

**Citation List:** Koçak, M. (2026). Shared blood, shifting order: The Türkiye–Azerbaijan strategic axis in defense, energy, and identity. In Ş. Aktürk & A. Balcı (Eds.), *Azerbaijan and Türkiye in world politics* (pp. 327-339). Turkish Academy of Sciences Publications.

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## **CHAPTER 21**

# **SHARED BLOOD, SHIFTING ORDER: THE TÜRKİYE–AZERBAIJAN STRATEGIC AXIS IN DEFENSE, ENERGY, AND IDENTITY**

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## SHARED BLOOD, SHIFTING ORDER: THE TÜRKİYE–AZERBAIJAN STRATEGIC AXIS IN DEFENSE, ENERGY, AND IDENTITY

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### **Abstract**

This article explains how Türkiye and Azerbaijan transformed a long-standing fraternal bond into a region-shaping alliance following the Second Karabakh War in the context of permissive systemic dynamics. Using Type III Neoclassical Realism (NCR), the article argues that the shift from symbolic fraternity to institutionalized convergence was enabled by a permissive structural moment, marked by United States (U.S.) retrenchment, Russian strategic overreach, and the erosion of liberal-order norms, and activated by leadership-level agency. The study combines document analysis, budgetary data, and official statements to trace four arenas of cooperation: (1) defense cooperation in areas including drone technology and joint drills; (2) energy and transit corridors, most notably Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Middle Corridor; (3) a cultural-normative strategy that leverages Turkic identity for soft-power reach; and (4) the repurposing of the Organization of Turkic States from a cultural forum into an order-building platform. Findings show that these strands form a mutually reinforcing ecosystem: hard-power credibility attracts economic partners, connectivity projects consolidate identity narratives, and the revamped Organization of Turkic States (OTS) elevates bilateral gains to the multilateral level. The article also challenges the view of middle powers as primarily norm-preserving or reactive, demonstrating instead that they can act as entrepreneurial order-builders when systemic slack and domestic capacity align. It concludes that the Türkiye–Azerbaijan axis represents an emerging model of “bottom-up regionalism,” illustrating how middle powers in a post-hegemonic world can design new rules, corridors, and identities to suit their strategic priorities.

### **Keywords**

*Type III Neoclassical Realism, Bottom-up Regionalism, Türkiye-Azerbaijan Relations, Organization of Turkic States, Middle Powers, The Middle Corridor*

## **Introduction**

The partnership between Türkiye and Azerbaijan is usually celebrated as the natural outgrowth of two leaders' personal rapport or of Turkic brotherhood. Commentaries frequently dwell on the warmth between Presidents Erdoğan and Aliyev and echo the slogan "one nation, two states," suggesting that cultural intimacy almost solely explains why the two capitals have moved in lockstep since 2020 (Çiçek & Asker, 2024; Deveci Bozkuş, 2022; Karayel, 2024). While the leadership and shared identity do serve as a very important dynamic in bilateral relations between the two countries, explaining a strategic relationship of this depth purely in terms of kinship risks anchoring it in sentiment rather than in the firmer terrain of international politics. Therefore, far from diminishing the moral or historical value of the bond, placing it on a more structural footing shows just how resilient that bond can be as it reveals the external conditions that have made cooperation feasible, scalable and durable.

Since the end of the Second Karabakh War, the rules and hierarchies that once disciplined secondary actors have loosened. The United States has become a selective rather than comprehensive guarantor of order (Spektor, 2025), while Russia's war in Ukraine has drained Moscow's leverage across its near abroad (de Waal, 2024; PSCR, 2025). Institutions fashioned during the liberal era now struggle to police norms or supply public goods, and their great-power patrons can no longer veto regional initiatives with the same authority (Mearsheimer, 2019; Ikenberry, 2018). This slack in the international system does not automatically produce new alignments, but it enlarges the menu of feasible options available to states prepared to seize them. The current alignment of great powers has opened space for middle powers to gain both relevance and autonomy, while also allowing their alliances to flourish (Zhiyenbayev, 2025). Türkiye-Azerbaijan partnership has gained traction under such conditions. I therefore argue that what has emerged since the Second Karabakh War is a deliberate project to exploit systemic slack, moving beyond reactive hedging to institutionalize a distinct Turkic sub-system as a new center of gravity in Eurasia.

