure the terms of its management, avoiding any regression, and to take measures for its deepening and diversification. Relying on the continuous political will of the Member States, this solid framework has enabled them to score significant achievements in various cooperation areas within the Organization in a short period of time. The keys of this successful performance are embedded in the principles and structure of the organization, and in its result-oriented approach in political, economic, cultural-educational and human fields. Furthermore, its collaboration as an umbrella organization with other Turkic cooperation organizations, such as Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking States (TURKPA), International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation (TCHF) and the Turkic Academy, has contributed to the enhancement of Turkic cooperation at the parliamentary, cultural, academic and scientific levels.¹²

There is no doubt that respect for sovereign equality, territorial integrity, the inviolability of internationally recognized borders, non-interference in one another's internal affairs and adherence to all universally recognized principles and norms of international law empower the Organization of Turkic States. Based on these principles, the last eleven years have proved that decisions and actions taken within the Organization are comprehensive and inclusive. In that time, the Organization has become a rising regional actor that acts not only for the benefit of its Member States but for all stakeholders in the region. The accession of Uzbekistan to the Organization in 2019 as a Member State is a significant outcome of the successful regional cooperation cherished within the Organization of Turkic States.¹³ Similarly, the rapprochement between the Organization of Turkic States and Turk-

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menistan is another recent critical achievement. The fact that the Organization has proven itself to work for the benefit of all Turkic States has gravitated Turkmenistan toward it, and led the country to officially apply to become an Observer country in 2021. Hungary's participation as an Observer to the Organization, granted in 2018, constitutes another milestone. After being granted this status, in a short period of time, Hungary has engaged in most of the cooperation schemes in the Organization from transportation to education. Upon Hungary's proposal, a Representation Office of the Organization of Turkic States was opened in Budapest by the Foreign Ministers of Member and Observer States. The Office has been mandated to promote the Organization and its activities in Europe, while contributing to the enhancement of its relations with European institutions.¹⁴ Hungary's Observer status opened up new discussions for the addition of new observer countries to the Organization. As of October 2021, ten countries have submitted a request to become Observers of the Organization, while seven other states have demonstrated interest in cooperating with the Organization under different modalities. This interest indicates that the organization has become a center of attraction not only for the Turkic States but for regional partners.¹⁵

The simplified decision-taking process within the Organization of Turkic State has enabled decisions to translate into actions in a rapid way. The existence of working groups and ministerial meetings in each cooperation field, the submission of decisions taken at these mechanisms to the Heads of State during the Annual Summit of the Organization and the instructions given by them to materialize these decisions by the time of the next Summit have paved the way for successful outcomes. With streamlined bureaucratic procedures and enhanced coordination provided by the Secretariat, the Organization could widen and deepen the scope of its agenda.¹⁶ The fact that each Summit of the Organization is dedicated to a specific theme has rendered the cooperation among the Turkic States more structured and focused, with measures taken in a timely way. It should be noted that the themes of all previous Summits, from "economy," "culture-education-science," "transportation and connectivity," "tourism," "media and information," "youth and national sports," "support for SMEs" to "health" were carefully chosen as areas where there is ample room for improved multilateral cooperation. Moreover, the regular meetings within the Organization

among the Heads of State of Member States, their foreign ministers and other ministers of areas of existing collaboration, as well as officials of the relevant national authorities have also provided the Member states with a better understanding of one another’s working mechanisms, and have resulted in the convergence of national agendas creating a common working culture.

The involvement of all stakeholders in each cooperation area is another asset that fortifies solidarity between the Member and Observer States of the Organization of Turkic States. Hence, in all cooperation areas, private sector actors are actively on board. Furthermore, a series of round tables that the Organization carries out with representatives of civil society, academia and the media has raised awareness about the Organization and its activities. The Secretariat, as a permanent body, is the key player for the institutionalization of cooperation within the Organization, which has been gradually reinforced over the last decade. This body serves to prepare documents and arrange meetings while ensuring regularity in the work of the Organization and acting as a follow-up mechanism.

