ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY AND IDENTITY: THE COLLECTIVE SELF ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) serves as a collective ontological security mechanism for post-Soviet Turkic republics. Building upon Giddens's ontological security theory, Mitzen's state-level perspective, and Steele's moral-narrative framework, the study positions the OTS as a regional institution mitigating existential anxieties through shared narratives of identity, continuity, and strategic unity. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis and securitization theory, it investigates summit declarations and presidential discourses from 2021 to 2025. The analysis reveals a shift from cultural and historical references to securitized and strategic narratives, signaling the OTS's transformation into a civilizational regional actor that anchors identity within power dynamics. The study concludes that ontological security is maintained through narrative consistency, enabling member states to assert a shared sense of selfhood.

Keywords: Ontological security, Organization of Turkic States, Discourse, Securitization, Regional identity, Post-Soviet, Collective selfhood, Narrative politics.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the newly independent Turkic republics of Eurasia were confronted with not only geopolitical uncertainty but also deep ontological insecurity. The dissolution of a long-standing imperial framework disrupted the narratives and institutional anchors that had provided these states with a stable sense of self. As a result, questions of identity, belonging, and continuity became as crucial as questions of sovereignty and economic survival. Building on Anthony Giddens's (1991) and Jennifer Mitzen's (2006) insights that actors seek ontological security through stable self-narratives, this paper examines how the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) functions as an identity-stabilizing mechanism for its members in the shifting post-Cold War order.

Established in 2021 in Istanbul, the OTS represents a new phase of civilizational regionalism, transforming earlier forms of functional cooperation into a discursive project of shared history, culture, and destiny. Through its annual summits Samarkand (2022), Astana (2023), Shusha (2024), and Gabala (2025) and the speeches of member-state leaders, the organization has consistently articulated a vocabulary of "Turkic unity" grounded in ancestral continuity and mutual recognition. This repeated invocation of common heritage operates as an identity anchor, providing ontological reassurance and symbolic stability amid global uncertainty. Following Steele's (2008) notion of self-affirmation, the OTS thus emerges as a site where member states continuously narrate and reproduce their collective sense of self.

Research Question: How does the Organization of Turkic States construct and reproduce collective ontological security through its official discourse between 2021 and 2025?

Hypothesis: The OTS functions as a civilizational identity anchor that alleviates post-Soviet ontological insecurity among member states by producing narratives of historical continuity, cultural unity, and shared destiny.

Methodology: To test this hypothesis, the study employs qualitative discourse analysis of five summit declarations (2021–2025) and official speeches delivered by the presidents of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan during those summits. These texts are treated as institutionalized expressions of collective selfhood, allowing for the identification of recurrent themes of continuity, unity, civilization, and security that reproduce ontological stability through language and symbolism.

This research contributes to the growing literature on *ontological security and regionalism* by extending the concept to a civilizational, non-Western context. It introduces the idea of collective ontological security as a framework to explain how regional organizations can function not merely as instruments of coordination but as existential mechanisms of belonging. The findings are expected to show that the OTS, through its narratives and rituals, performs a dual role: reinforcing the internal coherence of member states and positioning the Turkic world as a distinct civilizational actor in international society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of ontological security, initially developed by Anthony Giddens (1991) within sociological theory, refers to the confidence individuals have in the continuity and order of their self-identity across time and space. Giddens argues that, beyond physical safety, human beings strive for a stable sense of self that enables them to act meaningfully within a predictable world. This existential stability is sustained through routinized practices, consistent narratives, and trust in the surrounding social order. When extended to the international realm, ontological security moves beyond material survival to encompass a state's need for narrative coherence and identity continuity within an uncertain global environment (Kinnvall, 2004: 18).

Jennifer Mitzen (2006) was among the first to translate Giddens's insights into International Relations theory, arguing that states seek ontological security by maintaining consistent relationships that reaffirm their identity. Even conflictual interactions, she notes, may persist because they help sustain a stable sense of self; enemies and rivals thus become part of the state's ontological order. In this view, the international system is not merely a material structure of power and interests but also an arena of recognition, where states pursue self-continuity through social interaction. Felix Berenskoetter (2014) builds on this by emphasizing the interpretive frameworks that allow states to construct coherent self-narratives, highlighting the cognitive and emotional dimensions of security.

Brent J. Steele (2008) further refines this framework by highlighting the moral and narrative dimensions of ontological security. According to Steele, states act to preserve a "consistent self-story" that aligns with their moral self-understanding. When their behavior contradicts this narrative, states experience ontological anxiety, a form of discomfort that compels them to reaffirm or reconstruct their identity through symbolic actions, rituals, or foreign policy gestures. Ontological security, therefore, is not static but constantly reproduced through performative practices and discourse (Rumelili, 2015: 57-58). This dynamic understanding opens the way for analyzing how collective actors—such as regional organizations—can also function as sites where identity narratives are stabilized and performed (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017: 41).