This paper therefore asks how have Türkiye and Azerbaijan transformed a kinship-based bilateral bond into an institutionalized, region-shaping initiative, and why has this scaling been possible amid the fragmentation of the global order? It advances an argument rooted in systemic permissiveness and argues that hegemonic retreat opened space for entrepreneurial middle powers, and the Turkish and Azerbaijani leaderships moved quickly to institutionalize that space before it closed again. The theoretical vocabulary comes from Type III NCR, which holds that material opportunities arise at the structural level but must be recognized, prioritized and enacted by domestic decision-makers. Leadership charisma and cultural ties matter, but primarily as filters through which larger strategic possibilities are perceived (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 18-19).

Reframing the relationship in this way contributes to several scholarly debates. First, it complicates the conventional portrayal of middle powers as norm entrepreneurs whose main task is to shore up a liberal status quo (Jordaan, 2003, p. 167; Cooper, 1997, p. 6). In an era of hegemonic contraction, middle powers can become order engineers in their own right, designing institutions that reflect their strategic preferences rather than merely defending those of others. Second, it extends regional-security theory beyond its maritime preoccupations by analyzing a land-centric corridor that links the Black Sea to western China—an area where defense networks, energy corridors and overland supply chains intertwine. Finally, it challenges assumptions that institutional creativity withers without great-power sponsorship (Kaim, 2019, p. 6). The evolution of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) suggests that peripheral actors can use cultural affinity and connectivity platforms to fashion new legitimacy precisely because older hierarchies have lost their binding force.

The study focuses on the period from 2020 to 2025, a period that begins with the Second Karabakh War which coincides with Türkiye's increasing strategic autonomy from traditional Euro-Atlantic frameworks. Within this window it examines three domains—defense, economy and institutional diplomacy—in which systemic opportunity has been translated into durable infrastructure. Joint drone production, cross-

Caspian pipeline schemes and the procedural upgrade of the OTS illustrate how structural slack was rapidly converted into hard capabilities and rules. Evidence is drawn from formal agreements, budgetary data, satellite imagery and interviews with officials and industry insiders conducted between early 2024 and mid-2025. Leadership statements are analyzed not as causal drivers but as textual traces that reveal how decision-makers interpreted the changing external environment.

The argument unfolds in a sequence that mirrors this logic. The next section sets out the theoretical framework, blending Type III NCR with insights from historical institutionalism to explain why systemic openings matter only when domestic filters align in favor of bold action. The second section maps the international context of hegemonic retreat, showing how U.S. recalibration, Russian overstretch and normative fatigue combined to relax external constraints on regional initiative. The third section provides the empirical analysis of how Türkiye and Azerbaijan turned that permissive context into concrete cooperation across military, economic and diplomatic arenas. Final section before the conclusion examines the OTS, demonstrating that what began as a cultural forum now functions as a vehicle for governance and regional projection. The conclusion reflects on what this case implies for the study of middle powers and for theories of order-making in an age when global guardrails are fraying.

## 1. Theoretical Framework: Leadership Agency in a Permissive Structure

Before tracing how Türkiye and Azerbaijan turned a bilateral alignment into a region-shaping project, we must clarify the theoretical lens that guides our interpretation of those developments. The following section sets out the logic of Type III NCR, not as an abstract detour but as the conceptual scaffolding that enables us to link systemic change, domestic filtering, and observable policy outcomes in a coherent causal chain. By specifying the variables of clarity, permissiveness, and domestic intervening factors, the framework tells us what to look for in the empirical record and why the areas of cooperation between these countries carry explanatory weight. In short, this section equips the reader with the analytical tools needed to distinguish agency from structure, contingency from inevitability, and thus to understand the strategic significance of the Türkiye–Azerbaijan partnership in a fragmenting international order.

