

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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In the Grip of Global Bifurcation

The EU and its Possible Futures

Robert M. Cutler

A dozen years ago, I led a three-week international scenario-planning simulation for Wikistrat involving 80 experts across three continents. Our aim was to forecast plausible trajectories for the European Union through 2030. We developed four distinct “Master Narratives,” each representing a structurally coherent future. One scenario, *Solidarity in Misery*, envisioned the EU maintaining its formal institutional unity while stagnating economically and compensating for this stagnation through increasingly fervent affirmations of symbolic European identity. As of 2025, this scenario most closely resembles the EU’s current condition.

The simulation did not just identify static end-states; it mapped causal sequences—policy pathways and decision-points—through which the EU might either entrench or escape each scenario. In the case of *Solidarity in Misery*, there were multiple routes to a more favorable future, marked by both economic dynamism and social cohesion. These routes, while varied in detail, shared broad structural characteristics. The scenario to which they pointed was called *Wealthy Europe*. Achieving it required a coordinated suite of interventions across fiscal, monetary, migratory, and geopolitical domains.

Today, more than a decade later, Mario Draghi’s September

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2024 *Report on European Competitiveness*, and Ursula von der Leyen’s January 2025 programmatic uptake of it, together constitute a partial, incomplete expression of that pivot. The Draghi report accurately diagnoses many of the EU’s structural weaknesses, and von der Leyen’s agenda selectively embraces its headline recommendations. Yet the incomplete nature of this policy uptake, combined with persistent institutional inertia and new external shocks, raises the specter that the system may absorb and neutralize its own attempts at self-reform, even while ostensibly seeking transformation.

This article evaluates whether the Draghi–von der Leyen trajectory can credibly shift the EU out of the *Solidarity in Misery* trap. It measures current reforms not only against their stated goals but also, more rigorously, against the systemic criteria outlined by the earlier simulation’s projected escape pathways. Using a complex-systems lens, the analysis explores policy divergence, partial pivots, and latent fracture lines within the EU. It ultimately asks whether the Union is on the verge of meaningful transformation or

merely rationalizing its own managed decline.

From Simulation to Scenarios

The 2013 simulation was structured around a core principle from the science of complex systems: that institutional trajectories emerge from recursive, path-dependent interactions among structural constraints, agent strategies, and exogenous shocks. Over a structured three-week exercise, participants developed competing scenarios, which were then stress-tested against plausibility criteria and policy feasibility thresholds. The outcome was four “Master Narratives,” each projecting a structurally coherent future for the European Union.

One, *Solidarity in Misery*. In this scenario, the EU would survive austerity, crisis, and stagnation by cultivating a symbolic identity as a substitute for policy success. Institutional innovation would be frozen and weak growth, normalized. Brexit was not foreseen: it was supposed that no

This article ultimately asks whether the EU is on the verge of meaningful transformation or merely rationalizing its own managed decline.

member state would exit the Union. EU publics would feel estranged but would continue to cling to the idea of “Europe.”

Two, *Torn Apart by Success*. Here, growth would return unevenly, and the resulting economic divergence would fracture solidarity. As the European core would advance and the periphery stagnate, institutions would lose credibility, and policy spillovers would become politically toxic. National interests would predominate as EU-skepticism rose.

Three, *Cold Peace*. This scenario is defined by a geopolitical retreat: the EU turns inward as external threats intensify, resulting in strategic paralysis. As a result, its international weight declines, and it becomes a custodial administrative zone for its members rather than a coherent global actor.

Four, *Wealthy Europe*. This was only scenario featuring both sustained growth and institutional cohesion. It would result from a coordinated pivot: geostrategic investment, institutional reform, and proactive social integration. The EU would become not only a rule-setter but a global standard-setter. This future would be characterized by a deepened monetary and banking union, integrated capital markets, adaptive migration policies

(notably conceptualized before the 2015 “Merkel moment”), and stabilized geopolitical alignment.

The structural integrity of *Solidarity in Misery* should not obscure its predictive accuracy. Though it did not anticipate the politically imposed economic lockdowns of the early 2020s, it did foresee a sluggish recovery, unresolved migratory tensions, an over-reliance on symbolic integration, and a widening gap between formal institutional coherence and informal strategic fragmentation. Each of the four scenarios embedded pathways (sequences of interlocking policy decisions and institutional shifts) through which the EU could move toward or away from the integrated prosperity envisioned in *Wealthy Europe*. The *Solidarity in Misery* scenario was especially detailed, offering a multi-phase roadmap through which stagnation could be overcome via targeted reforms across fiscal, migration, energy, and monetary domains.

As of 2025, the *Solidarity in Misery* scenario remains the EU’s baseline condition. Any serious evaluation of the Draghi report and von der Leyen’s response must therefore be grounded not in abstract ideals but in the structured requirements of a credible pivot from stagnation to systemic transformation.

The Partial Pivot

The Draghi report and von der Leyen’s response would appear, at first glance, to signal a departure from the policy inertia that has long characterized the EU’s malaise. Yet their shared trajectory raises a critical question: Does this apparent shift represent a system-level realignment, or does it merely tweak existing problems without resolving them? This section examines that question by placing current developments against the simulation’s model of escape from stagnation. It draws out key points of convergence and divergence in order to assess whether these reforms initiate structural change or merely simulate its appearance.

According to the simulation’s results, the escape from *Solidarity in Misery* to *Wealthy Europe* required a sequenced and conditional integration of five policy vectors: geopolitical projection, banking and financial union, trade liberalization, coordinated migration management, and demographic stabilization. These were not modular components but

interdependent phases: pursuing one without resolving its prerequisites risked undermining the systemic transition. While the Draghi report is comprehensive, its recommendations are framed largely within a competitiveness paradigm. Von der Leyen’s “Competitiveness Compass” selectively incorporates some of its key proposals. Both documents sideline such core issue-areas as geostrategic positioning and a demographically-informed migration strategy.

The simulation emphasized geostrategic assertiveness as a necessary early-stage precondition. This element is either implicit or missing from the Draghi report, and von der Leyen amplifies it only modestly. Draghi’s fiscal recommendations focus on macro-level investment envelopes but omit differentiated migration dynamics and the political preconditions for intra-EU labor mobility. The simulation, by contrast, identified both of these as essential to a sustainable pivot. A second-order divergence is the absence of structural institutional reform. The idea of establishing a Eurozone Parliament with independent monetary-legislative

The European Union still possesses latent capacities for structural reinvention, but the window for self-correction is no longer open-ended.

capacity was under active discussion in Brussels policy circles at the time of the simulation and was central to the *Wealthy Europe* scenario. Draghi and von der Leyen, by contrast, anchor policy coordination in existing institutional geometries. This approach constrains the EU's capacity to adapt constructively, let alone transformatively.

Despite these divergences, there are partial convergences. Draghi's call for €800 billion per year in productivity-oriented investment aligns with the simulation's demand for a pan-EU growth envelope. Von der Leyen's support for capital market integration and joint borrowing echoes the simulation's roadmap toward financial union.

What emerges is a *partial pivot*: Draghi and von der Leyen seek to redirect European policy away from austerity and toward investment-led growth. The simulation posited that resolving fiscal divergence, energy fragmentation, and migration backlash required a specific sequence: first geopolitical consolidation, followed by institutional innovation, and only then capital pooling. While Draghi and von der Leyen embrace Capital Markets Union and Banking Union as goals, they do so out of sequence and without sufficient strategic anchoring. This recalls the EU's

founding period, when economic integration was expected to generate political unity downstream.

But today's global environment, unlike the postwar era, is multi-polar, fragmented, and adversarial: market integration no longer guarantees political convergence, and financial instruments cannot by themselves substitute for an assumed shared strategic purpose that no longer exists. That inversion creates a structural asymmetry: the EU would attempt to grow and stabilize through financial means, but these efforts are unsupported by political or institutional alignment. Increased liquidity and rhetorical cohesion could be achieved; but in the absence of parallel reforms in representation, migration policy, and geopolitical stance, the risk is that stagnation is reproduced under new policy branding.

There are points of alignment between Draghi and von der Leyen, such as the former's call for investment-led growth and the latter's promotion of a European Savings and Investment Union and a re-empowered European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA). These points would reflect mild progress toward financial integration; however, this *partial pivot* lacks a coherent transitional logic. The internal bifurcation between North/

East and South/West Europe overlays economic, political, and institutional divides. The Draghi-von der Leyen program may manage disorder and prevent collapse, but it does not resolve this fundamental internal geoeconomic fragmentation. While this partial pivot reflects a shift in tone and intent, it does not resolve the deeper contradictions within the EU's structure. The following sections move from this simulation-informed reflection into a rigorous mapping of the EU's emerging fault lines across institutional, demographic, infrastructural, and strategic domains. This shift reflects the urgency of confronting structural misalignment at scale.

Internal Divergence and Strategic Exposure

The Draghi-von der Leyen agenda, though partially responsive to problems, fails to account for the extent to which the EU's internal fragmentation has become structurally embedded. The necessary conditions for coordinated transformation, as derived from the simulation, are being undermined not only by inaction but also by growing misalignment across the Union's demographic, institutional, and strategic foundations. This section examines how

internal divergence—once considered a manageable feature of enlargement—now exposes the EU to systemic vulnerability. The analysis proceeds through interlinked analytical domains: institutional logic, demographic constraint, infrastructural incoherence, and geopolitical drift. Together, these pressures erode the Union's capacity to act coherently in what is now a rapidly bifurcating international system.

The presumption that formal institutions could neutralize structural divergence among EU member states was never grounded in certainty. It was an “illocutionary act” of narrative construction—i.e., one where the focus is on the speaker's performance of an action by saying something rather than on the actual words used or their effect on the listener—anchored in the illusion that integration, once initiated, would be self-reinforcing. Now, that illusion is breaking down. The core contradiction is no longer between ideal and execution, but between institutional continuity and functional incoherence. The organizational architecture remains, but the logics of its parts diverge.

What has developed instead is a compound asymmetry where—from fiscal strategy to institutional culture to geopolitical

posture—divergences are layered in destabilizing divergences. The asymmetry follows a rough axis from North and East to South and West, although this convenient geographical shorthand does not capture the depth of the misalignment.

Northern and eastern countries—Poland, the Baltics, the Nordics—operate with a logic shaped by historical experience and institutional rigor. For them, fiscal prudence is not merely policy but a criterion for credibility. Given their geographic proximity to a strategic (indeed existential) threat, NATO is not an option but an axiom. These states align toward deterrence, rule coherence, and a vision of “Europe” as a security compact anchored in transatlantic discipline. The EU lacks a fully-fledged military arm, and its members increasingly treat the EU and NATO as complementary frameworks: the one governing economic and regulatory integrity, and the other ensuring collective defense. The formal distinction between them is functionally blurred in the strategic calculus. Notably, Denmark recently announced its departure from the EU’s “Frugal Four,” suggesting a shift even among fiscally conservative member states toward a more integrated understanding of European responsibility in both security and investment domains.

To the west and south, the situation is more fragmented. France advances a doctrine of strategic autonomy that is sometimes aspirational and sometimes instrumental, yet it is still wedded to American security guarantees, because NATO (and the U.S. nuclear and conventional deterrent, above all) continues to underpin European defense in ways that EU-led initiatives cannot yet replace. Germany remains suspended between industrial interdependence with China and normative commitment to Western alliances. Italy, Spain, and Greece oscillate within domestic cycles of economic constraint and social volatility, looking to Brussels for investment buffers but without any shared clarity on strategic convergence.

These divergent, even conflicting, state-specific institutional dispositions are rooted in differentiated historical and contemporary experiences of state formation, demographic pressure, and elite reproduction. Under such conditions, coordination is not just difficult but structurally complicated. Initiatives in defense procurement, capital markets, or fiscal stabilization are launched into a field where state-preference vectors no longer align. Execution fails because the premise for coordination is exhausted.

The demographic compression now constraining nearly all EU member states intensifies this misalignment. Fertility rates remain below replacement as age-dependency ratios rise year-on-year. The productive base narrows even as the demand for social expenditures expands. There is no longer a “window” in which to act; the window has become the frame.

A policy on migration from outside the European continent might have been a stabilizing instrument, but delay transformed it into a stressor on the system. The east rejects quotas on cultural and political grounds, as exemplified by the Visegrád Group’s opposition to the EU’s 2015-2016 quota system. Likewise, a 2016 referendum in Hungary rejected compulsory quotas. By contrast, the south faces the operational burden of first reception under the Dublin Regulation (2013), which sets out which EU member state is responsible for examining an asylum application. The south demands resource redistribution that rarely materializes. Italy and Greece’s calls for reform and the stalled Dublin IV proposal are cases in point.

The north hedges and calculating intake by labor needs but then filters entry through rigid conditionalities. Thus, Germany’s

2016 Asylum Package II (which mandates accelerated asylum decisions) and Denmark’s 2010 Ghetto Plan (which seeks to promote social integration) restricted family reunifications and imposed employment-based residency criteria. A rhetorical public solidarity persists, often through European Council commitments and voluntary relocation schemes (such as the 2019-2020 France-Germany initiative), but the operational logic results in the evasion of the main questions.

The Draghi report of 2024 acknowledges labor shortages but offers no framework to address the EU’s demographic crisis. Von der Leyen’s 2025 program refers to the European Skills Agenda and Talent Partnerships, but these nods toward workforce mobility lack coherence. Both Draghi and von der Leyen view human capital as reactive to market and political forces. With the New Pact on Migration and Asylum stalled and the European Labour Authority underfunded, no architecture links demographic trends to economic or social renewal.

Persistent regional divides now make it impossible to achieve consensus on what such a framework would even look like. Municipalities are left improvising, with initiatives in cities like Milan and Marseille

struggling for resources while national ministries are caught between economic shortfalls and electoral pressure. Declarations from Brussels, such as rhetorical European Parliament resolutions and superficial follow-ups to the 2015 Valletta Summit that brought European and African leaders together to discuss the migrant crisis, perpetuate the policy vacuum by substituting symbolism for strategy.