In periods of identity crisis, states often seek stability through participation in institutions or communities that reflect familiar values and narratives. These entities operate as "identity anchors"—structures that provide ontological reassurance by embedding states within broader collectives of belonging. Regional organizations, in particular, can mitigate existential uncertainty by supplying symbolic continuity, normative frameworks, and collective narratives of purpose. Through joint declarations, rituals, and summits, such institutions transform abstract ideas of solidarity into routinized practices of recognition. As Acharya (2001) and Adler and Barnett (1998) argue, regionalism is not merely functional but deeply embedded in processes of normative and identity-based community building.

In this sense, regionalism serves not merely as a platform for economic or political cooperation but also as a mechanism of ontological stabilization. Shared symbols, historical references, and cultural heritage become instruments through which members construct a coherent sense of collective selfhood. The European Union, ASEAN, and the Arab League, for instance, have each albeit to varying degrees performed identity-anchoring functions for their member

states (Katzenstein, 2005: 112). Yet for post-Soviet Eurasia, where ontological disruption followed both the collapse of empire and the uncertainties of globalization, such mechanisms are particularly vital. Here, the search for belonging is entwined with the rearticulation of civilizational identity, a process that merges the political and existential dimensions of security.

Building on this notion, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) can be viewed as a form of civilizational regionalism, a framework in which cooperation is justified not merely by pragmatic interests but by the reaffirmation of a shared civilizational self. In this model, regional identity becomes the means through which ontological security is collectively produced.

Building on these theoretical foundations, this study conceptualizes the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) as a regional mechanism that reduces ontological uncertainty through normative cohesion and symbolic integration. The OTS constructs a shared narrative of "Turkic selfhood" that enables its members to situate themselves within a continuous civilizational story. Its normative dimension expressed through principles such as solidarity, mutual respect, and shared destiny offers a stable interpretive framework for collective action. Meanwhile, its symbolic dimension manifested in summit themes, logos, historical references, and linguistic unity provides the material and visual markers through which this narrative is reinforced.

This research extends ontological security theory beyond the individual and state levels by introducing the concept of collective ontological security: the shared pursuit of existential stability among a group of culturally and historically connected states. Through this lens, the OTS does not merely coordinate interstate policies but performs an existential function it supplies a collective identity anchor that alleviates post-Soviet and post-imperial anxieties among Turkic states. In this way, the organization contributes to what can be termed civilizational ontological security, a regional form of reassurance in which states find continuity not only within their national narratives but also within a shared civilizational horizon.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an integrated discourse analytical framework to examine how the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) constructs and reproduces collective ontological security through its official discourse between 2021 and 2025. The primary method is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Norman Fairclough (1995), complemented by Security Discourse Analysis inspired by Ole Wæver (1995) and Ontological Security theory as articulated by Jennifer Mitzen (2006) and Brent J. Steele (2008).

This combined approach allows us to move beyond literal meanings of texts and reveal how language functions as a strategic tool of identity production, security articulation, and geopolitical subject formation. CDA provides the linguistic and structural entry point, securitization analysis foregrounds the framing of threats and referent objects, while ontological security theory explains why these discursive shifts matter for collective identity stabilization.

The corpus consists of official, publicly available institutional texts:

- Five OTS Summit Declarations: 2021 (Istanbul), 2022 (Samarkand), 2023 (Astana), 2024 (Shusha), 2025 (Gabala).

- Official speeches delivered by the Presidents of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan during these summits.

These texts are treated as institutionalized self-narratives that reflect how member states articulate collective identity, security, and geopolitical agency. Observer-state or partner-organization documents are excluded to ensure analytical coherence and focus on core member discourse.

The analysis proceeds in three interrelated steps:

1. Textual Level – Identification of key vocabulary, metaphors, slogans, and symbolic references (e.g., "ancestral roots," "shared destiny," "civilizational unity," "common security").
2. Discursive Level – Mapping how these textual elements are embedded in broader narratives of belonging, continuity, securitization, and geopolitical positioning.
3. Socio-Political Level – Interpreting how these narratives function as ontological security anchors, legitimizing strategic agency in a post-Soviet and shifting international context.

To systematically trace discursive evolution, each speech and declaration is coded along four thematic axes derived from the theoretical framework: "Continuity" (C1), "Unity" (C2), "Civilization" (C3), and "Security" (C4).