Type III NCR retains the classical realist focus on power and anarchy but refines the systemic level in two important ways. First, it introduces clarity as an independent variable: the degree to which the structure of the international system sends unambiguous signals about threats, opportunities, and time horizons (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 52). When clarity is high states face clear dangers and narrow strategic choices. When clarity is low, strategic ambiguity predominates and multiple courses of action appear plausible. Second, it measures permissiveness—how tightly or loosely great powers monitor and police the behavior of others (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 55-56). An environment can therefore be ambiguous yet highly restrictive (as in contested Cold-War proxy zones) or permissive yet crystal-clear (as in unipolar moments when the lone hegemon sets bright red lines). The interaction of clarity and permissiveness defines the structural “envelope” inside which foreign-policy entrepreneurs must operate.

Structure, however, is only a first-order stimulus. Here it is important to note that the Type III NCR departs from Waltzian systemic reading of international relations while also arguing that domestic variables also can not solely explain the foreign policies of individual states (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 2). It therefore locates the decisive transmission belt in a set of domestic intervening variables that filter systemic cues before they become policy. Ripsman and his colleagues group these variables into four clusters: leader images and beliefs, strategic culture, state–society relations, and domestic institutions (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 59-60). Each cluster shapes different stages of the policy process. Leader images color threat perception and risk tolerance; strategic culture sets the repertoire of acceptable moves; state–society relations determine which factions can mobilize resources; and institutions translate decisions into sustained programmes. Because the salience of each cluster varies with issue area and time horizon—leaders dominate rapid crisis responses, whereas institutions loom larger in long-term grand strategy (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 82-84). Therefore, Type III can explain both sudden shifts and gradual order-building.

Crucially, the theory is not content to explain national decisions in isolation; it seeks to account for international outcomes that emerge when multiple states, similarly structured but diversely filtered, interact. Ripsman et al. argue that the cumulative effects of middle-power choices can reshape regional subsystems when systemic permissiveness is high and when at least some actors possess the domestic capacity to innovate (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 94). The result is a patterned, if fragmentary, redistribution of authority that traditional balance-of-power models struggle to predict. Building on this logic, the Türkiye–Azerbaijan axis is conceptualized here not as a reactive adaptation to external pressures, but as a proactive utilization of systemic slack to engineer a Turkic-centric sub-system that functions as a new center of gravity in Eurasia.

Applying this framework to the contemporary Eurasian landscape highlights why the Türkiye–Azerbaijan partnership merits analytical attention without resorting to cultural essentialism. The aftermath of the global financial crisis, the United States’ selective retrenchment, and Russia’s costly invasion of Ukraine have together produced a low-clarity, high-permissiveness environment in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Great-power red lines have blurred; enforcement capacity has thinned; and once-dominant institutional hierarchies no longer dictate behavior. In Type III terms, the envelope for strategic experimentation has widened dramatically.

Yet opportunity alone does not generate action. Among the many states situated inside this permissive envelope, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have been comparatively quick to exploit it. The difference lies in the domestic filters identified by Type III NCR. Centralized presidential systems give Ankara and Baku a leadership structure that can convert perception into policy with minimal veto points; shared strategic narratives supply a cultural script that legitimizes risk; and defense-industrial bureaucracies under strong executive control provide institutional machinery for rapid implementation.

Seen through this lens, the Türkiye–Azerbaijan dyad illustrates several larger theoretical claims. First, it affirms the primacy of structure in setting the boundaries of feasible action: the partnership could not have deepened so quickly had great-power constraints remained as tight as they were a decade earlier. Second, it shows that agency is unevenly distributed even among states that inhabit the same structural niche. Third, it demonstrates that middle powers can engage in entrepreneurial order-making, not merely reactive hedging, when their domestic settings amplify.

Framing the case in these terms also clarifies what the paper does not claim. It does not deny the role of historical memory or linguistic kinship; rather, it argues that such affinities became politically actionable only once structural permissiveness and domestic coherence converged. Nor does it treat leadership charisma as the fundamental driver. On Type III grounds, charisma matters chiefly as a cognitive lens through which structural incentives are recognized. Finally, the argument does not posit Türkiye and Azerbaijan as inevitable success stories; the same filters that enable rapid mobilization can also create risks of strategic miscalculation if systemic conditions change.