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From Institutionalization to Convergence of Foreign Policies among Turkic States

The institutionalized cooperation among the Member States of the Organization of Turkic States has led to the convergence of their policies on several items, including foreign policy. As a result, the Member States have gradually become more vocal in expressing their joint approach on pressing regional and global issues. Thus, in the Organization’s Summits, in addition to the declarations signed by the Heads of State, the practice of releasing joint statements has been established. As a recent example of this practice, the Council of Foreign Ministers convened on September 27, 2021 in Istanbul an extraordinary meeting to discuss the latest developments in Afghanistan and their implications for the Member States of the Organization of Turkic States, upon the

invitation of H.E. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey. As the first regional initiative to address such a crucial topic, the meeting was a testament to the Organization's capacity to raise a strong, common voice on an issue of common interest. Thus, at the end of the meeting, the Foreign Ministers of the Member States adopted the "Statement of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Turkic States on the Situation in Afghanistan" and decided to remain in consultation and coordination regarding the various aspects and repercussions of developments in Afghanistan, including in the fields of humanitarian efforts, human rights, migration and refugee flows, counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism.¹⁷ This timely meeting transmitted a strong message to the world, not only regarding Afghanistan, but also about the readiness of the Organization to act together when and if necessary.

The "Joint Statement on Egypt" made by the Council of Foreign Ministers in 2013 in Gabala, Azerbaijan, is another example of the Organization's Member States formulating a joint understanding on an issue of common interest. Moreover, on several occasions, the Heads of State of the Organization of the Turkic States reaffirmed in Summit Declarations their shared position on the need to reach a negotiated and mutually agreed-upon political settlement in Cyprus based on existing realities, the political equality of the two peoples and their co-ownership of the island and to express their solidarity with the Turkish Cypriot people. They also reiterated the strongest support for the earliest settlement of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, on the basis of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and the inviolability of the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In keeping with this position, the Member States and the Secretariat demonstrated strong solidarity with Azerbaijan during the "44 Days Patriotic War" and supported the liberation of its occupied territories and the restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over them, according to the norms and principles of international law and the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions.¹⁸

The "Joint declaration of the Member States on the relations between the Organization of Turkic States and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)," voiced by the Organization's chairmanship during the 20th OSCE Ministerial Council annual meet-

ing in Kyiv in 2013, established its commitment to acting together within other international organizations. These steps make it clear that the foreign policy preferences of Member States of the Organization have been converging in areas of mutual interest. Thus, the projects and programs launched within the Organization are supportive of such a convergence. The mechanism of security consultations within the Organization constitutes an important platform to this end.

The junior diplomats training program, launched in 2014, is among the successful activities of the Organization on foreign policy cooperation. This program aims to increase awareness of the common historical, cultural and linguistic ties in the Turkic region while raising a new generation of diplomats who will contribute to the enhancement of Turkic cooperation. More than 150 young diplomats have attended the courses of this visionary program so far. They have since been dispatched throughout the world on diplomatic missions, and have already started to take a leading role when an issue related to the Organization is concerned. Similarly, the internship program initiated in 2016 by the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of Azerbaijan has resulted in the production of a report titled, “Turkic Council Countries: Infrastructure, Trade, Logistics and Transportation,” which presents a comprehensive study of the different aspects of connectivity in the Turkic region.¹⁹

The cooperation process among the official foreign policy research centers of Member States of the Organization of Turkic States, initiated in 2013, has also been very productive in fortifying ties on foreign policy issues.²⁰ The regular meetings held by these centers and the joint publications prepared with the support of the Secretariat are the outcomes of this cooperation process.²¹ In this regard, the special publications prepared by the Secretariat and Center for Strategic Research under the auspices of Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to honor the 5th, 6th and 7th Summits are “the “Fifth Summit of the Turkic Council: A Rising Actor in Regional Cooperation in Eurasia,” “the 25th Anniversary of the Independence of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey’s Contribution to Development and Cooperation in the Turkic Region” and “The Turkic Council: 10th Anniversary of the Nakhchivan Agreement,” respectively. With the support of the abovementioned mechanisms, the Member States of the Organization of Turkic States have

become more practiced in acting together on foreign policy issues of common concern.²²

Fostering Multidimensional Connectivity with a Sectoral Approach

Since the first Summit, launched with the theme of economic cooperation, the Organization of Turkic States has continued to work on empowering the economic structures of the Member States, ensuring their diversification, generating the strong engagement of the private sector, increasing trade relations within the Turkic region and attracting investments to the area. The sectorial approach that the Organization has brought to economic cooperation supports efforts to this end. Multidimensional connectivity in far-ranging areas, from economics, transportation and customs, ICT, energy and tourism, requires such a comprehensive approach.