Table 1

Coding Scheme and Thematic Table

Code	Theme	Indicators	Examples (Keywords/ Phrases)	Theoretical Link
C1	Continuity	References to history, ancestry, deep time, Turkic roots	"from ancient times," "our ancestors," "centuries of unity"	Ontological security through continuity
C2	Unity	Appeals to collective identity, brotherhood, solidarity	"one nation," "Turkic family," "brothers and sisters"	Recognition & belonging
C3	Civiliza-tion	Civilizational discourse, cultural mission, moral community	"Turkic civilization," "our cultural heritage," "destiny"	Civilizational regionalism
C4	Security	Narratives of protection, collective strength, strategic autonomy	"common security," "strong together," "shared future"	Ontological security and securitization logic

Source: Developed by the author through inductive thematic coding of primary texts. The analytical framework is theoretically informed by ontological security theory, securitization logic, and civilizational regionalism, and reflects the author's systematic interpretation of recurring discursive patterns

While CDA reveals how discourse shapes power and identity structures, securitization analysis captures how specific issues (e.g., terrorism, cyber threats, energy security) are framed as existential threats to justify collective action. Ontological security theory explains these discursive shifts as attempts to ensure the continuity of the collective self in a transforming geopolitical environment.

- Inter-coder reliability was ensured by coding 20% of the corpus with a second researcher, minimizing subjective interpretation.
- Triangulation was achieved by cross-analyzing summit declarations, speeches, and relevant secondary literature.
- Transparency was maintained through detailed coding tables and matrices, enabling replication of the analytical process.

Since the data are based on publicly available official statements, no personal or sensitive data is involved. All interpretations aim to respect the cultural and political contexts of the member states.

This methodological design extends discourse analysis in ontological security research to a civilizational regionalism context. By integrating critical discourse, securitization, and ontological security perspectives, it captures not only how the Turkic world is imagined discursively, but also why security has emerged as a central anchoring frame between 2021 and 2025.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The discourse of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) between 2021 and 2025 reveals a gradual yet significant transformation from civilizational-heritage narratives toward a security-centered formulation of collective identity. The early years (2021–2022) were characterized by C1 (continuity) and C2 (unity) narratives, emphasizing shared history, ancestral ties, and civilizational pride as anchors of ontological security. In contrast, the later summits (2024–2025) display intensified references to C4 (security), particularly regarding regional security architecture, defense cooperation, and geopolitical agency indicating a discursive securitization of Turkic selfhood.

In the first years of OTS, the official discourse was built around common history, kinship, and shared civilizational heritage. For example, during the 2021 Istanbul Summit, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stated: "The presidency has been handed over to Türkiye. Turkic peoples have historical ties and common interests. This summit reaffirms this." (akorda.kz, 2021).

In the same speech, Tokayev referred to Adnan Menderes and expressed gratitude to the Turkish people for their brotherly reception of Kazakh migrants, thereby linking the present political community to a shared historical memory (akorda.kz, 2021). In the same summit, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also emphasized continuity and unity, declaring: "With our new name, the Organization of Turkic States, we will take root, grow and flourish faster and more persistently from now on" (Iletisim.gov, 2021).

Similarly, Ilham Aliyev stated: "Azerbaijan is committed to the unity goals of the Turkic world. Since the 2009 Nakhchivan Summit, the organization has come a long way. The Turkic world is a big family" (President.Az, 2022). In the continuation of the same speech, Aliyev stressed the ontological dimension of identity security: "The OTS does not only consist of independent Turkic states.

The rights, security and protection of the identity of our compatriots living abroad should be on the agenda constantly" (President.Az, 2022).

In a similar tone, Sadyr Japarov stated: "The active contribution of Viktor Orban, the leader of the observer country Hungary, strengthens solidarity in the Turkic world" (CentralAsia.News, 2022). Shavkat Mirziyoyev added: "We are proud of the common past of the Turkic world. It is the duty of all of us to preserve, research and pass on this heritage to future generations" (Yuz.Uz, 2022).

These statements demonstrate how ontological security in the early years was anchored in narratives of civilizational continuity and fraternal unity, with security remaining largely implicit and symbolic.

From 2024 onwards, a noticeable shift occurs in the discursive architecture of the OTS. Security narratives become increasingly prominent, encompassing not only defense but also issues such as regional stability, terrorism, extremism, and border security. During the 2024 Shusha Summit, Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated:

> "As far as security is concerned, we believe that Afghanistan should always be in the focus of our Organization. In this regard, it is important to establish a regular dialogue mechanism at ministerial and expert levels" (President.Uz, 2024).

He further added:

> "Within the framework of our organization, it is appropriate that we systematically continue dialogues on political and security issues and actively promote a unified and clear position on international issues of common interest" (President.Uz, 2024).

In the same summit, Sadyr Japarov echoed this securitized language: "During its chairmanship, Kyrgyzstan will continue to improve mechanisms for joint counteraction to security threats, fight terrorism, extremism and cross-border crime" (President.Kg, 2024).

Ilham Aliyev reinforced this stance, stating: "Our cooperation in defense, security and defense industry is of great importance in the face of increasing global threats" (President.Az, 2024). These remarks illustrate the discursive rise of security themes and their gradual institutionalization as a central element of Turkic collective identity.

By 2025, security had evolved into an institutionalized discourse at the OTS level. In the Gabala Summit, Ilham Aliyev stated:

> "Domestic political and economic stability, strategic geographical location, favorable demographics with a young population, great potential in transportation and logistics, rich natural resources and growing capabilities in the military and defense technology sectors make the OTS an important actor on the global stage" (President.Az, 2025).