The remainder of the study follows directly from this theoretical scaffold. A contextual section specifies how declining clarity and rising permissiveness have unfolded since 2020. Subsequent empirical chapters trace how Turkish–Azerbaijani cooperation in defense, economy, and institutional diplomacy embodies the logic of filtered structural opportunity. The conclusion returns to the broader debate on middle-power agency, underscoring that what is often labelled “regional assertiveness” is, in Type III terms, a contingent product of systemic slack plus domestic capacity-conditions that may not endure, but that reveal how new order-building can occur during moments of hegemonic retreat.

## **2. Systemic Context: Hegemonic Decline and Global Fragmentation**

The intensification of Türkiye–Azerbaijan strategic cooperation and its projection into a regional institutional framework must be situated within a specific systemic moment where the simultaneous retreat of hegemonic powers and the fragmentation of global governance structures. This section outlines the external conditions that created the permissive environment in which Türkiye and Azerbaijan were able to

act with increased strategic autonomy. These conditions lowered the cost, risk, and resistance associated with regional initiative. In particular, the contraction of United States (U.S.) global leadership, the overstretch of Russian power in its near abroad, and the erosion of universalist institutional legitimacy opened political and normative space for entrepreneurial middle powers.

The United States remains the most powerful global actor, but its willingness to exercise hegemonic leadership, particularly in the broader Middle East and Eurasia, has declined markedly since the early 2010s. The pivot to Asia under the Obama administration (Clinton, 2011), the transactional retrenchment under Trump (Wright, 2020), and the strategic restraint pursued under Biden (Gebert, 2024) have cumulatively eroded America's deterrent credibility in adjacent regions. Washington's disengagement from Syria, its ambivalence in the South Caucasus during and after the Second Karabakh War, and its limited appetite for new military entanglements have signaled to regional actors that U.S. security guarantees are conditional and geographically uneven. At the institutional level, U.S. leadership has also been undermined by domestic polarization and declining capacity to sustain liberal multilateralism. Institutions such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), once cohesive under U.S. primacy, have become internally fragmented, with divergent threat perceptions and inconsistent burden sharing. Meanwhile, global institutions like the United Nations (UN) and World Trade Organization (WTO) face gridlock, declining legitimacy, and limited capacity for enforcement (Yeola, 2025). This has created a permissive normative environment in which alternative institutional forms-rooted in regional identity or pragmatic cooperation-can emerge without encountering immediate delegitimization from the liberal core. For Türkiye, this retreat has both removed constraints and created incentives. The strategic ambiguity of the U.S. in northern Syria, its inconsistent stance toward Türkiye's defense priorities (e.g., S-400 sanctions), and its reactive posture in the South Caucasus have all reinforced Ankara's perception that reliance on U.S.-led frameworks limits policy autonomy. For Azerbaijan, U.S. inaction during the Second Karabakh War provided a strategic window of opportunity. In both cases, the decline of U.S. engagement has not left a vacuum per se, but it has redistributed initiative downward and toward capable regional actors willing to take risks in shaping their environments.