In addition to the Ministerial and working group mechanisms it mobilizes to address the economy, the Turkic Business Council's activities, and the Business Forums that bring national authorities together with business persons from the region have played an important role in obtaining results in uplifting economic ties among Member States of the Organization of Turkic States. On top of this, the decisions to establish the Turkic Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI) and the Turkic Investment and Development Fund are turning points in boosting cooperation in the field of economy. The TCCI, with its permanent Secretariat hosted by the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) in Istanbul, is a concerted effort for the institutionalization of economic relations among the business communities of the Turkic World.²³ Moreover, the TCCI is committed to implementing joint projects, training programs and exchanges of experience in areas of mutual economic interest. The Turkic Business web portal that was previously prepared provides an access point for the active engagement of business actors in the endeavors of the TCCI. The establishment of industrial zones, techno-parks and trade houses proposed by the Secretariat will undoubtedly contribute to the development of economic relations among the Member States. Moreover, once the Turkic Investment and Development Fund is operationalized, it

will provide an initial amount of 600–700 million USD to be allocated for the enhancement of the capacities of SMEs and the diversification of economies.²⁴

Interconnectivity among the economies of the Member States can be ensured through increased cooperation in the fields of transportation and customs. Based on this premise, the Organization of Turkic States promotes comprehensive cooperation among its Member States in the field of transportation through instruments such as its Ministerial and working group meetings and its Sister Ports initiative.

As a concrete outcome of this cooperation, with the purposes of phasing out the existing impediments in the way of efficient transportation operations and of developing stable, integrated and seamless transportation along the Trans-Caspian International East-West Middle Corridor passing through our countries, the Member States have been working to finalize the “Agreement between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan on the International Combined Transport of Goods.” Once entered into force, the

agreement will be the first combined transport agreement in the region. As a result of support provided by the Organization of Turkic States, there have already been significant improvements along the Middle Corridor in the last couple of years. Thus, the Secretariat has been vocal about the necessity of tapping

the great potential of this route. Accordingly, the reduction of logistical expenses along the corridor and the simplification of customs procedures in the Caspian ports are important outcomes of the efforts that have flourished within the Organization.²⁵ Moreover, the Secretariat has assisted the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) in developing relations with the relevant organizations of the Member States. Through the efforts of the Secretariat, the State Railways of the Republic of Turkey (TCDD) acceded to the TITR agreement in November 2014 and became a full member of the TITR in February 2018.

Lastly, the Secretariat of the Organization of the Turkic States has had a remarkable stake in the liberalization of transportation between Turkey

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and Kyrgyzstan. With the support of the Secretariat, the importance of the issue has been better understood by the relevant transport authorities of the Member States. As a result, during the Turkish-Kyrgyz Land Transport Joint Commission Meeting, held on September 15–16, 2021, in Bishkek, important decisions were taken in the field of international road transport to this end. With the signing of the liberalization agreement between the two countries during this meeting, Turkish and Kyrgyz carriers were empowered to carry out bilateral and transit transportation without the restriction of transit documents. This decision is an exemplary step for the liberalization of transportation between other Turkic-speaking States, which has been a long-anticipated step in enhancing their connectivity in logistical and economic means.²⁶

As for customs cooperation, which is an inseparable part of collaboration in transport, there is a well-structured working mechanism within the Organization of Turkic States. In addition to the regular working group and ministerial meetings, training seminars have been held on specific topics, and field visits have been carried out at the border gates of the Member States. As a result of these visits, the Organization facilitated the modernization of ten border gates in Kazakhstan by the Customs and Tourism Enterprises (GTI) of TOBB using the build-operate-transfer model. Furthermore, the ongoing collaboration with the World Customs Organization (WCO) is yielding successful outcomes in customs cooperation.

The establishment of working group and ministerial mechanisms for ICT and energy, as two key topics for the region, is an important step in itself to boost cooperation on these issues to foster further interconnectivity. Cyber-security, development of the Trans-Eurasian Information Super Highway (TASIM) project, fortification of fiber-optic infrastructure in the region, implementation of satellite services as well as mutual recognition of certificate on e-signature are among the promising cooperation topics that the Organization will build upon in the field of ICT. As for energy, cooperation in renewable energy with wind, solar and hydraulic power stations, development of means of investment in Member Countries in this field as well as sharing of knowledge in the training of nuclear engineers, nuclear infrastructure, and uranium mining are the priority agenda topics that were carefully chosen to serve for the benefit of all Turkic Member and Observer States.