Similarly, Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasized the collective security dimension of the Karabakh victory: "Without exaggeration, we can say that the 'Peace Declaration' signed with Armenia is a common victory of the Turkish states thanks to your decisive political will" (President.Uz, 2025).

These statements mark a discursive securitization of OTS identity moving from symbolic belonging to strategic agency. Security is no longer an implicit backdrop but a central identity-anchoring pillar, tied to geopolitical capacity and strategic positioning.

Between 2021 and 2025, OTS discourse reveals a clear shift from civilizational belonging to strategic actorhood. While C1–C2 (continuity and unity) remain foundational, their relative salience decreases over time, whereas C4 (security) steadily rises. C3 (civilization) continues to function as ideological glue, legitimizing this transformation.

This discursive trajectory aligns with security discourse analysis and ontological security theory, which conceptualize discourse as a mechanism of identity construction, threat framing, and collective action legitimation. Through this process, the Turkic world transitions from a civilizational subjectivity to a geopolitical subjectivity, articulating its identity through security, capacity, and strategic integration without abandoning its shared historical foundations.

Table 2

Yearly Thematic Distribution (2021–2025)

Year / Summit	C1	C2	C3	C4	Dominant Frame	Notable Discursive Shifts
2021 – Istanbul	34	32	20	20	C1	With the renaming from the Council to the Organization of Turkic States and the Vision 2040, the discourse shifted towards consolidating institutional identity and establishing a common policy framework on trade/transport integration, environment-Aral and youth/cultural heritage.
2022 – Samarkand	37	31	18	23	C1	In Samarkand, the 2040 Vision was carried to the implementation phase with the 2022-2026 Strategy, and the discourse evolved into concrete program and institutional reform proposals on the axes of transit competitiveness-TIF-digital economy-food/energy security.
2023 – Astana	36	26	11	22	C1	Under TURKTIME, the rhetoric of unity shifted to governance tools such as harmonization of standards, typical law, reference center, and an emphasis on mediation/human security, framing technical integration and cultural symbolism (Shusha, cultural forum) together.

2024 – Bishkek	34	25	12	24	C1	In Bishkek, the discourse deepened into institutionalized integration with decisions on Digital Economy Partnership, permanent representatives/MB Council, common alphabet/flag, and expanded the security dimension with references to international law with a focus on defense-cyber security and Gaza.
2025 – Gabala	30	20	13	26	C1	With the Gabala summit, the discourse focused on outreach with third parties through OTS+ (CSA Plus) and institutionalization of the common security architecture (cybersecurity concept, proposal for joint exercises), and strengthened practical economic integration with project lists focused on the efficiency of the Central Corridor and TIF.

Source: Author's own calculation based on systematic thematic coding of official summit declarations, leaders' speeches, and institutional documents of the Organization of Turkic States (2021–2025). Yearly frequencies reflect the relative salience of each thematic code (C1–C4) identified through qualitative content analysis and cross-year comparison

The data presented in Table 2 illustrates a structured and incremental discursive evolution within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) between 2021 and 2025. The earlier stages of this trajectory were predominantly shaped by narratives of civilizational continuity and unity, emphasizing shared historical roots, cultural symbolism, and post-Soviet ontological stabilization. For instance, Sadyr Japarov in 2021 underlined that the organization "has become one of the most important and prestigious platforms for integration among Turkic-speaking countries" (Kabar.Kg, 2021), reinforcing the symbolic unity frame. Similarly, Shavkat Mirziyoyev expressed in 2023 that "Our dreams and goals, our hopes and efforts are interconnected... Our Turkic peoples will continue to build a great future together in friendship and brotherhood" (Kun.Uz, 2023), emphasizing brotherhood as the basis of shared ontological identity.

This identity-centered discursive structure gradually gave way to more governance-oriented articulations, as seen in 2023, when the rhetoric of unity was translated into institutional mechanisms such as standard harmonization, reference centers, and legal frameworks. In this context, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced that Kazakhstan's chairmanship would proceed under the slogan "TURKTIME" — highlighting "Traditions, Unity, Reforms, Knowledge, Trust, Investment, Mediation and Energy" (akorda.kz, 2023), thus linking institutional language to strategic themes.

By 2024–2025, the discursive register reflects a marked securitization and strategic agency trend, with intensified references to defense, cybersecurity, and economic connectivity instruments. Economic narratives were increasingly tied to security logic: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had already emphasized in 2022, "It would be beneficial to launch the Turkic Investment Fund as soon as possible. The financial strength of the fund will reinforce our cooperation and accelerate our activities" (Invest.Gov, 2022). In 2024, he further declared:

> "Negotiations on the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement have been finalized. We expect the Turkic Investment Fund to be launched soon. We want to reduce dependence on a single source of energy and seize the opportunities offered by the Central Corridor in transportation" (TCCB.Gov, 2024).