Parallel to U.S. retrenchment, Russia's regional position has entered a phase of relative weakening. While Moscow remains a critical military and diplomatic actor in Eurasia, its strategic bandwidth has been severely constrained since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The war has consumed material resources, strategic attention, and international legitimacy. In the Caucasus and Central Asia-regions traditionally under Russian dominance-Moscow's coercive and normative instruments have visibly weakened (de Waal, 2024). In the South Caucasus, Russia's role as a broker of post-2020 ceasefire arrangements have rapidly eroded. Despite stationing peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia proved unable to enforce the 2020 trilateral agreement, especially during renewed Azerbaijani operations in 2023. This perceived passivity damaged Moscow's credibility with both Baku and Yerevan (Kucera, 2024). More importantly, it gave Azerbaijan political space to act unilaterally, relying instead on support from Türkiye and Israel. In Central Asia, traditional Russian influence has also declined. Kazakhstan's firm neutrality on Ukraine, Uzbekistan's distancing from Moscow-led economic projects, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)'s paralysis during regional crises all point to a growing autonomy among former client states. Russia's soft power tools have also degraded. The appeal of the Russian model, grounded in illiberal sovereignty and anti-Westernism, has diminished in the face of military underperformance and economic fragility. Russian-language media and cultural influence, long pillars of Moscow's regional projection, now compete with rising Turkish and Chinese narratives (Brad Finance, 2023). In this context, Russian power has shifted from a commanding presence to a more constrained regional role whose capacity to punish or co-opt deviation has diminished. For Azerbaijan, which has long calibrated its position between Moscow and Ankara, this shift has increased the strategic value of deeper cooperation with Türkiye. For Türkiye, Russia's weakening enables greater maneuverability in contested regions like the Caucasus and Black Sea without immediate confrontation.

A third enabling condition is the normative disintegration of the liberal international order. Once sustained by universalist claims to democracy, market liberalism, and multilateral governance, that order now looks fragmented and selectively enforced. Its core norms lost credibility as the very actors that crafted them applied them inconsistently, intervening forcefully in some theatres while remaining conspicuously silent in others. Nowhere has this double standard been more damaging than in the West's muted response to Israel's devastation of Gaza, an episode widely condemned across the Global South as genocide yet met in Western capitals with rhetorical evasions and veto diplomacy (Khar, 2024). That silence stripped the "rules-based" banner of its moral authority and signaled that liberal universalism operates on a sliding scale of interests (Lo, 2023). In the vacuum created by such selective morality, regional orders grounded in cultural affinity, shared threat perceptions, or pragmatic complementarity acquire new legitimacy. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) does not pretend to universality; its authority flows from Turkic identity, overlapping historical narratives, and regionally embedded governance logics. What might once have been dismissed as parochial is now accepted as a workable alternative in a pluralistic international landscape. The erosion of institutional universalism therefore lowers the normative costs of pursuing bespoke frameworks. Türkiye and Azerbaijan have seized on this opening, framing their cooperation not as a repudiation of liberal norms but as a realistic supplement to a discredited hierarchy. By offering a flexible, identity-linked platform unburdened by liberal proceduralism, the OTS allows them to expand their partnership without incurring reputational penalties, which was an opportunity made possible as much by the West's selective silence in Gaza as by any military or diplomatic calculus.

These three dimensions (U.S. retrenchment, Russian contraction, and normative fragmentation) have collectively created a historically specific opportunity structure. This is not merely a vacuum or power void; it is a multidimensional environment in which constraints are relaxed, and initiative becomes feasible for non-great powers. However, systemic permissiveness alone is insufficient. Many states occupy similar structural conditions but remain inert. What distinguishes Türkiye and Azerbaijan is their capacity to act: institutional readiness, leadership convergence, and a shared strategic vision. This section has laid out the systemic context in which that agency becomes intelligible. The next section turns to the empirical analysis of how Türkiye and Azerbaijan, acting through these structural openings, have translated bilateral synergy into a region-shaping strategy rooted in defense cooperation, economic connectivity, and institutional projection.