Multidimensional connectivity also involves enhancing collaboration among the Member States in the tourism sector. One example of this collaboration is the transformation of the historical Silk Road into an attractive tourism destination. The Modern Silk Road Joint Tour Project,²⁷ as a unique tour package, offers an unprecedented opportunity for tourists to visit Member States of the Organization of Turkic States, and is the cornerstone of its activities carried out in the tourism sector. The Joint Tour Package plays a vital role in increasing the flow of tourists among the Turkic Speaking States, and boosts touristic visits from third parties to these countries.²⁸ The promotional activities and the feedback gathered during the many international tourism exhibitions indicate a high level of interest in this touristic destination. The documentary prepared by TRT-AVAZ on the project has brought awareness of the tour’s natural attractions combined with historical and cultural heritage to broader audiences.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has negatively impacted the tourism sector all over the world. Facing this reality, Tourism Ministers of the Member and Observer States of the Organization of Turkic States convened on June 23, 2020 to coordinate their efforts in the fight against COVID-19 in the tourism sector by sharing the measures on inspection, sanitation, certification and safety applied by the Member States within the Organization. They also consented to launch new online training programs on certain topics to aid in fighting the pandemic. Beyond the measures related to the pandemic, projects such as the Silk Road Tourism Capitals, Tourism Week and the initiation of a Silk Road visa are among the promising projects within this cooperation area.

In addition to the abovementioned sectors, the Organization works to expand the scope of the collaboration that already embraces health, agriculture, environmental protection and preparedness for natural disasters. Taking into account the needs of its Member and Observer States as well as both regional and global developments, the Organization updates and shapes its agenda of collaboration with a dynamic approach.

Enhancing People-to-People Cooperation

The common culture, language and history of the Turkic States are found at the heart of people-to-people cooperation within the Organi-

zation of the Turkic States. Culture, diaspora, media and information, education, youth and sports constitute the most important elements of this collaboration. Thus, the Organization attributes the utmost importance to increasing people-to-people contacts and spreading common Turkic values in the Turkic region.

Culture is the cement of collaboration within the Turkic World. The Organization supports the activities of all relevant actors to this end. In this regard, besides its regular meetings of Ministers of Culture of the Turkic Speaking States, TURKSOY's Cultural Capital of the Turkic World initiative constitutes a flagship event to highlight and celebrate cultural cooperation in the Turkic region. The TCHF is actively expanding ties between Turkic-speaking peoples to preserve and develop their rich and diverse cultural heritage. While doing so, it carries out numerous activities aimed at enhancing ties among several segments of Turkic societies, including among women and children.

In addition to cultural cooperation among the Turkic-speaking people living in the Member States, enhancing coordination and cooperation among the Turkic-speaking diasporas and the diaspora institutions of the Member States has continued to be a priority for the Organization of Turkic States since its establishment. Based on the Turkic Speaking Diaspora Joint Activity Strategy of the Organization prepared by the relevant institutions of the Member States in line with their joint action plans, this cooperation process strengthens the spirit of

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solidarity among the institutions responsible for diaspora issues. It also consolidates the ties among nationals from Turkic States living abroad and creates further awareness through common Turkic values. In addition, Turkic Diaspora Forums aim at enhancing ties among Turkic-speaking diasporas.²⁹

Media, with all its components, is a cross-cutting key tool to empower Turkic cooperation. The MoUs among the national TV channels and

official news agencies, as well as the public broadcasting institutions of the Member States of the Organization of Turkic States, lay the foundation of cooperation in this field. The decision regarding the establishment of a Joint FTP Pool where viewers can download programs and videos on agreed-upon categories constitutes an important part of this cooperation process. Furthermore, the decision to prepare documentaries, short films and videos on prominent Turkic figures is another important measure intended to raise awareness about the rich cultural and historical heritage of the Turkic world. The TRT Avaz channel, with its insightful programs on the Turkic world, has already been acting as the common channel of the Turkic-speaking states.³⁰

Education is the *sine quo non* for the enhancement of cooperation among the Turkic speaking people. The preparation of common history, geography and literature books by the Turkic Academy with the support of the Secretariat of the Organization of Turkic States for the young generation of the Turkic states is itself a significant achievement. It is also instrumental in instilling a collective conscience in Turkic youth. Once the preparation of these books is finalized by the Turkic Academy, various school materials will be available to benefit Turkic youth in better understanding their commonalities. As an outcome of the efforts within the Organization, an elective course covering the period from antiquity until the 15th century has been already issued for 8th grade students in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkey and has reached almost 10,000, 15,000 and 50,000 youngsters in these respective countries.