In parallel, Tokayev underscored the strategic importance of transport connectivity, stating that "Full utilization of the Central Corridor is essential for the economic development of the Turkic World. In this context, an agreement should be signed to guarantee the development of transportation on the route" (akorda. kz, 2024). These remarks reveal that OTS discourse increasingly links economic governance to geopolitical capacity.

Finally, external partnerships through the OTS+ format further reinforced this trend. The simultaneous embedding of economic connectivity instruments particularly the Turkic Investment Fund (TIF) and the Central Corridor reveals that security and economic integration have become mutually reinforcing pillars of contemporary Turkic discourse. This shift from symbolic belonging to institutionalized, security-centered formulations indicates the emergence of the Turkic world as an increasingly strategic and autonomous actor in regional and global politics.

Leaders' speeches act as performative articulations of collective identity, shaping how the Turkic world imagines itself and projects its agency. Each leader embodies a distinct ontological orientation blending identity, security, and strategy. While Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ilham Aliyev fuse civilizational pride with hard power and geopolitical assertiveness, Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasizes reformist continuity and institutional modernization. In contrast, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Sadyr Japarov tend to foreground peace-through-brotherhood narratives that anchor ontological security in shared origins and cooperative stability.

For example, in 2023, Japarov stated: "The geopolitical situation in the world makes it important for the brotherly Turkic peoples to unite their efforts to increase their economic potential" (Caliber.Az, 2023). This reflects how unity (C2) and continuity (C1) are mobilized to frame external uncertainties as collective opportunities. Similarly, in 2024, Erdoğan declared: "With the Turkic World Vision 2040, the decisions we will make here today will once again show the entire world the unity of common ideals among our countries" (TCCB.Gov., 2024), projecting a shared strategic vision rooted in ontological reassurance. Aliyev expressed a similar sentiment in 2023: "We are part of the great Turkic world. I believe that our brotherhood and friendship will be eternal" (Aze.media, 2023), foregrounding C1–C2 narratives and consolidating identity through civilizational and fraternal imagery. Mirziyoyev emphasized in 2025: "Let me give just one example: today, within the framework of the Organization, practi-

cal cooperation is actively underway in more than thirty-five areas. The volume of trade between our countries is steadily increasing and is expected to double by 2030" (President.Az, 2025), which demonstrates the translation of identity into tangible institutional practices (C1–C2).

Tokayev's discursive positioning blends ontological unity with security framing. In 2023, he stated: "It is essential to ensure our collective security. Arms and drug trafficking, terrorism, extremism, and migration pose increasing dangers… an agreement on combating crime must be signed… information should be shared between financial investigation units" (akorda.kz, 2023), highlighting a strong C4 (security) emphasis within the unity frame. His 2025 remarks further reinforced this, revealing how security and belonging are discursively intertwined:

> "We constantly emphasize that the Turkic peoples share common roots and a centuries-old history. All these achievements represent the golden thread of our sacred unity and eternal solidarity. Recently, our countries celebrated the Day of Cooperation of Turkic Peoples. This meaningful day further strengthens our bonds of brotherhood. Today, the Organization of Turkic States has become a distinguished and influential platform that unites our friendly nations" (akorda.kz, 2025).

Meanwhile, Japarov's 2025 speech during the chairmanship handover highlighted the symbolic-cultural dimension of unity. He announced that the World Nomad Games will be held in Kyrgyzstan in 2026 and invited the Summit participants to attend as guests of honor (President.Kg, 2025), reflecting a performative invocation of civilizational heritage (C3) as a unifying force. Earlier, Tokayev had already signaled in 2021: "We must effectively use the geopolitical potential of the entire Turkic world. The prestige of the Turkic Council is growing. The international community is also increasing its interest" (akorda. kz, 2021), underscoring how security and agency were present as latent themes even in the formative years of the organization.

Together, these speeches illustrate a layered discursive ecosystem: Erdoğan and Aliyev advance a hard security–civilizational fusion; Mirziyoyev translates identity into institutional pragmatism; Tokayev blends ontological unity with strategic security; and Japarov performs symbolic unity through cultural and civilizational references. This division of discursive labor reflects the broader transformation of OTS from a civilizational cooperation platform into an actor projecting strategic agency on the regional and global stage.

Table 3
Leader–Thematic Matrix (2021–2025)

Leader	C1	C2	C3	C4	Characteristic Narrative
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	33	22	8	32	Merges civilizational pride with strategic strength; frames security (defense, terrorism, cyber issues, Middle Corridor) and economic connectivity as the backbone of Turkic agency.
Ilham Aliyev	34	18	9	31	Combines sovereignty, territorial integrity, and hard security narratives (post-Karabakh order, defense cooperation) with unity and connectivity.
Shavkat Mirziyoyev	38	24	18	18	Emphasizes reformist continuity and institutional modernization; prioritizes pragmatic integration through trade, investment, logistics, and digitalization.
Kassym-Jomart Tokayev	44	40	22	22	Balances governance tools (standard harmonization, reference centers) and multilateralism with peace-and-brotherhood rhetoric, promoting institutional and economic integration.
Sadyr Japarov	22	30	17	12	Centers peace-through-brotherhood discourse: unity, cultural symbolism, and mediation, emphasizing conciliatory identity rather than hard security.