The same pattern is visible in the EU's energy and digital infrastructures. After Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Union scrambled to diversify its gas supply, ramping up LNG imports from the U.S., Qatar, and Algeria. A memorandum of understanding signed with Azerbaijan in July 2022 did result in a modest increase in piped gas volumes via the Southern Gas Corridor, but further expansion remains stalled by regulatory constraints—including EU bans on financing significant hydrocarbon fuel infrastructure—creating a procedural impasse despite strategic intent.

Dependency figures improved on paper, but there are lags in the physical integration of new supplies. There is no shared doctrine for energy flow: transmission grids still have limited cross-border

capacity. The EU's energy network is still a patchwork of national systems, bridged sporadically by underpowered interconnectors and distorted by legacy contracts and domestic priorities. "Infrastructure sovereignty" has been normatively declared in EU Commission communiqués and EU Energy Council statements, but this remains a slogan without material engineering. The 2023 RePowerEU plan and the Connecting Europe Facility have yet to resolve core interconnection and distribution gaps.

This inertia typifies the deeper incapacity to project operational coherence in other areas that demand shared sovereignty. The digital sphere follows a similar logic: the EU leads in innovative, normative regulatory frameworks (such as the Digital Markets Act, the Digital Services Act, and the AI Act), but it lacks the industrial base to support them. There is no coherent linkage between these frameworks and material build-out. Semiconductor production remains marginal, dominated by non-European firms; cloud infrastructure is fragmented; and platform power rests outside the continent. The 2023 Chips Act was announced as a corrective, but its scale and execution are not enough to close the gap with global competitors. Meanwhile, the foundational financial requirements for

a robust digital economy (such as a flexible tax environment, scalable capital markets, and operational freedom for innovation) are either lacking or actively constrained by the EU's internal structures. High energy costs for data centers and AI infrastructure, rigid regulatory environments, and inconsistent national incentives further undermine the ambition to be a serious digital actor.

The result is a growing disjunction between normative aspiration and material capacity, experienced as an illusion of control. The EU is caught between U.S. platform dominance and Chinese infrastructural expansion, trying to regulate what it neither invents nor produces. It has no industrial depth to enforce interoperability at scale or to ensure digital resilience. Semiconductor dependence remains chronic, and the European Cloud Initiative has failed to break the dominance of U.S.-based providers. EU legislative efforts such as the General Data Protection Regulation (2016) and the Digital Markets Act (2022) are brought forward, but they rest on a fragile technological base. The EU's "digital sovereignty" claims

are hollowed out by the regulatory superstructure's lack of material autonomy. These claims are reduced to periodic declarations that seek to mask the EU's structural exposure to external pressures.

This cumulative structural disalignment produces stratification rather than collapse. Legally and bureaucratically, the EU continues to issue directives, allocate funds, and convene summits, while the real drivers of integration—such as a shared strategic culture, investment priorities, and demographic planning—stall. Private capital, perceiving the absence of coherent long-term planning, flows instead to more predictable transatlantic and Indo-Pacific destinations.

The EU is caught between U.S. platform dominance and Chinese infrastructural expansion, trying to regulate what it neither invents nor produces.

Eastern and northern states strengthen defense policy through NATO channels, notably with increased joint procurement under the European Defence Fund and

closer operational alignment via Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a framework and process within the EU that deepens defense cooperation among member states willing to do so. In this manner, they bypass the Union's political core.

Southern states pursue ad hoc fiscal collaboration (e.g., the partial activation of the European Stability Mechanism) and irregular migration coordination under pressure from the Mediterranean route. In these ways, opt-outs, derogations, and delayed ratifications become normalized. The Union's procedural machinery holds, but its substantive cohesion erodes. Germany and France, as well as the EU Commission, characteristically waver between strategic posturing and tactical improvisation.

This behavior is hardly a deliberate redesign; it is, rather, an adaptive reflex to systemic disalignment.

Contradictions are not resolved through institutional innovation. They are instead absorbed through procedural flexibility. In this process, institutional memory substitutes for institutional future: past agreements are recycled and forward coherence is deferred. The system persists as a management framework for its own internal status quo, but it lacks the coherence either to project power or to shape external consequences. In periods of relative external calm, as we have seen until fairly recently, this condition suffices; however, as

is becoming increasingly evident under the new sustained pressure, it risks disintegration into practical irrelevance.

This internal drift carries geo-strategic consequences. The EU cannot operate as a strategic actor in a bifurcated world unless it achieves internal coordination

The EU cannot operate as a strategic actor in a bifurcated world unless it achieves internal coordination at scale.

at scale. The fiscal, demographic, infrastructural, and technological fractures described above constrain its agency. An EU incapable of

aligning its capital allocation, labor strategy, and industrial base can only react to external shocks, not shape them. The 2022 Strategic Compass and the 2023 Industrial Strategy, while symbolically ambitious, fall short of reconstructing the EU's internal capacity for external projection. This trajectory is not inevitable, but the window to disrupt it is narrowing.

Talk of "strategic autonomy" and "sovereignty" rings hollow without serious and workable platforms to sustain them. Slogans substitute for substance, fostering the illusion that administrative continuity is equivalent to systemic capability. Unless the

EU rapidly rebuilds its internal capacity along the model of the post-Single European Act momentum—when legal, economic, and political integration cohered into a system capable of projecting regulatory and normative influence—it will drift without a gravitational center: lacking leverage, it will eventually forfeit relevance. Already, the fragmentation of its internal logic is visible in the divergence of strategic priorities, fiscal postures, and regulatory alignments, rendering its international posture reactive. Yet it remains difficult to grasp from within the Brussels bubble, that an EU deprived of autonomous power will be reduced—is being reduced—to a procedural zone increasingly orchestrated from the outside by actors having greater strategic coherence.

These fragmented and asymmetric patterns of adaptation are not isolated developments. They are increasingly overdetermined by global structural dynamics that impose their own constraints upon the EU's agency. To understand how internal divergence intersects with external systemic bifurcation, the next section shifts from granular policy diagnostics to an integrated geopolitical systems analysis.

Strategic Drift, Institutional Incoherence

The EU's internal fragmentation does not merely complicate coordination. It now threatens the Union's capacity for strategic agency. This section examines how this persistent divergence has evolved into a deeper systemic failure. It is not a failure of institutional design per se, but of institutional functionality under global stress. As pressures intensify with the international system bifurcating between the Anglosphere and the Sinosphere, the EU's procedural machinery reproduces form without generating momentum. The analysis below traces that drift by explicating how the Union's structure lacks system, how its timelines lack synchrony, and how its strategic ambitions lack anchoring. It is not breakdown that results, but rather a simulation of coherence that masks a growing incapacity to act.

The European Union's internal fragmentation is no longer a concatenation of disaggregated frictions. It has consolidated into a patterned asymmetry that is structurally aligned with the deepening bifurcation of the global order. This is not metaphor; it is system geometry. The post-2022 international

topology—an emergent dual-core configuration dominated by the Anglosphere and Sinosphere—has become a gravitational field that orients the collision between the EU’s internal political and economic tectonic plates. The Anglosphere is moving to absorb the EU’s north and east; the Sinosphere conditions the hesitation of the EU’s south and west. Strategic drift is no longer stasis but slow, cohesive, and directional segmentation.

Northern and eastern EU member states increasingly entrench themselves within U.S.-anchored defense and regulatory ecosystems. Digital architecture, energy security, cybersecurity doctrines, and capital mobility all bind them more deeply the transatlantic community. Western and southern EU member states, meanwhile, remain structurally ambivalent, dependent on Chinese trade volumes and global capital flows, yet still reliant on NATO for deterrence. France articulates strategic autonomy but backstops its posture with American guarantees. Germany hedges its position through technocratic caution, balancing a structural reliance on export markets—particularly China—with a restrained geopolitical posture constrained historical inheritance and dependent on U.S. security guarantees. The EU’s institutional frame persists, but

its internal reference systems now diverge.

This failure of internal alignment is an embedded institutional disposition, yet it is not theoretical. Rather, it is a reflection of the emergent global bipolarity. The Union’s forms superficially reproduce procedural continuity, but beneath this, strategic coherence is melting. Regulations and rhetoric maintain the illusion of unity, but geopolitical torque is shearing apart the operative logic of policy coordination. What emerges here is not collapse, but bifurcation within continuity: a legally intact but strategically disarticulated European Union, functionally divided and inertial in response.

Neutrality between the Anglosphere and the Sinosphere ceases to be a viable position and is exposed as a symptom of disconnection from the pace and direction of global systemic change. The EU’s longstanding aspiration to act as a “regulatory superpower” now yields diminishing returns, as faster-moving technological blocs increasingly bypass its standard-setting influence, which rival normative frameworks now contest. Simultaneously, the gravitational pull of its single market is growing weaker amid global economic fragmentation, supply-chain

regionalization, and hesitation by external investors. Unless the EU reconstructs internal coherence, not as compromise but as strategic re-foundation, it will not hold its own center. The world has already for some time ceased to orbit around it.

The Draghi–von der Leyen reform agenda is not incoherent. In its diagnostic precision and conceptual ambition, it is one of the clearest technocratic syntheses of the European strategic condition in recent memory; but coherence on paper is not producing traction in institutional space. The flaw is not in the vision, nor is it in the vocabulary. The flaw is the absence of a meso-structural framework capable of binding the intent for reforms to their actual execution. In other words, the problem is that there is no solid middle layer of institutional structures, political coalitions, and operational mechanisms to connect high-level goals with concrete implementation. Ambitious plans are made, but dependable machinery to carry them out is lacking.

It is not any lack of ideas that has eroded the EU’s strategic capacity. The system is simply unable to translate consensus into system behavior. Sectoral domains—capital markets, energy, digital regulation,

labor mobility—continue to operate in procedural silos that rarely interface with one another, each being governed by its own policy logic. The modular nature of the EU’s governance design is effective under conditions of stability, but it becomes pathological under stress. There is no layer of policy-coupling architecture to convert cross-sectoral diagnosis into the coordinated delivery of results in times of geoeconomic unpredictability and geopolitical transformation.

The Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP), the Green Deal Industrial Plan, and other Draghi-inspired mechanisms represent forward motion in form, but their operational baselines remain brittle. They layer instrumentation on top of legacy mechanisms, within which initiatives are undercapitalized or launched without timeline-binding mandates or any irrevocable long-term political commitment by member states. The European Investment Bank, invoked as a possible sovereign lever, remains structurally constrained: its mandate is rooted in risk-avoidance, which is incompatible with systemic transformation. EU institutions absorb strategic ambition and reproduce it as symbolic output while expecting the member states to underwrite the substance, yet also while refusing to alter the

distribution of authority that would make such ambition executable.

Even when policy uptake occurs in speeches and communiqués, its execution detours into procedural sub-layers: the EU Commission directorates redistribute mandates; the EU Council configurations dilute timelines; the intergovernmental overlays negotiate opt-outs. The EU Parliament, structurally reactive and lacking original budgetary initiative, comments at the margins of strategic design. The execution of mandate and strategic vision dissipates in those interstitial spaces of distributed authority; without critical concentration, agency evaporates. The deeper condition is epistemological. EU governance assumes that to layer instruments will generate capability, whereas in practice it produces redundancy. No executive body has sufficiently strong power to coordinate across the given policy silos. No EU treasury exists to enforce resource convergence across multiple policy domains. The consequence is not inefficiency but the dissolution of policy coherence at the threshold of implementation.

This is no longer an episodic malfunction, but rather an issue with operational logic. Policy peaks at declaration and descends into the granularity of interinstitutional

negotiation. The system coordinates but its capacity for execution does not increase. Procedurally, “Europe” speaks in compound tenses, but its actions are perpetually deferred and its ambitions are codified in frameworks that expire before they consolidate. Yet the language is not the problem. What we have is a simulation of agency.

Institutional Europe is not only spatially fragmented but also temporally fractured. Its procedural cadence is out of phase with accelerated change in the global system, as well as with its own internal cycles. The EU produces timelines that it cannot inhabit; the budget allocations, ratification processes, and intergovernmental mandates all operate at wholly different rhythms. The Union cannot act in time because it does not share time; and as it defers action, delay dissolves into incoherence. Even theoretically synchronized strategic proposals disaggregate in contact with reality. Budgetary envelopes are negotiated one year, released another, and absorbed across multiple national timetables that are not fully synchronized. Electoral cycles interrupt ratification; political transitions vitiate momentum. This structural latency leads integrated programming to degrade into asynchronous improvisation. Even

the EU Commission’s high-profile initiatives cannot guarantee that member states will act within convergent windows.

The time gap between design and execution neutralizes intent; meanwhile, the global system has moved into a different time signature. The Draghi–von der Leyen program treats exogenous pressures like U.S. industrial policy, Chinese infrastructural expansion, and monetary realignments away from the West as contextual challenges rather than structural drivers. But the bifurcation of the international system has become endogenous to the very operating environment within which the EU itself acts. The global phase shift proceeds without waiting on Brussels. Unless the Union constructs an institutional capacity to move at the tempo of the international system—not just faster but synchronized—it will remain unable to generate traction. Disconnected from the strategic realities of time in the real world, the EU becomes, to its increasing detriment, disconnected from geopolitical and geoeconomic consequence.

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The most critical lacuna in the Draghi–von der Leyen framework is not a particular domain, but a constitutive substrate: labor, demography, and human infrastructure. The entire apparatus of competitiveness is constructed on an eroding demographic base, yet this erosion is not structurally addressed. Labor and migration, which should be treated as foundational levers of resilience, remain subordinated to security crises and political contingency. There is still no integrated mechanism for labor mobility, no shared protocol for migration strategy in relation to demographic decline, and no fertility policy connected to strategic planning. The population base upon which all economic recovery narratives are built is treated as an exogenous variable.

That omission marks the system’s refusal to recognize that the human substrate is the ground for any rational technological ambition, let alone a feasible fiscal instrument or cohesive regulatory strategy. As migration policy remains reactive and political incentives reward delay, the EU’s narratives on productivity float untethered in cloud-cuckoo

land. “Strategic autonomy,” in this context, becomes a decorous incantation. How to be sovereign without an industrial base, a digital infrastructure, or a population strategy?