### **3. Strategic Convergence and Institutionalization: The Türkiye-Azerbaijan Partnership in Practice**

The 2020 Second Karabakh War elevated the long-standing slogan "one nation, two states" from rhetoric into practice, as Türkiye's decisive military, intelligence, and diplomatic support helped secure Azerbaijan's victory and redefined both countries' regional ambitions. Within months, the two presidents codified their wartime convergence in the Shusha Declaration, elevating the partnership to allied status and committing Ankara and Baku to mutual defense planning, joint procurement, and coordinated foreign policy (Prezident. az, 2021). Acting through centralized presidential systems at a moment when U.S. attention was drifting and Russian leverage was stretched thin, they translated symbolic fraternity into structure with new interoperability protocols, a defense-industrial agenda, and an institutional drive that now anchors a broader Turkic project. This section traces how that commitment plays out across four interconnected arenas. First is the dense weave of military integration, from shared drone doctrine to increasingly complex joint exercises. Second are the energy and transit corridors the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), the Middle Corridor, the prospective Zangezur link that lock the two economies together and project influence from the Caspian to Europe. Third is the deployment of Turkic language and shared history as soft-power capital, giving the partnership cultural legitimacy across Central Asia. Fourth is the transformation of the once-cultural Organization of Turkic States into a nascent governance platform that channels bilateral momentum into multilateral clout. Taken together, these strands show why the Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis now shapes, rather than merely reacts to, the balance of power from the Black Sea to the Kazakh steppe.

Defense cooperation is now the core of the Türkiye–Azerbaijan partnership, knitting together shared threat perceptions, operational integration, and political symbolism. During the Second Kabakh War Turkish-supplied Bayraktar TB2 drones helped secure Azerbaijan’s swift victory and demonstrated Ankara’s readiness to shape outcomes in the South Caucasus (Köker, 2020). What began as wartime collaboration later hardened into structure. The Shusha Declaration signed on 15 June 2021 codified an “allied” relationship that pledges mutual defense cooperation against external threats (Veliyev, 2021). The empirical record of these protocols reveals the creation of joint planning staffs, defense-industrial working groups, and officer-exchange programs, illustrating a deep structural integration (Ulupınar, 2021). Annual “Mustafa Kemal Atatürk” and winter exercises have grown in scale and complexity, rehearsing combined-arms manoeuvre, mountain warfare, and urban combat in locations—from Nakhichevan to the Armenian frontier—chosen as much for deterrent messaging as for training value. Interoperability now extends to logistics and Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR), and Azerbaijani cadets train in Turkish academies under instructors seasoned in counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Syrian operations, diffusing a proactive, expeditionary military culture (Rehimov, 2025a). The Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership on defense industry quickly widened to include space (Yiğitoğlu, 2024). Military exercises, shared drone doctrine, and cross-border logistics corridors further embed the partnership into a regional security-economic web. The alliance also welcomes willing actors such as Pakistan spreading the bilateral synergy beyond the Turkic world (Fazl-e Haider, 2025). These developments embed Turkish technicians, nurture a shared maintenance ecosystem, and pave the way for strategic cooperation to deepen.

Economic interdependence is as integral to the Türkiye–Azerbaijan axis as joint military planning. Energy and transit projects lock the two economies together, generate mutual leverage over larger powers, and turn the partnership into a pivotal connector across Eurasia. The anchor is the Southern Gas Corridor, where TANAP carries Shah Deniz gas across Georgia and Türkiye to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and European markets. TANAP frees Baku from Russian transit, advances Ankara’s ambition to become an energy hub, and embeds the alliance in Europe’s energy-security calculus. Building on TANAP’s success, the partners have widened the corridor concept. The Middle Corridor—running from China through Central Asia, across the Caspian to Azerbaijan, then via Türkiye to Europe—offers an alternative to Russian routes while dovetailing with, yet not surrendering to, China’s Belt and Road (Aguiar, 2025). Coordinated investments in Alat and Mersin ports, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and harmonized customs procedures are designed to shift East-West trade flows onto Turkic-managed infrastructure. The contested Zangezur Corridor, envisioned to link mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan and Türkiye without traversing Iran or Russia, would complete this Turkic land bridge and give physical form to a geopolitical arc from Istanbul to the Kazakh steppe. Trade and investment deepen the web (Yeni Şafak, 2023). The State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR)’s multibillion-dollar stake in Türkiye’s STAR (Socar Türkiye Aegean Refinery) facility and Petkim complex, and the growing presence of Turkish contractors and defense firms in Azerbaijan, convert energy revenue into strategic capital. These projects bind supply chains, finance military procurement, and signal long-term commitment (Cevrioğlu, 2023). At the multilateral level, Ankara and Baku, together with Tashkent, push the Organization of Turkic States toward tariff harmonization, logistics integration, and digital connectivity, scaling their partnership into a budding economic bloc (Efesoy, 2025). Although the volume of Türkiye–Azerbaijan trade and intra-Turkic trade more broadly remains modest, both governments have taken clear steps to deepen their economic interdependence. This integration distributes shared rents that support domestic stability, amplifies their bargaining power with Moscow, Beijing, and Brussels, and repositions each state as an essential transit hub rather than a peripheral actor.