Source: Author's own analysis based on leader-specific thematic coding of official speeches, summit interventions, and public statements delivered within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States (2021–2025)

The Leader–Thematic Matrix (Table 3) reveals differentiated but complementary role specializations within the OTS discourse. Security (C4) coalesces around a dual anchor of Erdoğan and Aliyev, who together account for more than half of all C4 cues, coupling civilizational pride with hard-power narratives such as defense industry development, counter-terrorism, and transit corridors. Mirziyoyev and Tokayev jointly drive the institutionalization of the project: across continuity (C1) and unity (C2), Tokayev emerges as the single largest contributor, while Mirziyoyev supplies a reformist–pragmatic strand centered on trade, investment, and digitalization. Japarov sustains a peace-through-brotherhood register, emphasizing conciliatory identity over hard security.

In terms of overall discursive salience, Tokayev is the most prolific institutional entrepreneur (128 references), followed by Mirziyoyev (98), Erdoğan (95), Aliyev (92), and Japarov (81). This distribution maps onto a clear division of discursive labor: Erdoğan–Aliyev project deterrent credibility and geopolitical agency; Tokayev–Mirziyoyev transform unity into governance instruments; Japarov maintains the symbolic glue through unity, mediation, and cultural capital. Together, these leadership narratives construct a performative coalition:

identity (C2–C3) is kept normatively resonant by Japarov and Mirziyoyev, routinized and scaled by Tokayev (C1–C2), and securitized by Erdoğan and Aliyev (C4). The result is a discursive architecture that legitimizes the securitized turn of OTS without abandoning its civilizational narrative, enabling economic connectivity and security cooperation to function as mutually reinforcing pillars.

The cumulative corpus analysis further reveals a progressive securitization of discourse, reflected in the sharp rise of C4–Security references, especially from 2023 onward. Initially marginal compared to civilizational and unity themes, security gradually expands from a narrow military defense frame to a broader ontological register that includes energy security, cyber and digital sovereignty, climate and resource stability, and the protection of cultural heritage. This discursive broadening aligns closely with ontological security theory, which posits that states seek not merely material survival but also the continuity of self through routinized narratives of control, resilience, and recognition.
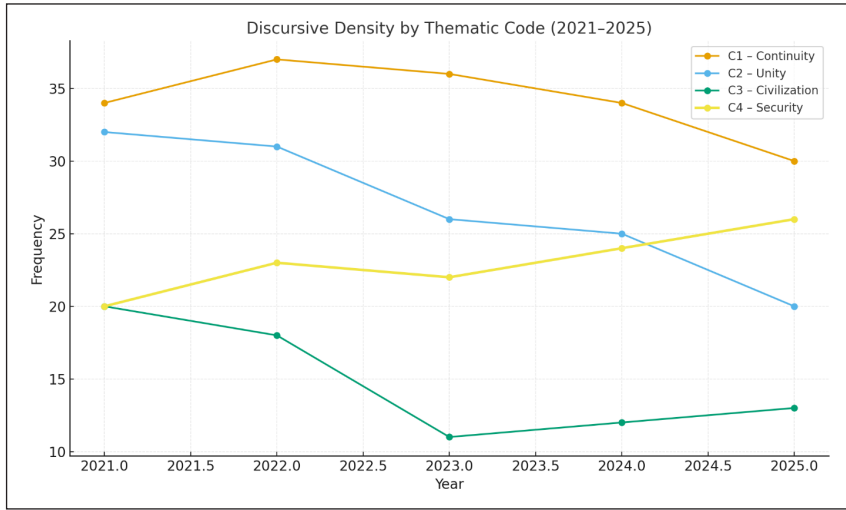
Table 4

Discursive Density by Thematic Code (2021–2025)

Code	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	% Change (2021–2025)
C1	34	37	36	34	30	−11.8%
C2	32	31	26	25	20	−37.5%
C3	20	18	11	12	13	−35.0%
C4	20	23	22	24	26	+30.0%

Source: Author's own calculation based on longitudinal thematic coding of official documents and summit-level discourse of the Organization of Turkic States (2021–2025)

By 2025, security emerges as a core identity-anchoring device, not in opposition to C1–C2 civilizational narratives but layered upon them transforming the Turkic discourse from symbolic cohesion toward strategic agency. As shown in Table 4, civilizational continuity (C1) remains numerically dominant but experiences a gradual decline, while C2 and C3 registers contract more sharply. In contrast, the security register (C4) displays a 30% increase over the five-year period, marking a structural shift in the thematic architecture of the OTS discourse. Initially confined to traditional defense and security language, C4 now encompasses multidimensional challenges and opportunities tied to regional security governance.