To pivot requires structural redesign across the three axes of lock-in, coupling, and alignment. First, the EU needs a fiscal instrument severed from domestic cycles: a Sovereign Investment Mechanism capable of executing across time. Second, it must build a meso-architecture, such as an Economic Security Council or a reformed Euro-group, which binds sectoral policies into coherent motion with obligatory feedback loops. Third, it must align internal timelines and resource strategies with external system tempo. Until this happens, the European Union will retain form and even content, but at the cost of consequence. It will simulate sovereignty, circulate initiatives, and drift under the weight of its own unacknowledged misalignment.

Strategy Without System

The previous section traced how internal fragmentation, procedural overload, and institutional delay hollow out the EU’s

strategic capacity. However, not only is policy coherence lacking, so is institutional traction. This section shifts the focus from the Union’s internal malfunction to its failure to operate as a system—that is, to coordinate across sectors, keep up with the global pace of change, and align strategic intent with operational reality. The Draghi–von der Leyen agenda is conceptually robust, but it cannot overcome the organizational deficits without structural redesign. The following analysis outlines how fragmented governance, demographic neglect, temporal asynchrony, and incomplete alignment combine to prevent the EU from executing a true systemic pivot.

Just as disagreement weakens the EU’s strategic capacity, so this is also undermined by the absence of institutional mechanisms that could sustain policy coherence across sectors and cycles. The Draghi–von der Leyen agenda, for all its conceptual ambition, fails to embed reform in a durable procedural framework; and the absence of a durable procedural framework means that there is no overarching substantive framework. Its instruments are modular, provisional,

often reversible, subject to national discretion, and prone to fragmentation.

The EU’s modular governance design was well-suited for consensus-building under stable conditions, but system stress has rendered it maladaptive. Sectoral initiatives like capital markets reform or digital regulation advance in isolation without any unifying scaffolding. Past proposals for integrative frameworks, such as a Eurozone Parliament, were diluted or abandoned. The EIB’s continuing constraint by a risk-averse approach constrains its capacity for strategic investment, weakening its ability to address system-scale challenges.

This policy fragmentation vitiates any strategic feedback loops. The bureaucratic structure operates through procedural sub-layers to fragment Draghi’s ambitious proposals, disconnecting sectoral goals from the coherent delivery of the intended result. There is no institution charged with dealing with external shocks and technological acceleration. Directives are generated and funds are allocated, but there is no efficacious enforcement. Since no organizational body is

empowered to bind cross-sectoral policy into coherent action, inertia and routine predominate.

The structural critiques outlined above logically lead to a recognition that the EU’s economic and technological aspirations are built on an eroding demographic substrate. The Draghi–von der Leyen framework gives a nod to labor shortages and skills-based migration, but it continues to treat human capital as a reactive input rather than as the strategic pillar it should be. A more reasonably constructed EU would have some coherent structural architecture for integrating fertility policy (rates are falling), labor mobility (gaps are widening), and managed migration (separating its internal and external sources), not to mention rising age-dependency ratios.

But the EU, lacking that, continues to lose real resilience. The misalignment is not peripheral lack, but a core shortcoming. Without a deliberate rethinking of labor mobility and demographic design, the EU will be unable to sustain either growth or autonomy. Missed opportunities and emergent risks include the failure to establish

The EU’s economic and technological aspirations are built on an eroding demographic substrate.

a common migration framework, the reactive securitization of border policy, and the absence of differentiated national toolkits.

Frontline states like Italy, Greece, and Spain bear disproportionate burdens, while in other countries domestic politics obstructs consensus. At the EU level, political incentives favor delay, resulting in rhetorical commitments that dissipate into procedural fog. The failure clearly to separate internal from external migration—an imperative already clearly indicated by the 2013 simulation that I led—means that labor and migration are still not treated as formative levers shaping system capacity.

The EU's failure is a matter not just of procedure but also of timing. As established above, the Union's internal cycles lag behind the accelerating cadence of the global system. Yet the Draghi-von der Leyen agenda continues to frame exogenous pressures as contextual challenges, rather than acknowledging them as structural forces reshaping the terrain within which the EU operates. Recent external shocks highlight this asynchrony. Under the Biden Administration, the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act (2022) redirected capital flows toward American green industries, leaving EU initiatives sidelined.

Meanwhile, China's consolidation of supply chains, particularly in electric vehicles and critical minerals, has disrupted Europe's industrial ecosystems. Even the EU's energy pivot from Russian gas, initiated in 2022, has been fragmented: LNG terminals proliferate without coordinated transmission planning, price harmonization, or strategic procurement structures. Even strategically aligned projects, such as a necessary expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor, remain immobilized, and not by geopolitical risk, but rather by the EU's own regulatory paralysis. Such and similar developments reveal a structural misreading of the global tempo. The EU formulates intent but is overtaken by events.

The world's transition is characterized by phase shifts: nonlinear realignments that alter, relatively abruptly, the architecture of supply chains, investment flows, and industrial ecosystems. The EU is hesitantly trapped in procedural sub-cycles and incremental adjustments while the global system reconfigures itself in real-time. Without synchronization across critical domains, EU reforms will remain reactive and partial. The EU's machinery moves in half-steps, unable to match the velocity of external dynamics. The system is unable to integrate

internal coherence with external momentum.

Escaping the *Solidarity in Misery* attractor requires more than adaptation. It demands a systemic pivot, or what complexity theorists of complexity science term a “phase transition.” The existing institutional scaffolding must be re-engineered along three interlocking axes: lock-in, coupling, and alignment.

Lock-in. The EU must uncouple its strategic investment capacity from the volatility of annual budget cycles and national bargaining. A European Sovereign Investment Mechanism, supranational and equipped with discretionary bandwidth and legal autonomy, is essential. Without this, investment strategies will remain hostage to short-term political calculations, and long-term transformation will remain structurally impossible.

Coupling. Sectoral initiatives—e.g., capital markets integration, digital sovereignty, labor mobility—persist as isolated policy islands. A meso-architecture, such as a reconfigured Eurogroup or an Economic Security Council, must translate horizontal priorities into vertically synchronized action. This intermediate layer would embed feedback loops that convert

fragmented reforms into systemic flows, creating coherence without which the EU's machinery will continue to function as a collection of silos.

Alignment. The EU must abandon the pretense that global bifurcation is an external condition to be managed and recognize it as an internal contradiction. Trade doctrine, technological standards, and energy strategy must all be reconfigured within a Euro-Atlantic framework. Hedged neutrality is no longer viable; partial convergence will not suffice. Euro-Atlantic alignment is not a concession but rather the architecture of the EU's future agency, if it is to have any. This is not to the exclusion of increased involvement in the Silk Road region, if it is coordinated with American strategies and policies.

These levers are the preconditions for a genuine EU-systemic transition. In their absence, the EU will remain a meta-stable hybrid, over-integrated for sovereign initiative but under-integrated for coherent agency. Without structural redesign, the *Wealthy Europe* scenario will remain a theoretical construct rather than a real possibility. The window for decisive action is narrowing.

Possible Futures

The preceding analysis has traced the erosion of the EU's strategic coherence across its institutional, demographic, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. This section turns from diagnosis to structured foresight, presenting three scenarios centered on the EU that extrapolate from current trends under conditions of continued global bifurcation. These scenarios are not speculative projections, but *adaptive equilibria*, i.e., stylized systemic outcomes that emerge from the interaction between unresolved internal fragmentation and accelerating external pressures. Each of them represents a plausible future for the 2030s, depending on whether the EU remains inert, disintegrates under pressure, or succeeds in executing a systemic pivot.

The baseline future scenario could be called “Enduring Stagnation.” In it, the EU remains trapped by the *Solidarity in Misery* attractor until the 2013 simulation's horizon of 2030 arrives. Strategic drift continues beneath the surface of bureaucratic continuity. Draghi's structural vision is not outright rejected, but neither is it fully implemented; rather, it is deferred into procedural inertia. Von der Leyen's reforms are present in the public

discourse but remain unsupported by institutional redesign. The result of this stasis will be that key reforms falter. The Banking Union will stay incomplete, and capital-markets integration will stall amid regulatory divergence and taxation mismatches.

Likewise, common borrowing would be used episodically in crises but is never embedded as a sustained strategic mechanism. The Draghi agenda would live on as rhetoric, but binding instruments would remain absent. In this situation, demographic imbalances and labor market challenges will remain unaddressed, as migration policy remains fragmented and ineffective. Cost-sharing will remain elusive, and local authorities will remain overburdened. It is almost already baked-in that fertility will continue to decline and skills shortages will continue to persist: a formula for the further erosion of productive capacity and social cohesion. Externally, the EU would further deepen commercial entanglements with China while continuing to rely on U.S. security guarantees.

That is a precarious straddle in a further bifurcating world; it would, moreover, presuppose a reversal of current U.S. strategic thinking. Such a result would produce widening industrial vulnerabilities in

areas like pharmaceuticals and critical minerals. Following the pattern of other policy issue areas, claims of digital sovereignty may be sustained in rhetoric but will collapse under infrastructural dependence. By the early 2030s, nominal growth may even return on the back of global growth, but this would take place without a renewal of productivity or even any legitimacy recognized by the public. The general impression of the EU will be that it is strategically hollow, even if administratively coherent, a juridical container for managed irrelevance that still survives but is increasingly peripheral.

The second possible scenario could be called “Torn Apart by Failure.” The 2013 simulation did not suggest that *Solidarity is Misery* was durable in the longer term. If such inertia prevails, then a critical exogenous shock like a sovereign debt rupture or an external military escalation (but not limited to those examples) would be able to rupture the fragile equilibrium. Today, we can say that the result of that would fuse together elements of the simulation's *Torn Apart by Success* and *Cold Peace* scenarios, signifying a cumulative trajectory of the EU system's erosion.

The resulting external shock will trigger fragmentation. Eastern and

northern member states will deepen their alignment with the U.S. and NATO. The Franco-German axis will fray, and even the recent idea for reinvigorating the Weimar Triangle with Poland will not save it. Southern states, frustrated by EU bureaucratic inaction, will pursue ad hoc fiscal and energy cooperation autonomously, bypassing Brussels with other “coalitions of the capable” coalescing around other critical policy issue-areas.

By the mid-2030s, the EU will function as a mosaic of overlapping regional groupings: Intermarium, Balto-Scandia, a Danubian Compact, a Mediterranean Core—to name just a few possibilities. Brussels will persist as an administrative hub for the increasingly disconnected polities of its increasingly divergent member states. However, the Brussels bureaucracy will become more of an archivist than an architect, a hollowed-out procedural shell continuing to mouth the rhetoric of unimplemented reform.

The movement out of *Solidarity is Misery* thus fails through drift: Draghi's report will become a retrospective artifact, a “what might have been” blueprint overtaken by events. At the same time, following past patterns, von der Leyen's partial reforms will dissipate into national improvisations, abandoned

amid mounting political risk. Throughout the policy universe, regulatory alignment will erode as opt-outs and legal ambiguities proliferate still further than they already have done.

The final possible outcome is “Achieving the *Wealthy Europe* Scenario.” A credible pivot from the *Solidarity in Misery* trajectory to a coherent, high-functioning future for the EU demands decisive structural reconfiguration. This transition cannot be triggered by discrete policies but only by an integrated, system-wide shift: a phase transition catalyzed by the realization that the EU’s current procedural machinery is incompatible with the bifurcating global system.

The necessary inflection point is political: a coalition of core EU member states converging around the establishment of a permanent, supranational investment authority, insulated from the volatility of intergovernmental cycles. This mechanism to normalize joint borrowing (not just as an episodic response to crisis) must be operational by 2027 or 2028, redirecting the Union’s fiscal architecture toward strategic investment in industrial modernization, energy diversification, and digital infrastructure. The 2027-2028 window is critical,

because it marks the start of the EU’s next Multiannual Financial Framework (i.e. budgetary) cycle in 2028-2034, the 2026 expiration of the pandemic-era Recovery and Resilience Facility (joint borrowing instrument), and the narrowing geopolitical window for institutionalizing the EU’s sustained strategic investment.

This pivot is more than fiscal. Demographic and labor-market policies would need to be reframed as structural drivers rather than reactive inputs. The distinction between internal skilled migration and unmanaged external flows would become embedded in a differentiated framework, and other demographic programs would be strategically coupled to industrial policy. This shift would put human infrastructure at the heart of the EU’s competitive and geopolitical agency, signaling a shift from managing demographic decline to proactive demographic regeneration.

Externally, the EU must decisively align with the Anglosphere: not as a subordinate, but as a co-architect of a Euro-Atlantic compact. “Strategic autonomy” would evolve into interdependent antifragility, underpinned by institutionalized defense coordination, technology partnerships, and a re-grounded energy doctrine. The integration

of regulatory power with an operational capacity would signal a departure from the hollow proceduralism characterizing the EU’s earlier attempts at sovereignty. By 2040, the EU in this scenario would not have erased its pluralism but rather orchestrated it into a dynamic system of *polycentric subsidiarity*: it becomes but a builder of coherent architectures that can participate in shaping the emergent global order.

Choosing a Future

If those are the plausible trajectories of the European project, then what are the structural conditions for the EU to reclaim its agency? The European Union is now at a system-bifurcation point. The question is no longer about economic competitiveness or technocratic refinement but about the viability of what is called the “European project” as a coherent political system. The distinction between a *Wealthy Europe* scenario and a hollowed-out Union does not depend on whether individual reforms are adopted or delayed, but on whether the Union can reconfigure its systemic logic to match

the tempo of international-system change and reintegrate its own internal fracture lines. This is about re-anchoring Europe’s role in the world. Incremental adjustments will not suffice; a deliberate, sequenced phase transition is required.

Von der Leyen’s reform program has only partially addressed Draghi’s diagnosis of the EU’s core deficits, including underinvestment, competitiveness erosion, and institutional undercapacity. It all remains trapped in an operational logic that assumes a global equilibrium that has already dissolved. The bifurcated international system, with its competing infrastructural, financial, and technological ecosystems, demands from the EU a new institutional circuitry capable of coupling together its own fragmented policy domains and aligning them with external realities.

Breaking from the *Solidarity in Misery* attractor demands decisive action across five interlocking domains. These are not stand-alone policy areas but structural levers, the integration of which will generate new systemic coherence for the EU.

What are the structural conditions for the EU to reclaim its agency?