The exchange program for high school students within the Organization of Turkic States also serves as an important tool for raising next generations who are fully aware of their common roots, languages and history. The exchange program for high school educational professionals and the Sister Schools Project that are on the agenda within this cooperation area will certainly contribute to the same purpose. Moreover, the establishment of the Turkic University Union in 2013 within the Organization of Turkic States with the participation of universities from the Member States has generated a comprehensive cooperation process at the level of higher education. In a short period of time, the number of universities involved in this cooperation reached 22, including a university from Hungary. The Orkhon Process, which is the exchange program for academic and university students within the Turkic

University Union, started its first pilot project in academic year 2017–2018. Since then, there has been a high volume of student mobility among member universities. The Student Council of the Union has also been instrumental in seeding a cooperation culture in the minds of university students through the realization of various activities.³¹

The sizable young population of the Turkic States constitutes the key target group that will enhance Turkic cooperation in all its dimensions; since 2015, the Organization of Turkic States has organized youth activities, including youth camps, festivals and forums. It provides platforms where Turkic youngsters can learn from each other and generate a common vision for the future. So far, these platforms have welcomed more than 3,000 young participants coming from the Turkic Member and Observer States, as well as from other regional countries. The establishment of the Youth Platform of the Organization of Turkic States in 2017 is a milestone in increasing cooperation and coordination between young people from the Turkic States through different projects and activities. This platform brings them together under one roof and offers them the possibility of representation in regional and international youth platforms. As the first activities of this platform, three Young Leaders Forums were organized in Nakhchivan in 2018, in Turkistan in 2019 and in Osh in 2021 with broad participation from the region.³² These forums were instrumental in bringing youngsters together, sharing the same history, culture and language, and preparing a future generation of leaders with an increased sense of awareness of regional problems.

Sport is an area that also cements cooperation among young people, channeling their energy and dynamism toward common causes. With this in mind, the first university sports games of the Organization of Turkic States (Turkic Universiade) were successfully hosted in Baku in 2018 with the participation of 400 athletes in 7 branches. Because of its emphasis on shared culture and history, the Turkic Organization supports the revival and protection of traditional sports. Thus, the Organization significantly contributed to the preparation and realization of the three World Nomad Games initiated by and hosted in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, 2016 and 2018.³³ The Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States attended the opening ceremony of the 3rd World Nomad Games, which coincided with the 6th Summit of the Organization of

Turkic States held on September 3, 2018 in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan. Over 4,000 athletes from about 100 countries, and thousands of audience members from around the world attended the World Nomad Games, for which there is growing global interest. The UN General Assembly has already recognized the importance that the Games place on intercultural dialogue and their valuable contribution to promoting social cohesion, peace and development.³⁴ Secretariat of the Organization, Ministry of Youth and Sports of Turkey and World Ethnosport Confederation (WEC) are all participating in the organizing committee of the 4th Games to be hosted by Turkey in 2022, under the leadership of the WEC. The Organization and the WEC, based on the MoU between them, closely cooperate in developing Turkic ethno-sports.

The above-mentioned cooperation areas are tangibly contributing to enhancing people-to-people cooperation in the Turkic region. As long as Turkic-speaking people directly benefit from the outcomes of the projects carried out by the Organization of Turkic States in different sectors, this cooperation will be further bolstered.³⁵

Capacity-Building and Vocational Training as a Cross-cutting Responsibility

Capacity-building and vocational training are significant elements of international development cooperation. Expressing its firm commitment to the achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, the Organization of Turkic States carries out capacity-building and vocational projects in different areas. In addition to the training of young diplomats mentioned above, the Secretariat facilitates the implementation of projects in the fields of economy, transport, customs, tourism, media, diaspora and health, led by its Member States, through experience- and knowledge-sharing. It also benefits from the expertise of the international organization in most of these areas.