Figure 1

Discursive Density by Thematic Code (2021-2025)

Source: Author's own visualization generated through MAXQDA based on longitudinal thematic coding of official OTS summit discourse (2021–2025)

This layered securitization allows the Organization to position itself as a geopolitical actor capable of balancing identity-based legitimacy with strategic agency. The discursive trajectory reflects the institutional maturation of the Turkic world project: a movement from symbolic cohesion toward a strategic language that integrates identity, security, and connectivity into a single performative narrative structure.

DISCUSSION

The empirical patterns identified between 2021 and 2025 indicate a clear evolution in the discourse of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) from symbolic civilizational references to a strategically securitized language of collective agency. This shift illustrates how ontological security, originally theorized at the individual level (Giddens, 1991) and later adapted to states (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008), can also be constructed regionally, through shared narratives that provide stability, recognition, and belonging. The OTS thus emerges not merely as a platform for coordination but as a civilizational project that seeks to safeguard "Turkic selfhood" in a post-imperial global order.

Ontological security theory asserts that actors require narrative coherence to alleviate existential anxiety. Giddens (1991) emphasized that routinized practices sustain consistent self-narratives. In the OTS context, annual summits and ritual references to "shared history" and "ancestral continuity" function as such practices, affirming both national and supranational identities.

In early summits (Istanbul 2021, Samarkand 2022), references to ancestry and unity (C1) dominated the discourse, providing reassurance amid post-Soviet identity flux. The OTS acted as a symbolic shelter, projecting continuity through historical lineage. However, ontological security is a dynamic process (Steele, 2008), requiring narrative adaptation in response to changing threats. As uncertainties like the war in Ukraine, energy shocks, and regional instability in-

tensified, OTS discourse shifted. While civilizational unity remained, it was increasingly paired with securitized language emphasizing protection and agency.

By 2024–2025, this discourse entered a phase of civilizational securitization, where identity affirmation fused with strategic imperatives. While Wæver's (1995) securitization theory frames security speech as legitimizing exceptional measures, within the OTS, securitization operates as a narrative tool of reassurance. Through repeated use of terms like "collective strength" and "common security," civilizational identity became a shared strategic mandate.

This aligns with Steele's (2008) view that states reaffirm moral self-narratives under ontological anxiety. In the Turkic case, threat perception includes not only external challenges but also risks of identity fragmentation. Thus, security discourse becomes performative defining identity through the assertion of strategic capacity. The Gabala Summit (2025) encapsulated this synthesis: Aliyev's focus on defense technology and Mirziyoyev's celebration of unity in Karabakh reframed heritage through the lens of power.

Accordingly, OTS discourse integrates symbolic and material dimensions. Ancestral unity legitimizes defense and economic cooperation, while these strategic actions reproduce identity stability. This layering of heritage and security underpins a robust collective self.

A leader–theme matrix further reveals differentiated identity roles. Erdoğan and Aliyev act as "protectors," emphasizing security; Tokayev and Mirziyoyev serve as "institutional stabilizers," translating unity into governance; Japarov plays the "symbolic mediator," upholding moral fraternity. These roles contribute distinct narrative functions, forming a coherent collective self through complementarity rather than uniformity echoing Steele's (2008) notion of diverse identity performances converging on continuity.

This functional differentiation casts OTS summits as performative arenas for enacting collective identity. While materialist perspectives might attribute discourse evolution to practical concerns (energy routes, security), these alone do not explain the consistent symbolic framing. Bilateral cooperation on such issues predates the OTS, but what distinguishes it is the civilizational vocabulary underpinning its actions.

Domestic legitimation theories also fall short of capturing the collective and sustained nature of this discourse. Despite political diversity among members, references to "brotherhood" and "continuity" persist across years and contexts, signaling an ontological function that transcends individual regime interests.

Likewise, realist accounts emphasizing power-balancing cannot fully explain the OTS's self-referential narrative. Unlike classic geopolitical alliances, the OTS avoids defining identity in opposition to others. Instead, it affirms selfhood positively through shared culture, memory, and moral vision. This affirmative identity-building distinguishes civilizational regionalism from power-centric alliances.

Empirically, a 30% increase in securitized discourse (C4), coupled with declining emphasis on civilizational tropes (C1–C3), reflects not a discursive rupture but a layering process. Security becomes the outer shell of an identity architecture rooted in continuity. Thus, the OTS evolves from a symbolic forum into a strategic community, where cultural kinship legitimizes collective agency simi-

lar to ASEAN's shift from "brotherhood" to "centrality" or the EU's trajectory from identity to autonomy.

In the Turkic context, this shift carries distinct ontological implications. Embedding security within civilizational identity reframes pragmatic cooperation as self-preservation. Security is internalized not just as a response to threats, but a reflection of self-understanding. This reframing may enhance resilience by alleviating post-imperial marginality through a shared, empowering narrative.