One, *Strategic Autonomy and Euro-Atlantic Alignment*. The illusion of equidistance between China and the U.S. must be abandoned. Euro-Atlantic interdependence is not optional; it is the precondition for resilience. Industrial policy in AI, semiconductors, energy, and critical minerals must be co-designed with democratic partners. The European External Action Service (EEAS) must evolve from a symbolic appendage into an operational geostrategic actor, capable of encoding the EU's priorities into external alignments. This last would require member states to phase out their national foreign policy prerogatives.

Two, *Migration, Labor, and Demography as Systemic Drivers*. Population policy is economic strategy. Legal and irregular migration streams must be differentiated, with skilled migration linked to dynamic labor forecasts. Fertility support and labor retraining programs should be strategically coupled to industrial and technological renewal. Policy instruments must remain nationally differentiated but synchronized through common digital platforms and backed by EU-level fiscal support.

Three, *Fiscal-Political Integration with Autonomous Capacity*. The

EU requires a permanent, supranational fiscal instrument anchored in autonomous resources. Joint borrowing must be reframed as strategic investment rather than an emergency response. Disbursement must be performance-linked—to innovation, climate transition, and productive capacity—in order to mitigate politicization and secure durable legitimacy.

Four, *Monetary and Capital-Market Architecture as Systemic Infrastructure*. The Banking Union must be completed, with the European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA) endowed with supranational regulatory authority. Eurobonds should be institutionalized as not only safe assets but macro-financial stabilizers. A common deposit insurance mechanism, scaled by risk-based contributions, would close the credibility gap and support cross-border capital flow integration.

Five, *Institutional Sequencing and Democratic Legitimacy*. A differentiated parliamentary structure—potentially a Eurozone Parliament with fiscal oversight—should complement the broader European Parliament. Co-designed governance, grounded in polycentric subsidiarity, is essential for public legitimacy.

Strategic narratives must precede institutional mechanisms. The EU's architecture for renewal must be built on coherent stories that mobilize collective agency.

A Decision Space Closing

The 2013 simulation that I ran was not naive. *Solidarity in Misery* was, and remains, a meta-stable basin, i.e., a transitional attractor immobilizing strategic momentum without resolving the tensions it accumulates. Its stasis is not stability, but it disguises erosion. The appearance of system coherence camouflages the entrenchment of systemic incoherence.

The European Union still possesses latent capacities for structural reinvention, but the window for self-correction is no longer open-ended, as it seemed to be in 2013. The EU's institutional scaffolding remains intact, and its policy space has not yet collapsed; however, the phase has passed during which systemic readjustment could have been discretionary. It has now become imperative, lest the EU be defined by the passing of its era.

The international system has already restructured its basis. The bifurcation between the

Anglosphere and the Sinosphere is the operative configuration that constrains the EU's capacity for maneuver, defining the perimeter of its agency. External pressures and internal desynchronization now converge to close the window of opportunity for incrementalism. What once passed for cohesion is spoiling into stagnation; what seemed like as continuity now reveals itself as strategic drift. The inward-looking question—whether the Union stands at the threshold of renewal or is merely refining the grammar of its decline—is no longer sufficient. The real query is outward-facing and existential: Does the EU still exercise strategic initiative, or has its trajectory become externally scripted?

An EU that acts preemptively, with coherence and conviction, may yet co-author the architecture of the post-bifurcation international order. It may yet encode its priorities into the evolving topography of the international system. But an EU that hesitates by delegating decisions and mistaking process for power will persist only as an “archival” relic, viz., as a custodian of legacy mechanisms, administering decline long after its capacity for self-transformation has expired.

Coda

What the 2013 simulation foresaw as adaptive equilibria now reveal themselves in sharper focus. *Solidarity in Misery*, once a plausible interim state, has hardened into a structural attractor. Pathways out remain visible but systemic drift and external torsion increasingly obstruct them. In this closing moment, that simulation

is no longer merely a foresight exercise, but it has become a mirror. Scenarios are not just prophecies; they are also projections of choices. The EU may yet shift from being an object of global bifurcation to a co-architect of its future reconfiguration, but it will not have another chance to choose. Its chances for success will increase if its outreach to the Eastern Partnership countries and Central Asia is coordinated with its allies in North America. **BD**

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Why the U.S. Should Embrace Israel-Azerbaijan Alignment

Stephen Blank

This essay argues that Azerbaijan's joining the Abraham Accords and formalizing its entente with Israel and the U.S. is eminently in the interests of all three states, particularly in the context of the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. In the wake of the 12-day Israel-Iran war and the American strikes on Iran's nuclear program, as well as the U.S. proposal to oversee and perhaps even guarantee arrangements regarding the Zangezur Corridor to foster peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, this argument makes even more sense, given that Washington has expressed a clear interest in having peace and a lasting presence in the Caucasus.

These events highlight the American presence in both the Middle East and the Caucasus and its de facto alliance with

Israel. Given the growing intimacy of Azerbaijan-Israeli ties and U.S. interest in pacifying the South Caucasus, this move by Washington and Baku to formalize ties among these three states would be all the more logical now. Indeed, President Ilham Aliyev has publicly welcomed this American initiative. This idea of extending the Abraham Accords to Azerbaijan apparently originated in Israel. Still, there is no sign that Azerbaijan opposes this notion. Moreover, as shown below, this tandem acts—and can act even further—in critical areas to further interests congruent with those of the United States. Since this partnership, long a fixture in world affairs, both reflects and can extend trends in world affairs that are beneficial not only to Israel and Azerbaijan but also to the U.S. Washington should encourage Baku to take this step.

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Although Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had to postpone his scheduled visit to Baku in May 2025, his postponement letter cited the deepening bond between the two states, which can be seen in increasing economic cooperation, expanded tourism to and from both countries, Israel's construction of Azerbaijan's satellites, and two daily flights by Azerbaijani airlines between the two countries. While this partnership, if not a formal alliance, is primarily founded on a shared fear of Iran's aggressive intentions against both states, this tandem has now strengthened the economic dimension of the relationship. It is thereby forging a broader and deeper foundation that transcends shared anxieties. This can also be seen in Israel's technology and defense trade with Azerbaijan, where Baku employed Israeli weapons in its campaigns in Karabakh and is buying Israeli radar and aerial detection systems.

However, at the same time, this alignment also exemplifies a larger trend towards trans-regional partnerships between Middle Eastern and South

Caucasus states. A similar trend is observed in Central Asia, where Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev proposed in 2024 that his country establish a strategic partnership with Qatar. Similarly, those Gulf states that are already working with Israel are becoming more entangled with Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus. Consequently, the Azerbaijan-Israel partnership is no anomaly, but rather an illustration of a discernible trend in world politics that Washington should embrace.

Furthermore, beyond or in conjunction with this trend toward trans-regional partnerships, the concurrent rise of "keystone states" or "middle powers" that can defend their interests and even expand their local version of the aforementioned trend toward forming effective partnerships with other neighboring states to project their influence and power abroad is also taking place. Azerbaijan and Israel are such states that can function as regional anchors of local or regional security (especially with American support) and, so argued Michael Doran in the Winter 2021-2022 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, as partners

The Azerbaijan-Israel partnership is no anomaly, but rather an illustration of a discernible trend in world politics that Washington should embrace.

with the U.S. in extending its and their influence in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Indeed, this is already occurring in Central Asia, as evidenced by Azerbaijan's growing role as a complete player in regional forums and various informal arrangements. This trend aligns with the interests of Central Asian governments, who have been drawing Azerbaijan into their fold for some time now, demonstrating their acceptance of the country as an equal regional actor. Azerbaijan's participation in Central Asia also creates opportunities for Washington which, if it can overcome existing bureaucratic and political obstacles, could come to see Central Asia as a region connected to the South Caucasus and certainly to Azerbaijan, which clearly hopes to play a greater role in regional affairs, as S. Frederick Starr, Svante Cornell, Damjan Krnjević Mišković, and others have argued for quite some time now (this is illustrated by their promotion of terms like "Greater Central Asia," "Trans-Caspian region," and the "Silk Road region"). But it also accords with Baku's desires to be seen, as per Aliyev's opening address at COP29, as

a country where East and West, North and South meet, and this is not just a matter

of geography. We can build political, cultural, energy, trade, and transportation bridges between different international actors. The mega projects initiated by Azerbaijan have already transformed the energy and transportation maps of Eurasia, leading to the establishment of fruitful multinational cooperation formats.

Azerbaijan is thus collaborating with states like China and Kazakhstan to construct a cargo terminal at the Port of Baku for the transportation of Central Asian and Chinese cargo. Similarly, Tajikistan is considering joining the green electricity corridor being set up from Azerbaijan through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Further examples of the growing connectivity between Azerbaijan and Central Asia are discussed below.

New Vistas, Deeper Alignment

Therefore, despite conventional Western thinking about Israel and Azerbaijan that restricts them to their respective geographical zones (i.e., the Middle East and the South Caucasus), their 30-year partnership and coinciding international trends reflect greater regional trends that

have opened new vistas for them and potential partners, especially the United States. As this partnership deepens, its development also offers Washington substantive and durable economic, political, and possibly military gains in the Middle East and the Silk Road region.

The Azerbaijan-Israel strategic partnership presents Washington with a significant opportunity to promote peace in both the Middle East and the South Caucasus, aligning with long-standing U.S. interests and policies. Azerbaijan and Israel are fundamentally status quo states: their primary aim in both regions is to maintain peace and expand opportunities for economic growth and regional integration. This point has become especially salient as Armenia and Azerbaijan are moving towards signing a comprehensive peace agreement, the text of which has already been finalized.

This shared desire for an end to wars and terrorist attacks can now possibly be realized in the wake of Azerbaijan having consolidated its Second Karabakh War victory and

The Azerbaijan-Israel strategic partnership presents Washington with a significant opportunity to promote peace in both the Middle East and the South Caucasus, aligning with long-standing U.S. interests and policies.

the shared U.S.-Israeli victory over Iran. Those events could promote a new status quo in both regions, particularly in light of the need for a continued American presence in both regions. This linkage between Baku-Jerusalem

and Washington's fundamental interests provides a significant argument for formalizing the Abraham Accords with Azerbaijan and other major Arab players as members.

Other trends in the Middle East, such as the ceasefire in Lebanon and the revelations that the parties are discussing Syria's adherence to the Abraham Accords (despite Israeli encroachments on Syria to limit the possibility of it becoming a terrorist base), can foster negotiated resolutions of these issues, as well as those related to the West Bank.

Meanwhile, Russo-Iranian-Chinese efforts to forge their own trans-regional revisionist arrangements threaten both Israel and Azerbaijan, as well as other regional actors in the South Caucasus and the Middle East. The deepening Russo-Chinese alliance, which

poses a threat to both Europe and Asia, represents another trans-regional alliance system, underscoring their revisionist ambitions.

Likewise, the Russo-Iranian alignment, formalized in their January 2025 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement, represents a deeply revisionist entente (if not alliance) that targets Azerbaijan and Israel. This bilateral document openly displays the scope of the potential threats that their entente could produce in both the Middle East and the South Caucasus. It reaffirms the parties' mutual commitment to enhancing regional security in the former Soviet space and the Middle East. It also proclaims enhanced defense cooperation, suggesting more mutual arms and technology transfers. Thus, military-technical cooperation is expressly included here as a mutual commitment. Given Iran's missile and drone transfers to Russia and oft-expressed interest in advanced fighters like the Su-35 and air defenses, this could also include support for exchanges of nuclear, missile, and space technology. Indeed, right after the aforementioned document was signed, Iranian reports claimed that Iran had received the Su-35.

The agreement further states that both sides will expand

intelligence cooperation and anti-terrorist cooperation. Although this cooperation is not defined, it could become a platform for cooperation with Iranian efforts to subvert Azerbaijan on the alleged grounds of terrorism there as well as support for Iranian proxies in the Middle East, since Russia has in the past provided extensive support to Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. The document also openly advocates excluding American and European influence in the Middle East and the Caspian basin, i.e., it implicitly proposes Russian hegemony over Central Asia and the South Caucasus. In economics, it emphasizes creating a North-South transport corridor from Iran and presumably beyond to Russia, which would block independent Central Asian trade and transport routes while limiting Azerbaijan's connections to both Central Asia and Europe.

These plans for a North-South trade route from India through the Indian Ocean to Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia would limit Azerbaijan's direct access to the European market and reroute it through Asia. This is to be contrasted with the rival Middle Corridor project, which runs from China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and Azerbaijan, and then onto Georgia and the Black Sea,

bypassing Russia and linking to the parallel pipelines carrying oil and gas to Europe. Be that as it may, the Russia-Iran defense alliance nonetheless represents a de facto treaty for increased subversion, terrorism against both Israel and Arab governments, war in Ukraine, weapons, and possibly nuclear technology trade between the parties.

Neither Baku nor Jerusalem can have any doubts concerning Russian support for Iran against them. The recent incident in Yekaterinburg, which involved Russian police killing two ethnic-Azerbaijanis and injuring several more during a raid, coupled with the December 2024 downing of an Azerbaijan Airlines plane with no subsequent Russian apology, demonstrates Russia's continuing inability to accept Azerbaijan and its people as genuinely sovereign. Eritrea, which is also closely tied to Iran, unlawfully detained three Azerbaijani ships that were sailing in international waters while en route from Suez to Abu Dhabi from November 2024 to March 2025. Worse yet, despite the destruction of its nuclear program wreaked by Israel and the U.S. and the advent of negotiations with European

governments, Iran apparently intends (if it has not already started) to rebuild its nuclear program. Lastly, it now appears that Russia will be able to retain its Syrian bases that are the logistical lynchpin for all its power projection activities abroad, including support for Iranian terrorist proxies.

In contrast, the Azerbaijani-Israeli alignment exemplifies the benefits of trans-regional structures of cooperation. In earlier works, I have argued that this partnership exemplifies the larger trend towards trans-regional organizations of states for mutual cooperation. This trend is particularly notable in trans-regional partnerships between Middle Eastern and South Caucasian states, as Emil Avdalani has argued. A similar trend is evident in Central Asia; for instance, Kazakhstan and Qatar have become full strategic partners. However, while Russia and China are eagerly organizing such groupings to promote their interests, partnerships like the Israeli-Azerbaijani one offer states in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East alternatives to Sino-Russian-led trans-regional organizations and arrangements.