Beyond its military and economic pillars, the Türkiye–Azerbaijan partnership relies on a carefully cultivated cultural-normative dimension that frames their alignment as a civilizational project rather than a utilitarian bargain. Drawing on shared Turkic linguistic roots, overlapping historical memories, and Islamic markers, Ankara and Baku now deploy identity as strategic currency: since 2020 they have translated fraternal rhetoric into structured initiatives in education, media, public diplomacy, and intergovernmental coordination. The

OTS has served as the chief vehicle. Through summits, joint communiqués, and cultural exchanges, the two governments cast the “Turkic world” as an inclusive community tied to sovereignty, connectivity, and mutual respect. State broadcasters such as Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) and Azerbaijan Television (AzTV) have expanded Turkic-language programming, while new scholarship schemes and joint-degree programs under the Turkic University Union cultivate an epistemic network that internalizes this vision (Omuraliyev, 2024). In Central Asia, where hard-power assets are thin, identity-based outreach offers a low-cost, high-yield pathway to influence, positioning Türkiye and Azerbaijan as benign facilitators rather than domineering patrons. Cultural coherence also legitimizes deeper institutional integration inside the OTS from regulatory harmonization to joint investment vehicles by presenting governance initiatives as natural extensions of a common civilizational space. The personal diplomacy of Presidents Erdoğan and Aliyev, who routinely invoke historical continuity and Turkic solidarity in international forums, amplifies this narrative and aligns elite perceptions despite asymmetries in size and capability (Rehimov, 2025b). Thus, cultural and normative projection supplies the ideological scaffolding that legitimizes the alliance domestically, attracts culturally proximate partners, and underwrites Ankara and Baku’s broader aspiration to craft a region-wide order grounded in their own strategic priorities.

The Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis has transcended bilateral bounds by recasting the OTS into a region-making instrument. Founded in 2009 as the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States, the body was largely cultural until the post-2020 window, when the Karabakh victory and systemic slack encouraged Ankara and Baku to rebrand it and themselves as architects of a distinct Eurasian pole. At the 2021 Istanbul Summit the bloc adopted the “Turkic World Vision 2040,” signaling a pivot from heritage to governance (Organization of Turkic States, 2021). Three objectives motivate this shift: consolidating the Türkiye-Azerbaijan dyad as the Turkic core; supplying Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and others with an institutional hedge against Russian dominance and Chinese overreach; and operationalizing identity into functional cooperation on trade, security, education and infrastructure (Organization of Turkic States, n.d.). The empirical examination of recent summits shows that the agenda has since widened: defense dialogue now appears in official communiqués, while customs harmonization and digital-corridor schemes move through documented ministerial tracks, and Middle-Corridor infrastructure is folded into OTS frameworks. Power within the organization is asymmetrical yet transparent Türkiye hosts the secretariat and supplies bureaucratic heft, Azerbaijan contributes post-war prestige and investment leverage, and the bilateral Shusha Declaration explicitly binds their alliance to OTS ambitions. Symbolic statecraft reinforces cohesion: maps of the “Turkic World,” emphasis on language unity and technical offshoots such as the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States (TurkPA) and the Turkic Academy provide both cognitive glue and bureaucratic continuity (Turkic Academy, 2024). Enlargement underscores rising appeal: Uzbekistan’s 2019 full membership and Turkmenistan’s observer status reflect Central Asian interest in a forum that offers connectivity without the heavy conditionality of Western clubs or Moscow-led blocs. Theoretically, the OTS exemplifies how middle powers exploit permissive structures to build alternative institutions, substituting entrepreneurial regionalism for hegemonic sponsorship. It is not yet a collective-security alliance, but as a functional nucleus. Driven by Ankara’s agenda-setting and Baku’s diplomatic assertiveness, it integrates military synergy, economic corridors and cultural diplomacy into an embryonic regional order. In doing so, it confirms that middle powers can translate structural slack into durable governance frameworks, illuminating new pathways of agency and order-making in a fragmented international system.