The capacity-building programs undertaken by the Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Turkey, together with Turkey’s Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organization (KOSGEB) for its counterparts in the Organization of Turkic States on investment statistics and investment climate trainings, combined with information- and experience-sharing programs in the field of development of SMEs, have start-

ed to yield tangible results. Furthermore, the joint publication of the Organization and the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), titled “Trade and Investment Relations among the Turkic Council Member States,”³⁶ published in 2021, is important capacity-building research that will serve to improve economic ties among the Turkic States in a multilateral way. In the field of customs, the Organization of Turkic States has so far organized several regional and international workshops on “Post Clearance and Risk management,” the “Authorized Economic Operator (AEO) System,” “Customs Transit Facilitation” and the “Electronic TIR System” in Ankara, Astana, Baku, Bishkek and Izmir through the support of relevant authorities from its Member States. During these events, the Organization has closely collaborated with international organizations and platforms such the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the International Road Transport Union (IRU). The Organization of Turkic States is also working for the expansion of the e-TIR pilot project between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which aims to digitalize the system of transport of goods and allow holders to carry cargo without the need for customs control procedures at the borders of other Member States. As for tourism, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey carried out vocational training programs on the service sector for the tourism employees of the other Member States in coordination with the relevant Ministries and tourism associations. As a result, over the course of 2014–2017, more than 1,000 tourism employees in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were trained, of whom 50% were women. This capacity-building initiative became the subject of several UN reports, and is considered a best practice for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Moreover, the Organization of Turkic States has contributed to the development of relations with its Member States and the UN World Tourism Organization, especially in the field of capacity-building. In this regard, the Organization contributed to the adoption of international standards in the field of tourism by all Member States. The fact that the tour agencies involved in the Modern Silk Road Joint Tour Package project signed “the Code of Ethics of the UNTWO” constitutes an example in this direction.³⁷

Another tangible capacity-building activity prevails in the field of media cooperation. The Social Media Training Program of the Organization of Turkic States was organized in Istanbul on July 29–30, 2021 by the Directorate of Communications of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. During the training program, which was attended by 100 participants from the Member States, issues related to the use of social media, combating disinformation, addressing cyber-security threats and Turkey’s experience in these fields were discussed, and a decision was taken to continue these trainings in a regular way. Similarly, the capacity-building trainings carried out for diaspora institutions in Berlin and New York in 2019, attended by more than 200 participants, were also instrumental in the exchange of information and knowledge on the working system for diaspora affairs of the Member States.³⁸ As a concrete outcome, the initiatives generated for cooperation among the diasporas of the Turkic States within the Organization paved the way for the signing of bilateral agreements between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Kazakhstan.

As for cooperation in the field of health, the first face-to-face Vaccine Workshop of the Health Scientific Group of the Organization of Turkic States, hosted by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Turkey with the coordination of the Secretariat on August 24, 2020 in Izmir, was a timely capacity-building event. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, this event brought together medical professionals from the Member States and provided a forum for the exchange of knowledge about COVID-19 and the vaccine development process. Moreover, within the framework of a MoU on cooperation between the Organization of Turkic States and the UN WHO, the two organizations are planning to join forces in exchanging information, including methodological and regulatory documents on public health, and in ensuring sanitary and epidemiological well-being; they plan to hold joint events for capacity-building in areas of mutual interest.

As indicated above, capacity-building and vocational training in several areas rest at the core of the activities of the Organization of Turkic States. This approach paves the way for the needs assessment of the Member States, and facilitates the putting forward of adequate responses to these needs through the mutual exchange of information, knowledge and experience.³⁹

Support of the Organization of Turkic States for International Cooperation

Regional cooperation is essential for the enhancement of international collaboration. In line with this perspective, the Organization of Turkic States has succeeded in building strong ties with regional and international organizations in a short period of time. Becoming an observer to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in 2012, the Organization is making considerable efforts to obtain observer status at the UN General Assembly and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and has established fruitful relations with the specialized institutions of these organizations. MoUs signed with the UN Development Program (UNDP), the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), the United Nations Alliance of Civilization (UNAOC), the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the UN WHO constitute the road map for relations with the UN and its specialized institutions. The international conference co-organized with the UNDP in 2015 on the role of informational technologies for development, attended by more than 150 high-level experts from 15 regional countries, and the global event on the role of youth to prevent violent extremism co-realized with UNAOC with 300 young leaders coming from 40 countries, are just a few examples of how the Organization has partnered side by side with the UN to address global concerns. Furthermore, the support that the Organization provided to the UNOSSC helped to make the 2017 Global South-South Development EXPO hosted by the Turkish government in Antalya a successful event, in which more than 800 high-level officials from 120 countries participated. In addition, the activities that the Organization of Turkic States has organized on SDGs with the UNDP and UNWTO have reiterated its commitment to the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Thus, the UNOSSC report, titled “South-South in Action: How the Turkic Council Uses South-South Cooperation to Promote Regional and Global Development,”⁴⁰ launched in 2017 in New York on the margins of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly outlines and praises the work of the Organization of Turkic States in this area.