The Azerbaijani-Israeli alignment exemplifies the benefits of trans-regional structures of cooperation.

The organizations established by Russia and China—namely, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)—were initially focused on mutual economic benefit. Yet both Moscow and Beijing have “hijacked” these organizations for political purposes, generally anti-American ones. While a debate exists over the benefits of EAEU membership, the establishment of a unified trade market that attempts to replicate the former unified Soviet one has apparently not yielded significant outcomes, as smaller economies remain excessively tied to Russia and suffer from the vicissitudes of that economy, e.g., sanctions.

These West-imposed sanctions put members in a difficult position, sandwiching them between their association with Russia and the larger global economy, which appears to be causing economic and political tensions among them. Likewise, smaller members of the EAEU (e.g., Kazakhstan) are increasingly unhappy with it. Evidently, Russia is politicizing it for its own geopolitical gains at the expense of its members, and also because the economic benefits for a country like Kazakhstan seem to be outweighed by visible economic costs (e.g., the severe devaluation of the Kazakh currency).

Therefore, a different form of trans-regional association—one that allows Central Asian states to trade freely with Azerbaijan and thus gain a more direct outlet to Türkiye and the European Union—is eminently desirable. In this connection, as the AIRCenter’s Vusal Guliyev has written,

The Port of Baku is a key node in the trans-Eurasian trade ecosystem, enabling Azerbaijan to influence regional transit flows. Enhanced connectivity through Baku yields economic benefits and carries substantial geopolitical weight. It provides Europe and Central Asia with greater trade flexibility, minimizing dependence on Russian infrastructure. Consequently, the Port of Baku has become a pivotal node in the evolving Eurasian supply chain, collaborating with programs such as [China’s] “One Belt One Road” initiative and new EU trade routes. Continued investments and reforms will be key to ensuring the Port of Baku’s sustained growth as a vital transit hub in the heart of Eurasia.

Indeed, Azerbaijan is currently undertaking a large-scale investment program to make this port into a genuine regional hub. And not surprisingly, China is also investing heavily in it to help realize its dreams of becoming the driver of intercontinental trade and connectivity. The construction of such infrastructure and the opportunity

for a “pro-American” Azerbaijan to become a significant hub comports with the desires of both Central Asian governments and Baku for a stronger connection with Washington, as Starr has argued in various recent publications.

In this way, Washington could compensate for the earlier policy failure in Georgia, as described below, and strengthen both its position and that of Israel as a commercial partner for Central Asia. Indeed, if Washington can extend the Abraham Accords to Central Asian states, such as Kazakhstan, which appear to be interested in joining, and Middle Eastern states like Syria, the possibilities for Central Asian–Middle Eastern connectivity and trade increase by an order of magnitude, along with enhanced economic and political stability.

On the other hand, an American and/or Western failure to seize the opportunities now emerging in Central Asia and the South Caucasus leaves these areas to the tender mercies of another Russo-Chinese experiment in a suboptimal type of trans-regionalism that will take place at the expense of smaller states in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

A similar process is currently occurring within the BRICS. As

Alexander Gabuev and Oliver Steunkel put it in *Foreign Affairs* last September,

But despite its allure, the club must grapple with an internal fissure. Some of its members, chief among them China and Russia, want to position the grouping against the West and the global order crafted by the United States. The addition of Iran, an inveterate adversary of the United States, only deepens the sense that the group is now lining up on one side of a larger geopolitical battle. Other members, notably Brazil and India, do not share this ambition. Instead, they aim to utilize BRICS to democratize and encourage reform of the existing order, helping to guide the world from the fading unipolarity of the post–Cold War era to a more genuine multipolarity, in which countries can navigate between U.S.-led and Chinese-led blocs.

The Israel-Azerbaijan alignment stands in contrast to these trends, as its activities are poised to benefit not only these two states but also other potential partners from Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The Israel-Azerbaijan alignment represents both a trans-regional organization that stems from well-founded apprehensions that the interests of Iran and its proxies are strategically incompatible with their own, as well as a trans-regional formation that is deepening the partnership into new

economic domains. Neither is it an instrument of anti-American policies; rather, it is the opposite.

Therefore, the Israel-Azerbaijan alignment offers Washington numerous opportunities in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The U.S.-Israel alliance's value has been amply displayed in the wars Israel has fought against Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah since 7 October 2023.

This points to further opportunities available to the Trump Administration to strengthen ties with Azerbaijan and Israel across Central Asia. Those ties could further integrate the U.S. and Azerbaijan with the South Caucasus and Central Asia, where Azerbaijan is already extremely connected. For example, the Azerbaijani government has signaled that it wants to improve ties with the Trump Administration after what it sees as the duplicity and bad faith of the Biden Administration, obviously not least in expectation of cooperation on matters related to Iran.

The Middle East and Europe

Many signs of new opportunities for Washington in the Middle East are currently emerging, despite Russo-Chinese-

Iranian obstacles. For example, regarding Syria, despite numerous difficulties, opportunities for peace with Israel are emerging. Although we hear a great deal about Turco-Israeli tensions that could even lead to an armed conflict between them, developments pointing in an opposing direction are taking place, not least due to the Azerbaijani-Israeli partnership. Syria's discussions with Israel concerning the Abraham Accords could arguably not have taken place without Turkish support. Despite the bilateral tensions between them (including bellicose rhetoric on the part of the Turkish president), Türkiye's foreign minister has publicly stated Ankara's desire to avoid a confrontation with Israel. In addition, and again undoubtedly with Ankara's blessings, Syria is spurning Iran and looking to the U.S. for economic support. Indeed, Syria did nothing to interfere with Israeli aircraft flying over its territory when Israel struck Iranian targets during the 12-day war, a sure sign of its lack of support for Iran and desire to remain neutral.

As Claudia De Martino's assessment of Turkish policy from earlier this year has concluded,

Despite occasional tensions, such as Turkey's vocal criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza and close competition in the sale of advanced military equipment

on the global market, Turkey is not a clear threat to Israel. On the contrary, it has not stood in the way of the extension of the 2020 Abraham Accords (which, to this day, remain largely on paper), and it has dealt a blow to the Axis of Resistance in Syria, which has also proved highly beneficial to Israel. Therefore, thus far Ankara has not jeopardized any vital Israeli interest and, moreover, its role in rebuilding Syria could contribute to regional stability and prevent the further fragmentation of the country, which could be beneficial to broader regional security.

Azerbaijani mediation efforts have long been a regular feature of this partnership. As President Aliyev stated at ADA University in early April 2025, not only has Azerbaijan undertaken serious mediation between Israel and Türkiye during previous crises, but it is also doing so now to avert a conflict between them.

Now we are facing a *déjà vu*. We know the algorithm of our actions, and I can assure you that we are sparing no efforts in order to be helpful. At this stage, it would probably not be right to say anything more than that because, again, it is a relationship between two countries, and it is up to them to decide to what degree they want to make public any kind of process between us, if ever. Again, during the first round

of normalization, we were absolutely silent. We worked behind the scenes. So, you can imagine that we are doing the same now, and we hope that the process will lead to normalization.

Moreover, Azerbaijan and the U.S., in particular, have significant interests at stake that could benefit both Israel and Türkiye. Azerbaijani mediation could not only help stabilize the Levant but also could have an impact beyond the Middle East in Europe. This applies explicitly to energy prospects in the Eastern Mediterranean and Southeast Europe, since Azerbaijan's state-owned energy company, SOCAR, has acquired a 10 percent stake in Israel's Tamar Mediterranean Gas field. SOCAR will also be able to explore for gas off of Israel's coast.

This deal offers SOCAR a presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and access to the massive gas deposits found there by Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt, and potentially available to a revived Lebanon. It strengthens Azerbaijan and SOCAR's potential for exporting gas and oil to Türkiye, the Levant, and the Balkans. Since a July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding with the EU holds out the prospect of doubling Azerbaijani gas exports to the EU, the Tamar field could figure in those discussions, thereby

enhancing Azerbaijani and Israeli connections to Europe—particularly to the Balkans and Italy, which would be the natural consumers of this gas.

Given the EU’s continuing demand for gas and Azerbaijan’s role in providing it, as well as its potential ability to persuade its ally Türkiye to halt blocking exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean, and possibly to mediate between Ankara and Jerusalem, this deal portends the benefits the Baku-Jerusalem partnership offers the European Union.

It is significantly in America’s interest that Eastern Mediterranean gas reaches Middle Eastern and European markets via the Balkans, as this helps stabilize relations among Israel and its neighbors and reduces Russia’s energy presence on the European continent. The first Trump Administration actively promoted an association of all local gas producers with these goals in mind. Today, Washington should try to help stabilize Lebanon and Syria as part of a broader initiative to check Iranian threats to both Israel and Lebanon by helping resolve their negotiations over a land border. That would allow them to explore the Eastern Mediterranean for gas. Since SOCAR also intends to expand production to other fields

outside Europe, stabilization here opens up new vistas for SOCAR. This, in turn, could make Azerbaijan a real partner in stabilizing the Middle East.

Finally, beyond having set back Iran’s nuclear program and Israel’s victory over Iran’s terrorist proxies, the Trump Administration clearly hopes to extend the Abraham Agreements to Saudi Arabia. That also opens up the possibility of extending them still further to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Those accords clearly benefit the Middle East’s overall regional economy. Robert Greenway, President and Executive Director of the Abraham Accords Institute, testified before the U.S. Congress on 9 May 2023 that, “In 2022, trade between Israel and its regional peace partners reached \$3.47 billion, up from \$1.905 billion in 2021 and \$593 million in 2019.” Greenway further advocated that the U.S. follow up the extension of the Abraham Accords with a proposal for a regional free trade area. Specifically, he advocated that doing so would ensure regional stability, check the China-led Belt and Road Initiative, and generate thousands of new jobs and billions of dollars in new economic activity.

These are only a few examples of how this partnership can advance what needs to be understood as shared interests. However,

this alignment’s potential benefits to the U.S. and the West do not stop here. The real importance of each country’s presence in regions beyond its supposedly limited geographical zone lies in its partnership, exemplifying a major trend in world politics: the forging of trans-regional economic, security, and political groupings whose influence

transcends the members’ particular borders. Thus, the Azerbaijan-Israel bilateral partnership could potentially expand and benefit the U.S. even as it reflects broader tendencies in world politics. Therefore, this partnership, as well as the Kazakh-Qatar one, offers Washington an opportunity to forge stable, enduring partnerships across key regions to address pressing economic, political, security, and environmental challenges.

South Caucasus and Central Asia

These opportunities for multi-dimensional trans-regional cooperation include but transcend the obvious case of a unified stance to push back against Iran that brings together the U.S.,

Israel, and Azerbaijan. While Israel gains from Azerbaijani support in energy and both states exchange intelligence, Azerbaijan benefits from Israel’s arms sales—as we saw

The Azerbaijan-Israel bilateral partnership could potentially expand and benefit the U.S. even as it reflects broader tendencies in world politics.

in the campaigns to liberate Karabakh and, presumably, to help it counter subversion attempts from abroad, including Iran. Israel also stands to benefit significantly from its connec-

tion with and to Azerbaijan, as opportunities for cooperation with the South Caucasus and Central Asia open up to Western influence, as described below.

Moreover, both Israel and Azerbaijan will also have a role to play in President Trump’s regeneration of the policy of “maximum pressure” upon Iran. Israel’s ability to defeat Iran’s terrorist proxies and, in tandem with the U.S., Iran’s missile strikes and nuclear program has already been demonstrated. But its concurrent arms sales to Azerbaijan and intelligence cooperation, along with Azerbaijan’s alliance with Türkiye, represent strong factors of deterrence against both an Iranian invasion or use of terrorist proxies against Azerbaijan. Furthermore, to the extent that both Washington and Baku agree,

bilateral intelligence sharing against Iran and Moscow, as in the presumed case of Jerusalem and Baku, can be further developed.

Similarly, the Trump Administration should extend the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA) to Azerbaijan. C-SIPA is designed as an instrument for forging durable cooperation, if not partnerships, among states menaced by Iran. It provides for extensive cooperation in the fields of defense and security, trade and investment, and science and technology. It has already won support from Bahrain and the UK and could help establish a durable regional or even trans-regional security order in the Middle East.

Apart from the benefits that trade, investment, and technological cooperation can offer members, it also provides security guarantees that approach those of Article V of NATO's Washington Treaty. Specifically, as Article II of the C-SIPA text indicates,

In the event of external aggression or the threat of external aggression against one Party, the Parties shall [...] immediately meet at the most senior levels to determine additional defense needs and to develop and implement appropriate defense and deterrent responses as decided

upon by the Parties, including in the economic, military, and/or political realms. The Parties stand ready to immediately share available and appropriate information and intelligence in response to such an event.

For C-SIPA to extend to Azerbaijan, however, the notorious Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act would need to be repealed.

In the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Azerbaijan's agenda is paramount. However, there are growing opportunities for Baku, Jerusalem, and Washington to advance their respective and shared interests. First, the South Caucasus is no longer an exclusively Russian region as Türkiye, Iran, and Israel all compete for influence there (as do the EU and the U.S.). Second, Russian influence is steadily declining as Armenia seeks Western partners and Russo-Azerbaijani relations are in free-fall due to Russia's shooting down of an Azerbaijani civilian flight on 25 December 2024, and subsequent stonewalling of Baku's demands for acceptance of responsibility.

Consequently, Baku is expressing its independence from Russia more freely. Baku-based political analyst Farhad Mammadov says that "Russia's political and economic

'levers of pressure' on Azerbaijan had been reduced to practically none." Similarly, Aykhan Hajizada, Spokesman for Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry, bluntly stated that Azerbaijan had leverage over Russia: "They don't want to lose Azerbaijan as well," he said in January 2025.

These issues have not died down, as Russia continues to stonewall Azerbaijan over its responsibility for the loss of life on that flight. As a result, President Aliyev conspicuously shunned Putin's VE Day celebrations on 9 May 2025. A state-run news channel, *lnews.az*, commented that,

Aliyev's decision not to attend was a logical consequence of the recent developments in relations between Baku and Moscow, and reflects the principled and balanced position of the Azerbaijani leadership on key bilateral issues. [...] There are quite a few unresolved problems.