Taken together, the military, economic, cultural, and institutional tracks form a mutually reinforcing ecosystem. Joint exercises and credible deterrence; pipelines, rail links, and shared investments lock in economic interdependence; Turkic identity lends the project a ready-made narrative; and the retooled OTS gives all of it a multilateral façade. The result is not yet a formal defense bloc, but it is already strong enough to shape regional agendas and offer smaller Turkic states an alternative partner when dealing with Moscow, Beijing, or Brussels. In short, the Türkiye–Azerbaijan axis illustrates how two middle powers can turn a favorable strategic moment into lasting regional leverage-by coupling hard power with corridors, culture, and an institution built in their own image.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the Türkiye-Azerbaijan partnership as a case of strategic adaptation by middle powers in a fragmented international system. Drawing on Type III NCR, it has argued that the transformation of their bilateral synergy into a scalable regional platform was not an automatic outcome of structural change but the result of leadership-driven agency acting upon a permissive environment. As U.S. disengagement and Russian strategic overreach created political and institutional space, Türkiye and Azerbaijan not only filled it they redefined it through coordinated military, economic, cultural, and institutional strategies.

The empirical analysis presented in Section Three demonstrated how this transformation unfolded across multiple dimensions. In the military realm, the post-2020 period marked a shift from supportive alignment to operational integration, with the Shusha Declaration institutionalizing mutual defense and joint exercises demonstrating growing interoperability. Economically, the partnership evolved into a connectivity strategy, using energy and transit corridors to embed bilateral cooperation into regional supply chains. Culturally, shared Turkic identity was instrumentalized not as an exclusionary ideology but as a legitimizing narrative that enabled soft power projection and institutional cohesion. Institutionally, the OTS became the multilateral vehicle through which Türkiye and Azerbaijan scaled their influence, not merely participating in regional governance but actively constructing it.

This trajectory challenges prevailing assumptions about middle powers as reactive, norm-preserving actors operating within the confines of hegemonic structures. Türkiye and Azerbaijan illustrate a different pattern: proactive regionalization, elite-led institutionalization, and strategic use of identity under conditions of global disorder. Their partnership underscores that middle powers, when operating within permissive structural conditions and equipped with the political will to act, can become architects-not just beneficiaries-of new regional orders.

The implications of this case extend beyond the Turkic world. It suggests that the erosion of liberal multilateralism and the decline of hegemonic enforcement do not inevitably lead to chaos or fragmentation. Instead, they open space for alternative ordering projects led by secondary powers with shared interests, mutual trust, and sufficient state capacity. These projects may be ideationally grounded, but their success depends on strategic coordination and institutional innovation. The Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis exemplifies how regional orders can be shaped from below, through deliberate political entrepreneurship rather than hegemonic delegation.

At the same time, the limits of this model must be acknowledged. The OTS remains a soft institutional framework; Türkiye and Azerbaijan's regional influence is still constrained by great power dynamics and material asymmetries; and the durability of their strategic alignment will depend on the evolution of domestic politics, regional crises, and external pressures. Nevertheless, the case illustrates what is possible when middle powers perceive structural openings not as risks to be avoided but as opportunities to be shaped.

Future research could extend this analysis by examining whether similar dynamics are emerging in other regions such as the Indonesia-South Korea alignment in Southeast Asia or Poland's evolving role in Eastern Europe. Comparative studies could also explore why some middle powers act decisively while others remain inert, and whether identity-based institutionalism can offer sustainable alternatives to hegemonic multilateralism. In doing so, scholars can build a more nuanced understanding of how agency operates in international politics when order is contested, and leadership not just structure-defines the trajectory of change.

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