Relations with the OIC have equally improved in recent years. The MoU signed with this international organization supports the bid of

Organization of Turkic States to obtain observer status. The cooperation with SESRIC on economic issues, and the Islamic Cooperation Youth Forum (ICYF) on youth-related areas, fortify the ties between the Organization and the OIC. In addition to this, the working relations built between the Organization and the OSCE have proved the former’s readiness and firm will to contribute to stability and prosperity in Eurasia. The regular participation of the Secretary General in the annual OSCE Ministerial Council meeting upon the invitation of the OSCE Chairmanship is an essential practice that the Organization of Turkic States values to this end.

The strong ties between the Organization of Turkic States and regional and international partners enable the Organization to closely track global agendas and incorporate them in its work. In addition to its cooperation with UN specialized agencies, its close ties with the World Customs Organization (WCO), the International Centre for Sports Security (ICSS), the Sports Integrity Global Alliance (SIGA) and the WEC yield tangible outcomes in this direction. Moreover, the contacts that the Organization has initiated with a wide range of organizations from the European Union, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) constitute additional testimony to its active collaboration with actors of various regions.

Organization of Turkic States also engages actively in international development assistance. Within this framework, the ongoing cooperation between the Organization and the Turkic Cooperation and Coordination Agency will be instrumental in implementing joint developmental projects in the region. All of these relations with external parties have reconfirmed the role of the Organization of Turkic States as a promoter of partnerships and collaboration on global development topics that require joint engagement while contributing to the development of inter-regionalism in Eurasia.⁴¹

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Conclusion

As we witnessed in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Organization of Turkic States is a regional cooperation mechanism capable of adapting itself and responding meaningfully to emerging conditions. With its fast decision-making process, practical working mechanisms and selective cooperation areas, the Organization can mobilize itself to answer to the needs of its Member and Observer States and their people. Its multi-faced approach to cooperation aligns with the miscellaneous nature of these needs. The Organization's active role in converging foreign policies of the Turkic States on issues of common interest, fostering multidimensional connectivity with a sectoral approach from economy to tourism, and its firm assistance to increasing people-to-people contacts constitute the important assets that the Organization brings to Turkic cooperation. Moreover, its contribution to the capacity-building of its Member States in areas including but not limited to diplomacy, economy, transportation, customs, tourism, media, diaspora and health services benefit not only its Member and Observer States but also their people. The Organization's growing relations with the UN and its specialized agencies as well as other regional

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and international actors constitute a testimony to its active role in global governance. With these instruments in its toolkit, the Heads of States of the Turkic States adopted the "Turkic World Vision 2040" during the 8th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States hosted by Turkey on November 12, 2021 as a strategic document to draw the road map of

cooperation for the next decade. This is another proof of the Organization's ability to evolve responsively to face the needs and recognize the opportunities of the upcoming decade.

David Mitrany spoke truly when he stated that an international organization can be functional when its activities are commensurate with the conditions under which it has to operate, and when these activities meet the needs of the moment. This perspective is certainly support-

ive of the development of multilateral cooperation and multilateralism. The Organization of Turkic States’ achievements in various areas since its establishment run in close parallel with this understanding. The Organization catches the spirit of the times, and shapes its agenda and carries out its functions accordingly. Being a resilient member of international community requires nothing less. The Secretariat, as the permanent body of the Organization, should continue its tireless efforts to turn the idea of Turkic cooperation into reality. The political will displayed at the level of the Heads of State of the Turkic States to deepen their ongoing multilateral cooperation should be reflected in the actions of all stakeholders. We cannot predict the future, but we can prepare ourselves for its management. In this context, the Organization of Turkic States is equipped with the adequate means to remain a functional international organization meeting today’s needs as well as tomorrow’s, based on the *motto*, “together we are stronger”.

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