But Russia is pushing back. It is pressuring Georgia to abandon its leanings to the West, maintains several military bases in Armenia, and its January 2025 agreement with Iran will be used to generate continuous pressure upon Azerbaijan. More recently, Russia has reinforced its base in Armenia and may have been involved in attempting a coup against the

Pashinyan government. Moreover, its new navy base at Ochamchira in secessionist Abkhazia gives Moscow heightened leverage in the Black Sea and over Georgia. To the extent that it comes to control Georgia, it could also control Azerbaijan's and Central Asia's direct access to the West, as the pipelines to Türkiye run through Georgia, and the Black Sea provides the best maritime access for these regions to the West.

Should Russia come to dominate these countries' access to the Black Sea, it could severely retard their development and orientation towards the West. Although the Trump Administration is unlikely to intervene in Georgia on behalf of human rights, multiple important strategic considerations could spur American involvement in this matter. These issues stem from Georgia's strategic location in the South Caucasus and on the eastern shores of the Black Sea.

First, a continuing adoption of the West's hitherto passive policy towards Georgia means losing Georgia. Then its economy will be reoriented to a Russo-Chinese orientation rather than a Western one, with serious consequences for American firms. A French-led Western bid for the giant construction project at the Anaklia port on the Black Sea has already

been outbid by a Chinese-led consortium.

Moreover, this port, along with other investments in infrastructure, is crucial for bringing Azerbaijani and ultimately Central Asian energy to Europe, as well as expanding trade between the South Caucasus and Central Asian states with the Old Continent.

Neither is this energy trade the only one of importance to Europe and the West. Central Asia has considerable potential for exporting green energy and, more importantly, large quantities of rare earth minerals. To the extent that Georgia is an independent actor whose infrastructure is integrated with that of other Black Sea littoral states, Central Asian states, and Azerbaijan, it will then enjoy significantly greater opportunities for trade, investment, connectivity, and linkages with the global economy.

It stands to reason that a Russian-dominated Georgia would reorient its economy and politics towards Russia and China, denying those states many of the opportunities they seek to integrate with the global economy. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to state that Georgia's freedom is the key to and precondition for both the South Caucasus' and Central

Asia's complete emancipation from Russian imperial ambitions. Since Baku is the principal port for Central Asian trade westward and a key lynchpin for the success of the Middle Corridor, a project that facilitates free trade between Central Asia and the West will help all these states evade Russian pressure.

Beyond trade, Israel and Azerbaijan, along with other governments, are supporting their own, Central Asian, and U.S. interests. First, many Central Asian states, grasping the dangers of Russian, Chinese, and terrorist threats, have begun to prioritize military reconstruction. Kazakhstan, perhaps the leader in this regard, is already advocating for a Central Asian defense union and is simultaneously quickly moving to become the dominant Caspian naval power. Whereas Türkiye (and possibly Azerbaijan), Israel, and to some degree the U.S. are already engaged in security cooperation with Central Asia, either or both Baku and Washington can foster more meaningful Israeli security and military cooperation with willing Central Asian states, even possibly including arms sales. Such cooperation promotes diversification of Central Asia's security providers and economic ties while minimizing the threat of excessive dependence or vulnerability to Russia and/or China.

Another way in which Israel could facilitate American interests in Israel is by serving as a "backdoor" for U.S. investments through third-party Israeli companies. Since Central Asian countries do not wish to run the risk of strong Russian or Chinese opposition to a heightened American presence there, if that economic

presence is mediated through a third party, such as Israel, then it can serve to bring an indirect American presence into the region for the mutual benefit of all parties.

Finally, and perhaps most urgently, the greatest threat to Central Asia and Azerbaijan is the desertification and erosion of all its main bodies of water, from the Caspian Sea to Lake Balkhash. This escalating crisis threatens the livelihoods, health, and environment of millions of people on both sides of the Caspian and other bodies of water, such as the Aral Sea, throughout Central Asia. This crisis stems from climate change, poor water management, and a previous failure of collective action among these states.

But using the convening power of the U.S.-Central Asia C5+1 (or C6+1 that includes Azerbaijan) format that involves the U.S. and

This paper has outlined numerous instances where the Azerbaijan-Israel partnership can benefit not only these two states but the U.S. and other states from the Levant to Central Asia.

given Israel's successful and extensive efforts at desalination and water reclamation, suggests that Israel is a natural fit for large-scale cooperation with Central Asian States, either collectively or individually on this

urgent ecological-economic process that is no less in Azerbaijani and/or American interests. For example, an Israeli company that produces water from thin air signed an agreement with Uzbekistan in 2019 for just this purpose and can serve as an example for the latter's neighbors.

Conclusions

This paper has outlined numerous instances where the Azerbaijan-Israel partnership can benefit not only these two states but the U.S. and other states from the Levant to Central Asia. Unlike Russian- and Chinese-led trans-regional organizations, this partnership is driven by a shared need for security that is now expanding to

include energy and can be scaled to encompass a broader economic, environmental, and security agenda for mutual benefit. Ideally, this is the genuine purpose and redeeming feature of a trans-regional organization.

Given today's global arena, it would be a dangerous and reckless American policy failure not to capitalize on this pro-Western alignment, particularly in light of

Russian and Chinese opportunism. It would also be a cardinal strategic error to squander the opportunity presented by those Central Asian and South Caucasus states that wish to improve ties with Washington and even sign the Abraham Accords. After all, who knows when such a pro-American alignment will return, while we do know what to expect in all these regions if Washington fails to seize the day here. **BD**

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Azerbaijan's Multilateral Green Energy Diplomacy

Powering Regional Integration Through the Caspian-Black Sea Green Energy Corridor

Ahmad Humbatov

In some parts of the world, the global energy transition is accelerating, driven by increased electrification, expanding climate commitments, and the political drive to decarbonize economies. As demand for electricity generated from renewable sources increases—particularly in the markets controlled by the European Union or influenced by its unwavering commitment to climate action—so too does the strategic importance of cross-border transmission infrastructure that can deliver renewable energy across regions. However, today's grid systems remain fragmented, constrained by national borders,

technical incompatibilities, and insufficient investment in transnational connectivity. In this context, large-scale regional initiatives have become more important as critical enablers of energy security, economic integration, and climate resilience.

Originally known as the Black Sea Submarine Cable, the project—now increasingly referred to as the Caspian-Black Sea or the Caspian-Black Sea-Europe Green Energy Corridor—represents one of the most ambitious and strategically significant responses to this challenge. The broader framing reflects both Azerbaijan's

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prospective offshore wind contributions from the Caspian and the corridor's potential to serve as a conduit for green electricity from Central Asia, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Although initially focused on a Georgia-Romania connection, the project has evolved to represent a broader strategic vision that links the South Caucasus and Central Asia, due to a combination of Azerbaijan's geo-economic ambition and the EU's aspiration to lead the world in establishing a future powered by renewable energy systems.

This paper explores the Caspian-Black Sea-Europe Energy Corridor, focusing on its structure, governance, and broader regional implications. It analyzes Azerbaijan's strategic shift from a hydrocarbons exporter to an enabler of renewable energy systems. It examines how the development of this corridor is reshaping regional diplomacy, fostering economic integration, and advancing multilateral cooperation. In doing so, it highlights Azerbaijan's emerging role as both a green electricity supplier and a facilitator of cross-regional energy connectivity.

Evolution

Since regaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has emerged as a key enabler of regional energy security and connectivity. Under the leadership of the late President Heydar Aliyev, the country laid the groundwork for its modern energy diplomacy by engaging with international partners and positioning itself as a bridge between East and West.

The signing of the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli (ACG) production sharing agreement in 1994—dubbed the “Contract of the Century”—marked a historic turning point, attracting major global energy companies and signaling Azerbaijan's openness to multilateral investment and cooperation. This oil-focused engagement firmly anchored Azerbaijan in international energy markets and provided the fiscal base for broader economic development.

Following these and similar achievements in the oil sector, Azerbaijan developed its natural gas strategy through the implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). This landmark initiative physically connects Caspian gas

This paper explores the Caspian-Black Sea-Europe Energy Corridor, focusing on its structure, governance, and broader regional implications.

reserves to European markets for the first time via a 3,500-kilometer infrastructure system that traverses seven countries. At its core is the (i) Shah Deniz natural gas-condensate field (“SD1”) and its full-field development (“SD2”), which supply the gas volumes underpinning the corridor. In addition to the Shah Deniz natural gas field, the SGC includes the (ii) South Caucasus Pipeline (“SCP”) and its expansion (“SCPX” project), (iii) the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), and (iv) the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). Additionally, the (v) Interconnector Greece–Bulgaria (IGB), which became operational in October 2022, links the Greek and Bulgarian gas transmission networks and diversifies gas supplies to Bulgaria and the wider Southeast Europe region. Together, these infrastructure elements form one of the most complex and geopolitically significant gas value chains ever constructed by a consortium of more than a dozen international energy companies, representing a total investment of approximately \$35 billion.

Thanks to strategic projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor—which connect the Caspian Sea to international energy markets—Azerbaijan now exports its oil to 25 countries and its natural gas to 12. These initiatives were not

merely technical achievements; they required complex negotiations involving transit countries, international financial institutions, and energy consortia. By aligning diverse stakeholder interests and managing regional geopolitical dynamics, Azerbaijan established itself as a reliable and pragmatic partner in the EU’s energy diversification agenda. This legacy of pragmatic, multi-layered engagement continues to shape Azerbaijan’s approach to the energy transition—now extending beyond hydrocarbons into renewables, electricity trade, and climate diplomacy.

Building on this foundation, Azerbaijan has taken concrete steps to operationalize its energy transition—adopting new legislation, launching institutional reforms, and advancing large-scale renewable energy partnerships. The country has introduced several laws and regulatory frameworks to support the expansion of green energy—including the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, dated 31 May 2021, titled On the Use of Renewable Energy Sources in the Production of Electricity.

This law provides the foundation for integrating renewables into the national energy system and creating a favorable environment for international investment. In parallel, the

government has launched strategic partnerships with developers such as the UAE’s Masdar and Saudi Arabia’s ACWA Power to implement large-scale wind and solar projects. These efforts are helping to diversify the country’s electricity supply, reduce reliance on fossil fuels, and reorient Azerbaijan’s energy sector toward long-term sustainability.

Baku’s hosting of the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) represented another important milestone in its international energy diplomacy. As the first post-Soviet fossil fuel-producing country to convene a COP, Azerbaijan demonstrated its evolving energy identity—moving from a hydrocarbons-based

model toward integrated renewable energy and climate cooperation. COP29 elevated Azerbaijan’s visibility as both a renewable energy producer and a neutral platform for global dialogue, bridging the gap between developed and developing economies, fossil fuel exporters, and climate-vulnerable nations. The event underscored Azerbaijan’s ambition to contribute to international climate action while reinforcing

its role as a regional convenor and enabler of multilateral energy solutions.

As part of this transformation, Azerbaijan aims to become a vital bridge between Central Asia’s green energy potential and the EU’s decarbonizing electricity markets. In parallel with domestic reforms and green energy investments, Baku is expanding cross-border grid infrastructure and exploring next-generation

COP29 elevated Azerbaijan’s visibility as both a renewable energy producer and a neutral platform for global dialogue, reinforcing its role as a regional convenor and enabler of multilateral energy solutions.

technologies such as hydrogen and carbon capture. These efforts reflect a coordinated strategy to align internal energy transition with regional cooperation and global climate objectives. The Caspian–Black Sea Energy Corridor embodies this vi-

sion by positioning Baku not only as a renewable energy exporter but also as a key architect of cross-regional green energy connectivity.

Nut and Bolts

At the core of the Caspian–Black Sea Green Energy Corridor is a high-voltage direct current (HVDC) submarine cable

to be laid across the Black Sea, complemented by a fiber-optic internet line to enhance digital connectivity between the participating nations. This ambitious infrastructure will transmit electricity produced from renewable sources (i.e., wind, solar, and hydro) from the South Caucasus to Central and Eastern Europe, forming the backbone of a broader effort to integrate regional electricity markets.

The planned transmission system will run approximately 1,200 kilometers from Anaklia, on Georgia's Black Sea coast, to Constanța, Romania, crossing seabed depths exceeding 2,000 meters—making it one of the longest and deepest HVDC cables in the world. Once operational, the system will interconnect with Hungary and other countries in Europe, channeling renewable electricity into Europe's grid while supporting parallel goals in digital transformation and resilience.

According to the Italian engineering firm CESI, which conducted a feasibility study for the initial phase of the project—a 1,100-kilometer HVDC submarine cable linking Georgia and Romania—the proposed infrastructure has been deemed both technically and economically viable. The study assessed that, given

the sea depth and cable length, the transmission system could operate at a capacity of between 1,300 and 1,500 megawatts (MW), depending on the insulation technology used.

A 1,300 MW capacity is achievable using mass-insulated (MI) cables, which are currently considered the more proven and reliable option for such demanding subsea conditions. Reaching 1,500 MW would require the use of XLPE insulation, a higher-capacity technology with limited operational experience at 525 kilovolts in similar environments, necessitating further risk assessment before deployment. This system would be sufficient to supply up to 2 million households on the European continent with green electricity. (Earlier proposals envisioned a capacity of 1 GW and estimated costs of around €2.3 billion.) More recent estimates project total investment costs at approximately €3.5–4 billion for a 1.3 GW transmission system.

While Tbilisi plans to export around 1.3 GW, Baku envisages supplying up to 4 GW of renewable electricity through the corridor, which will likely be delivered in three separate stages of approximately 1.3 GW each. Each phase will require laying a separate cable system with dedicated converter

stations, as current technology does not permit higher transmission volumes through a single subsea link due to limitations in insulation, thermal dissipation, and cable weight at extreme depths. This modular approach reflects both engineering constraints and a phased investment strategy.

In parallel, CESI is finalizing a second feasibility study evaluating the broader 4 GW Caspian–Black Sea–Europe electricity corridor, extending from Azerbaijan to Hungary via Georgia and Romania. The launch of the corridor is scheduled for 2032. While currently structured as distinct tracks—Azerbaijan's 4 GW plan and Georgia's 1.3 GW plan—they share considerable technical similarities and overlapping participants, and may eventually converge into a unified regional corridor.