However, the durability of this model depends on balance. Over-securitization may erode legitimacy if disconnected from symbolic roots, while excessive symbolism may falter under real-world pressures. The OTS's success lies in sustaining a synthesis of heritage and functionality a vision already visible in "Vision 2040" and "OTS+" initiatives.

Analytically, the study contributes a transferable framework for examining collective ontological security. The C1–C4 coding scheme offers a replicable model for tracing identity stabilization across regional organizations. Comparative studies might apply it to ASEAN, the Arab League, or the African Union to explore similar dynamics in other civilizational regions.

Yet, limitations remain. This study relies heavily on official discourse, potentially overlooking informal practices or public reception. Moreover, multilingual translation nuances may affect metaphor coding. Future research could expand through multilingual corpus analysis, elite interviews, or event-data mapping to explore how discourse translates into cooperation, particularly in defense, energy, and digital spheres.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how the OTS functions as a discursive and normative framework contributing to collective ontological security among its member states between 2021 and 2025. Building on Giddens's (1991) notion of routinized self-narratives, Mitzen's (2006) understanding of security as the continuity of self-identity, and Steele's (2008) emphasis on the moral dimension of state action, the analysis conceptualizes the OTS not as a fully consolidated security-providing institution, but as a symbolic and narrative arena through which member states seek to articulate continuity, unity, civilization, and shared historical meaning. Rather than assuming that the OTS effectively reduces post-imperial uncertainty in a material or institutional sense given the political fragility, asymmetric capacities, and divergent threat perceptions of its members this study argues that the organization aspires to manage such uncertainty at the level of discourse and identity construction. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) with securitization theory (Wæver, 1995), the research demonstrates how official speeches and summit declarations function as performative texts that symbolically reproduce a sense of belonging, moral legitimacy, and collective self-understanding, even in the absence of fully institutionalized or operationalized security mechanisms.

The findings demonstrate a clear discursive evolution: from 2021 to 2025, the OTS shifted from identity-affirming language centered on civilizational continuity (C1) and unity (C2) toward a more securitized and strategic discourse (C4). This transformation does not signify the abandonment of civilizational identity but rather its reformulation through security. The organization's narrative architecture now

layers pragmatic cooperation defense, cyber governance, connectivity, and economic integration upon a foundation of shared history and culture. Security thus becomes a vehicle for preserving identity rather than merely defending territory. This process marks the OTS's maturation from a symbolic forum of fraternity into a strategic community capable of articulating its own geopolitical agency.

The analysis also identifies a division of discursive labor among member leaders that collectively sustains this transformation. Erdoğan and Aliyev articulate a security–civilizational fusion, projecting the Turkic world as a confident geopolitical actor. Tokayev and Mirziyoyev translate unity into institutional reform and governance mechanisms, ensuring routinized stability. Japarov sustains the symbolic-cultural register of brotherhood and heritage that legitimizes strategic cooperation. Together, these differentiated narratives maintain ontological reassurance by blending emotional, normative, and pragmatic dimensions of collective identity. The OTS thereby becomes a platform where identity and strategy, belonging and power, mutually reinforce one another.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research extends ontological security theory in three ways. First, it operationalizes the concept at the collective level, showing that groups of states can jointly construct self-continuity through shared discourse. Second, it introduces the idea of civilizational ontological security, highlighting how identity reassurance operates through cultural and historical frames rather than solely through state-to-state relations. Third, it demonstrates that discourse is not only reflective but constitutive: the act of narrating unity and security itself produces the sense of stability sought by member states.

Methodologically, the study contributes a replicable framework for measuring collective ontological security through a four-axis coding scheme (C1–C4). This model can be applied comparatively to other regional organizations such as ASEAN, the Arab League, or the African Union to explore whether similar identity-securitization trajectories emerge in non-Western contexts. Such comparative research would help refine the relationship between civilizational narratives and institutional resilience, deepening our understanding of how identity politics shape regional order.

In practical terms, the findings underscore that the OTS's legitimacy and effectiveness depend on maintaining the balance between heritage and strategy. Over-securitization without normative grounding risks turning the organization into a purely instrumental alliance; excessive symbolism without operational depth risks stagnation. The enduring strength of the Turkic world project lies in its capacity to integrate the two to narrate continuity while exercising agency. Future research could therefore examine how this balance is sustained through concrete policy outputs, elite interactions, and public diplomacy.

In sum, the OTS exemplifies how ontological security and regionalism intersect in the post-Soviet Eurasian context. By transforming shared history into a strategic resource, the organization provides its members with both a stable self-narrative and a platform for coordinated action. What began as a quest for cultural affirmation has evolved into a coherent civilizational project of belonging and agency. The pursuit of security among the Turkic states thus emerges not only as a response to external uncertainty but as an ongoing act of self-definition an affirmation that to be secure is, above all, to know who one is and to act accordingly.

Ethical Commission Approval

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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