Power feeding into the corridor will be sourced from a diverse portfolio of renewable energy assets across Azerbaijan and Georgia. In Azerbaijan, the strategy centers on expanding solar and wind capacity, including the potential for future offshore wind development in the Caspian Sea. The UAE-based developer Masdar launched its operations with the 230 MW Garadagh solar power plant, the first utility-scale solar project in the country.

In October 2023, the company signed investment and operational agreements for three additional projects: the 445 MW Bilasuvar Solar PV Project, the 315 MW Neftchala Solar PV Project, and the 240 MW Absheron-Garadagh Onshore Wind Project. Together, these projects bring Masdar's total managed portfolio in Azerbaijan to over 1.2 GW, with an expected commissioning date of 2027. As Masdar has recently noted, “With this rollout of 1 GW in wind and solar projects, in partnership with SOCAR, we take a significant step forward in realizing our ambitious plan to develop up to 10 GW of renewable energy by 2030 in Azerbaijan.”

Meanwhile, ACWA Power is constructing a 240 MW solar facility in the Absheron and Khizi districts and has reached agreements to develop up to 2.5 GW of wind capacity, including offshore projects. These developments—driven by international investment—form the backbone of Azerbaijan's strategy to build export-oriented renewable generation capacity. With these developments, the country is well on track not only to reach its 2030 target of 30 percent renewable electricity, but also to supply electricity for up to 4 GW of exports through the Caspian–Black Sea–Europe Green Energy Corridor.

Georgia is a net importer of energy. Currently, the country covers only about one-fifth of its total energy demand, making it heavily reliant on imports of oil products and natural gas (primarily from Azerbaijan). Georgia is also a net importer of electricity. In 2024, the country purchased 1.2 billion kilowatt-hours (kWh) of electricity while exporting 1.04 billion kWh.

Nevertheless, the country has significant potential to become a net exporter of green electricity, particularly due to its renewable-heavy power mix. According to OMNIA and the International Energy Agency (IEA), hydropower accounted for 80 percent of Georgia's electricity generation in 2024—equivalent to 14.2 billion kWh, of which only 2.8 billion kWh came from thermal power plants. To capitalize on this advantage, the state-owned Georgian State Electrosystem (GSE) aims to more than double the country's national generation capacity to 9.8 GW by 2033, mainly through new hydropower investments. Achieving this goal would position Georgia to transition from a periodic importer to a stable exporter of green electricity via the Caspian–Black Sea corridor.

To formalize cooperation, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary signed a quadrilateral agreement in

December 2022 and subsequently established a joint venture to oversee project development and coordination. In June 2023, Bulgaria expressed its intention to join the project, reflecting the corridor's growing regional relevance.

In September 2024, the transmission system operators of Romania (Transelectrica), Georgia (Georgian State Electrosystem), Azerbaijan (AzerEnerji), and Hungary (MVM Electrical Works) signed the articles of incorporation for the Green Energy Corridor Power Company (GECO), a joint project company headquartered in Bucharest, Romania. The initiative has been submitted for designation as an EU Project of Mutual Interest (PMI). This status would make it eligible for grant financing through the European Union's Connecting Europe Facility. The EU Commission has already expressed strong support, aligning the project with its Global Gateway infrastructure strategy. The project also supports Georgia's long-term goal of integrating into the EU's electricity market and synchronizing with the ENTSO-E grid system—a strategic milestone for deepening its energy ties with the Brussels-based entity. EU enlargement officials have projected that Brussels

could contribute up to €2.3 billion (\$2.5 billion) toward the cable's construction.

The long-term profitability of the corridor will depend heavily on electricity prices in destination markets and the ability of participating countries to build sufficient export-oriented renewable capacity at competitive costs, while leveraging economies of scale. A study by the German Economic Team estimates that under optimistic conditions—assuming levelized costs of electricity (LCOE) at €50/MWh in Georgia and Azerbaijan, and offtake prices of €65/MWh in Romania and Hungary—the system could generate net revenues of around €160 million annually.

At this rate, and with total investment costs estimated between €3.5 and €4 billion, the simple payback period would slightly exceed 20 years. This demonstrates that the subsea cable could, in principle, be profitable in the long term. While some forecasts suggest that rising demand in the EU could keep prices quite high, a recent study conducted by the EU Commission has put forward the proposition, contested by skeptics, that average wholesale prices could fall by 57 percent by 2030 as renewables increase market share. This uncertainty underscores

the importance of long-term power purchase agreements (PPAs) in providing revenue stability and mitigating market risk.

A Broader Corridor

The Caspian-Black Sea Europe Green Energy project began as a regional endeavor. Still, it may have the potential to serve as the backbone of a broader transcontinental corridor linking Central Asia via Azerbaijan with the European Union. While the current framework centers on cooperation among Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary (and potentially Bulgaria), the project's long-term vision may extend well beyond the South Caucasus as the initial base for green electricity generation and export. Over the past several years, Azerbaijan and Central Asian states have taken concrete steps—through bilateral agreements and multilateral initiatives—to lay the groundwork for a future expansion of the corridor.

Azerbaijan plays a pivotal role in this emerging strategic electricity corridor as the only viable land and sea transit route connecting Central Asia to Europe while bypassing both Russia and Iran. With its strategic location along the Caspian Sea and established energy and transport

infrastructure, Azerbaijan provides the indispensable link that enables the movement of electricity from Central Asia through the South Caucasus to the Black Sea and onward to the EU. This unique positioning elevates Baku's importance not only as an energy producer but also as a regional enabler of secure and diversified transcontinental energy flows.

This growing alignment is reinforced by Azerbaijan's increasingly active foreign policy in Central Asia. Over the past few years, Baku has intensified its political outreach across the region, hosting high-level summits, deepening bilateral ties, and aligning its energy and infrastructure priorities with those of its Central Asian partners. For Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan offers a vital connection to European energy markets via the Caspian and Black Sea corridors. Turkmenistan, too, seems to be interested in joining a potential green energy interconnection project linking Central Asia to Azerbaijan and the European continent, signaling a broader regional alignment around renewable energy exports.

One of the most evident signs of this momentum came in 2024 with the formal establishment of the Green Energy Corridor Alliance (also referred to as the Green Corridor Alliance) among Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. The joint venture, headquartered in Baku, provides a long-term institutional foundation for collaboration on technical, regulatory, and financing issues. On 13 November 2024, during COP29, the presidents of the three countries signed a strategic partnership agreement on the development and transmission of green electricity, further anchoring their shared commitment to the corridor's expansion.

Uzbekistan has emerged as a key driver of this initiative. The country aims to generate an additional 20 gigawatts (GW) of renewable energy by 2030, bringing total renewable capacity to 27 GW. As of April 2024, the government had signed agreements for 12 GW of wind and solar capacity, with another 6 GW secured in May. These investments position Uzbekistan to become a leading supplier of renewable electricity

Azerbaijan's unique positioning elevates the country's importance not only as an energy producer but also as a regional enabler of secure and diversified transcontinental energy flows.

via the trans-Caspian green energy corridor.

Kazakhstan, while managing its domestic energy needs and addressing its fossil fuel legacy, has also signaled a growing interest in renewable energy development. The country currently generates about 2.9 GW from renewable sources and aims to add at least 5 GW more by

2030. In 2023, Kazakhstan became a net importer of electricity due to domestic shortfalls, but longer-term plans suggest that future renewable capacity could be directed toward exports. The government has also set a goal of attracting at least \$150 billion in foreign direct investment by 2029, with a substantial share expected to support green energy initiatives. Additionally, a tightly controlled referendum in October 2024—with over 70 percent voter approval—cleared the way for building a new nuclear power plant, which could reduce internal demand for renewables and enable greater export capacity.

The inclusion of Central Asian countries in the broader corridor would not only expand the project's geographic

scope but also enhance its strategic value. For the EU, it offers access to one of the world's most potentially abundant regions in solar and wind, while boosting energy diversification and system resilience. For Azerbaijan and Georgia, it would consolidate their roles as indispensable transit hubs. And for landlocked Central Asian states, it provides a long-

awaited route into global electricity markets—advancing their energy transition goals and increasing their participation in cross-border green trade.

Risks and Challenges

The Caspian–Black Sea–Europe Green Energy Corridor represents a transformative vision for transcontinental electricity trade, connecting renewable energy producers in Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to end users in the European Union.

While the project has gained political momentum and established an institutional structure, its implementation faces a set of five

interrelated challenges that must be addressed through coordinated action, long-term investment, and robust governance.

First, *technical and logistical constraints*. The corridor's core infrastructure—a series of HVDC submarine cables across the Black Sea—faces significant logistical and technological hurdles. Only a few global manufacturers currently possess the capacity to produce long-distance HVDC submarine cables, with annual output ranging between 1,000 and 1,200 kilometers. Each 1.3 GW stage of the project requires its own cable and converter station pair, making procurement and sequencing critical.

Additionally, specialized vessels for cable-laying are limited and often booked years in advance. Delays seen in past projects, such as the NorthConnect interconnector (between the UK and Norway) and Viking Link (between the UK and Denmark), illustrate the importance of early contracting and proactive supply chain management. Countries participating in the corridor could mitigate these risks by securing multiple manufacturers and chartering vessels through long-term agreements and collaborative procurement strategies.

Second, *regulatory and institutional fragmentation*. The corridor spans both EU and non-EU jurisdictions, with diverse technical standards, regulatory frameworks, and levels of grid synchronization. While Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria operate entirely within the ENTSO-E system, Georgia and Azerbaijan currently function outside the synchronized pan-European grid. Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also operate under different rules and lack market integration with the EU.

These discrepancies pose significant obstacles to the seamless trade of electricity and system stability. Advancing regional convergence—through synchronized grid upgrades, technical assistance, and alignment with EU market protocols—will be essential. Empowering the newly created Green Energy Corridor Power Company (GECO) with regulatory coordination authority could enhance consistency across jurisdictions and ensure efficient cross-border flows.

Third, *financing and investment uncertainty*. The estimated €3.5-4 billion cost of the Black Sea transmission infrastructure—excluding generation assets and domestic grid upgrades—demands a complex financing mix.

While the European Union and development partners have expressed willingness to provide grants or concessional loans, heavy reliance on public funds introduces exposure to shifting policy priorities and administrative delays.

Moreover, private investors may remain hesitant in the absence of clear offtake agreements, competitive and stable pricing structures, or de-risking mechanisms. To bridge this gap, project stakeholders should consider blended finance strategies, long-term power purchase agreements (PPAs), and partial risk guarantees supported by international financial institutions. Recent market analysis suggests that the corridor could be profitable under optimistic price assumptions—€65/MWh in destination markets—but the aspirational prospect of falling European electricity prices due to rapid renewable expansion, which tends to underestimate the rate of consumer demand growth and overestimate efficiency, may reduce margins. Robust PPA frameworks will therefore be crucial to bankability and long-term viability.

Fourth, *geopolitical and cybersecurity risks*. Spanning multiple regions with diverse political contexts, the corridor faces a range of geopolitical and security threats. These include tensions in the Black

Sea, disputes over maritime boundaries, and risks of sabotage or cyberattacks. The reliance on digital infrastructure, remote monitoring, and cross-border interdependence further amplifies the system's vulnerability to disruptions.

Regional cooperation will be essential to mitigating these threats. This may include joint security protocols, shared monitoring of cable routes, coordinated emergency response plans, and formal inclusion of the project under the EU's critical infrastructure protection regime. Establishing unified cybersecurity standards and conducting regular system vulnerability assessments could further enhance resilience.

Fifth, *environmental and social concerns*. The construction of submarine cables and converter stations, as well as upstream renewable generation facilities, might pose ecological and social risks. Marine ecosystems may be affected during underwater installation, and land-based infrastructure could disrupt local communities, agricultural land, and sensitive habitats.

In Georgia, for example, the suspension of the Namakhvani hydropower project highlights the risks of proceeding without proper community engagement or environmental due diligence. Additionally,

seasonal variability in hydropower output raises concerns about the reliability of exports from this source during dry periods.

To manage such risks, governments and project developers should prioritize early and transparent stakeholder consultations, robust environmental impact assessments, and transboundary coordination. Diversifying renewable sources with solar and wind (which is inherent to the project) and deploying technologically sound energy storage solutions can help stabilize seasonal fluctuations. Clear benefit-sharing mechanisms and local involvement will be key to securing public support and maintaining project development.

Unique Vision

The Caspian–Black Sea–Europe Green Energy Corridor represents a unique blend of infrastructure development, international diplomacy, and climate strategy. Driven by Azerbaijan’s shift from a traditional oil and gas exporter to a proactive player in the renewable energy space, the corridor offers a new vision for

If realized, the Caspian–Black Sea–Europe Green Energy Corridor could become a cornerstone of regional energy diplomacy.

connecting electricity markets across regions.

Its growing network of partner countries and ambitious technical design highlight how cross-border

energy projects can advance economic integration, support climate goals, and enhance regional cooperation. Azerbaijan’s geographic position, renewable energy potential, and diplomatic engagement place it at the heart of this evolving green energy landscape—serving as a vital bridge between Central Asia and the EU.

Despite its potential, the corridor faces a complex set of implementation challenges. High capital costs, supply chain constraints, regulatory misalignment, and geopolitical uncertainty could delay progress or increase risks. Effective coordination—both within national governments and across borders—will be critical to managing these hurdles and aligning technical standards, grid operations, and investment timelines.

Securing long-term financing and power purchase agreements will also be key to ensuring the project’s

commercial viability, particularly amid uncertain electricity price trends in the EU. Addressing these issues early on and decisively will determine whether the corridor can move from political vision to operational reality.

If realized, the Caspian–Black Sea–Europe Green Energy Corridor could become a cornerstone of regional energy diplomacy and a driver of what its proponents call the “global clean energy transition.” For the EU, it provides access to new, diversified sources of renewable electricity. For Azerbaijan and Georgia, it strengthens their positions as both renewable

electricity suppliers and strategic transit countries, as well as trusted partners in the decarbonization of European markets. And for Central Asian states, it opens a long-awaited route to global electricity trade, unlocking their vast renewable energy potential.

In an era marked by geopolitical uncertainty and deepening climate commitments, the corridor stands out as a bold example of how infrastructure, policy, and trans-regional cooperation can come together to advance shared energy and sustainability goals across Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. **BD**

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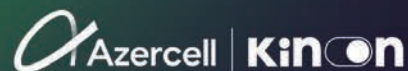
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The D-8 and Azerbaijan

The “Islamic Eight” and the Ongoing Shift in the Global Balance of Power

Inara Yagubova

“Out of approximately 60 Muslim countries worldwide, Azerbaijan has been chosen as the newest member. This is both a great honor and a significant responsibility for us. [...] We view the interests of all Muslim countries as our own, which is likely why Azerbaijan was the first choice after the decision to expand D-8 was made. Of course, our country’s economic potential, political influence, and military strength were also taken into consideration. Additionally, our policy of Islamic solidarity, which I mentioned earlier, played a role in this decision. At the same time, this organization is expanding its geographical reach. D-8 has already extended to both the Caucasus and the Caspian region, and the broader our geography becomes, the greater our opportunities.”

*– Ilham Aliyev,
7 January 2025*

The long-held notion of the rules-based liberal international order, which may be defined as consisting of globalization and a world order headed by the United States (benignly, in its self-conception), is progressively waning. A new perspective that acknowledges the Global South’s importance and its increasing prominence on the international scene is beginning to take shape, with a

shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. Instead of following the lead of the superpowers, the strong, serious, and ambitious countries that make up the Global South have become outspoken and influential players in international affairs, promoting causes that serve their own interests. In the conduct of foreign policy, one can say that more countries in more parts of the world are putting their countries first.

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Several key features highlight the growing autonomy of countries in the Global South. Despite their significant differences, they all prioritize economic expansion and strengthening ties with other countries through trade and investment. They are free from the geopolitical ambitions of the leading countries of the developed world and conduct

their affairs in an independent (or multivectoral) way. In fact, rather than only reacting to outside forces, they are increasingly establishing new trade, technological, and economic development relationships that fit with their own strategic aims.

Global power dynamics are therefore changing, particularly in the areas of commerce, climate diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation. Azerbaijan stands out as a strategic pivot in this context, using its location, political neutrality, and assertive diplomacy to operate as a link between these two international arenas.

To that end, Azerbaijan has put forward several initiatives to be a platform for cooperation between

the Global South and the Global North by increasing its interaction with developing countries. As President Ilham Aliyev stated

Azerbaijan is an active supporter of multilateralism that pursues an independent foreign policy posture. Its membership in the D-8 is a testament to its successful strategy.

on 20 July 2024 at the Shusha Global Media Forum, “We launch initiatives. We now actively work with developing countries in order to build bridges between the Global South and the Global North. Our advantage

is that we’ve been chairing the Non-Aligned Movement for four years.” At an international forum themed “Facing the New World Order” at the ADA University on 25 April 2025, Aliyev stated that “Of course, we played an important role in building bridges between the Global South and the Global North. That was one of the important assignments, which we put in front of ourselves. So, the way how we tackled COVID, the way how we hosted COP29 [...], and bilateral contacts with African countries demonstrate clearly our agenda.”

In the past year or so, this agenda has included the successful organization of COP29, the takeover of the chairmanships of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in

Asia (CICA) and Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), served as host of the summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization, and completed its chairmanship of GUAM. Next year, it will preside over both the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and so on.

Azerbaijan is one of a handful of countries that is a member of European, Asian, Turkic, and Muslim interstate organizations. As an active supporter of multilateralism that pursues an independent foreign policy posture and is situated at the crossroads of flagship connectivity projects, Azerbaijan seeks to enhance its standing as a bridge between East and West, as well as North and South.

As part of such a strategy, Azerbaijan applied for membership in the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation (the ‘D’ here stands for “Developing”). During the 19 December 2024 D-8 Summit held in Cairo, this application was unanimously approved: Azerbaijan became the ninth member of the D-8 on 7 March

2025 after the ratification of the D-8 Charter by the Milli Majlis, which Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev later signed.

Azerbaijan is the first new member of the D-8 in its nearly 30-year history. This is seen as a significant step for Azerbaijani independent (or multivectoral) foreign policy, an important thread of which is deepening and expanding relations with the Global South. It is expected that Azerbaijan’s involvement in the organization will open up new opportunities for economic, trade, and transit collaboration. Furthermore, Azerbaijan’s strategic alliances—such as its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its cooperation with Türkiye and Pakistan—are likely to enhance its role within the D-8 group. As a central player in the Middle Corridor, the country is well-positioned to strengthen connections between East and West via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Baku International Sea Trade Port. At the same time, this unprecedented move serves Azerbaijan’s foreign policy goals and ambitions as a key-stone state of the Silk Road region that, as Aliyev said in Khankendi

Azerbaijan is one of a handful of countries that is a member of European, Asian, Turkic, and Muslim interstate organizations.

in July 2025, “conducts a highly independent policy, doesn’t listen to instructions, ignores advice, and does whatever it decides is in its national interest.”

This essay will analyze the factors explaining Azerbaijan’s quest for D-8 membership by (1) assessing the Organization and its strategic potential, (2) the foreign and domestic policy implications thereof, and (3) the expected benefits for the country of membership in this grouping.

Economic Cooperation

Also known as the “Islamic Eight,” the D-8 was established under the leadership of Türkiye, Egypt, and Pakistan in 1997 and also includes Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, and Nigeria as member states. Each is a majority-Muslim developing country that is either a middle power or a key-stone state. All are key economic players. Together, they constitute one-seventh of the world’s population (i.e., 1.1 billion), with 60 percent of the world’s Muslims residing in D-8 countries.

The idea behind the D-8’s founding was first put forward by Türkiye’s then-prime minister Necmettin Erbakan in Istanbul in October 1996. From the start, it was conceived as a global arrangement rather than a regional one. Consider the geographic location of D-8 member states: one is located in Sub-Saharan Africa; one at the intersection of North Africa and the Middle East; one at the junction of Europe, the Silk Road region, and the Middle East; one at the intersection of the Middle East, the Gulf, the Silk Road region, and South Asia; two that bookend South Asia; and two in heart of East Asia. The necessity for increased collaboration through the utilization of member nations’ comparative and competitive advantages, as well as underlying complementarities, served as the impetus for the group’s founding.

The D-8 was conceived as a forum in which membership would have no adverse impact on their other bilateral, regional, and multilateral commitments. Since member states do not share a common area, the grouping is founded on common adherence to a set of principles and objectives rather than a shared geography,

Azerbaijan is the first new member of the D-8 in its nearly 30-year history.

all of which are in the service of its strategic goal of furthering the socio-economic development of its member states.

Formally, the D-8's principles are identified as being:

- Peace instead of conflict,
- Dialogue instead of confrontation,
- Cooperation instead of exploitation,
- Justice instead of double standards,
- Equality instead of discrimination,
- Democracy instead of oppression.

Moreover, the D-8's four main objectives are identified as improving member states' position in the global economy, diversifying and creating new opportunities in trade relations between them, enhancing their participation and influence in decisionmaking at the global level, and improving living standards in their respective countries.

In short, the D-8 collectively represents a group of emerging economies that are eager to overcome obstacles to their future modernization and regional empowerment, and do not solely rely on natural resources to prosper economically.

The majority have accepted international trade as a key driver of growth. Along with the adoption of neo-liberal policies and new vulnerabilities, this also entails a greater outward orientation.

Furthermore, each D-8 member state is an economically significant developing country. The total economic size of the Organization exceeds \$4 trillion, with its economies accounting for over 14 percent of global trade. This represents about 60 percent of the economies of Muslim-majority countries.

The fact that the D-8 countries encompass leading economies in every corner of the Muslim world lends special significance to the Organization. All D-8 members are also leading members of OIC in terms of their technological and economic development levels, commercial potential, and population. Membership in the D-8, which has a global rather than a regional character in terms of its principles and the geographical area it covers, is open to all developing countries. But for right now, think of the D-8 as the geopolitical and geoeconomic vanguard of OIC.

Think of the D-8 as the geopolitical and geoeconomic vanguard of OIC.

Again, Azerbaijan is the D-8's first new member in its nearly 30-year history. Clearly, this is a sign of Azerbaijan's successful diplomacy, which could position Baku as a reliable partner in the field of political, economic, and cultural cooperation. Azerbaijani diplomacy is making serious efforts to have a significant impact on global discourse and is asserting itself as a major player in the world's dynamic geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape. Through broad-based engagement, Azerbaijani diplomacy has succeeded in promoting its national interests while contributing meaningfully to international efforts in sustainability, development, and conflict resolution.

In written remarks to an international conference held in Shusha on 15 June 2025, Aliyev referred to this point. "Azerbaijan, which has always demonstrated its commitment to a just world order through concrete actions, advocates for transforming not only the South Caucasus region where it is located, but also the entire Eurasian space into a hub of dialogue and cooperation," his remarks stated. "The projects we implement jointly with friendly and partner countries make significant contributions to regional and international security and create a favorable basis for constructive and promising

cooperation between both East and West, as well as North and South," the remarks concluded.

In this context, Azerbaijan's admission to the D-8—an organization that brings together dynamic emerging economies from the Islamic world—should be seen as both a recognition of its diplomatic achievements and a strategic alignment with nations that share similar visions of inclusive growth, regional cooperation, and sustainable development. It underscores the country's rising profile and the success of its diplomacy in adapting to and shaping the evolving global landscape.

Why D-8 Membership?

First and foremost, the shift in both the regional balance of power and the South Caucasus's geopolitical dynamics are factors behind Azerbaijan's several initiatives in diversifying its partners aiming to balance competing interests, maintaining strategic autonomy in the Silk Road region, and avoiding overdependence on any country. Relatedly, ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region prompt Azerbaijan to seek alternative trade routes and partners that connect it with other parts of the world. Against the backdrop of

great power competition and ongoing shifts in the balance of power in the Silk Road region and beyond, this is an attempt to strengthen its role in the overlapping set of regions to which Azerbaijan and its neighbors belong.

Another reason Azerbaijan pursued G-8 membership is that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has heightened the importance of the Silk Road region as a vital connectivity corridor between East and West. In his 14 February 2024 inauguration speech, Aliyev alluded several times to the significance of international cooperation in the context of OIC, OTS, and NAM as a part of Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy approach. The hosting of COP29 signaled a significant shift in posture, whereby Azerbaijan has been exploring new horizons in its foreign policy. In this context, it has become clear that the country's new foreign policy direction already reflects some internal paradigm shifts, which are expected to result in a more active and significant position on the international stage.

Moreover, an ongoing rivalry is leading to the politicization and securitization of many aspects of the global economy. Nearly 30 years ago, Türkiye aimed to offer an alternative economic model

to the (de-)globalizing capitalist system controlled by the West in launching the D-8. The grouping's emphasis on leading developing states working together was viewed as a means of upending the current economic structure and strengthening the Global South.

The global balance of power continues to shift from the West to Asia, resulting in the West no longer being a hegemonic economic power. Under these geostrategic circumstances, Azerbaijan chooses cooperation, which occurs "when actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination" (as Robert Keohane and other scholars have put it). Under the same circumstances, Azerbaijan also seeks to promote its interests, which also aims at mutual advantage. Azerbaijan's official application for membership in BRICS+ is also a part of this broader cooperation strategy—a response to geoeconomic and geopolitical changes.

The Turkish Connection

Strong and longstanding bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Türkiye also played an important role in Baku's choice to apply for D-8 membership. Their

deepening economic, cultural, and political ties—driven by shared aspirations to challenge Western dominance and promote a "just multipolar world order"—have intensified notably since the Second Karabakh War.

Thanks to the June 2021 Shusha Declaration, the relationship has now become an alliance. While it is rooted in a shared understanding of Turkic brotherhood and presented as opposition to global hegemony, it simultaneously seeks to establish its own form of regional dominance, stretching from one end of the Silk Road region to the other and down into the Middle East.

Azerbaijan's aspirations to become a hub for energy, transportation, and diplomacy are complemented by Türkiye's position as a significant regional actor with sway in Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. For at least the past 20 years, Türkiye has pursued a multifaceted, multilateral foreign policy.

By integrating both regionalism and minilateralism (a blended strategy, so to speak), Türkiye not only strengthens its geopolitical

Azerbaijan aims to serve as a connector between the North and South, acting as a mediator in conflict resolution.

leverage but also reduces its dependence on traditional global powers, thereby increasing its autonomy in international affairs.

To support this vision, Türkiye has launched several geopolitical initiatives and regional openings—including increased engagement in Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific. These efforts reflect Ankara's broader ambition to become a more influential and self-reliant actor on the global stage.

On the one hand, regionalism—which promotes a common identity and collaboration based on cultural, ideological, or geographic links—is the foundation upon which Türkiye builds its relations with certain other states. On the other hand, it bases its relationship development with other countries via a minilateralist approach, which stresses practical cooperation based on shared interests. By combining these two ideas, Türkiye aims to enhance its global standing and reduce its reliance on powerful nations. Türkiye initiated a number of geographic openings in an effort to broaden its foreign policy options and elevate its standing internationally.

Moreover, Azerbaijan aims to serve as a connector between the North and South, acting as a mediator in conflict resolution—a role that is further supported by Türkiye’s engagement with countries in the Global South. First, in an effort to counteract the damaging effects of major powers’ actions in various parts of the world, Türkiye has been working to establish regional stability axes in those areas. It has been pursuing an inclusive, cooperative, and non-sectarian approach in all areas to achieve this goal. In order to avoid “otherizing” any regional state, Ankara is adamant and cautious. It seeks to work as closely as possible with all countries in a given region, which in turn is designed to enable it to strengthen ties with all of them. Türkiye also aims to be a leader in resolving regional conflicts.

Hence, in addition to signing on to Türkiye’s determination to advance South-South cooperation, it led to the establishment of the D-8 to advance a national diplomatic strategy that prioritizes solidarity among developing states. This approach aligns with Azerbaijan’s

longstanding vision, which also aims to contribute to deepening intra-developing world economic and political discourse, enhance its position in the Global South, and advocate for the interests of emerging economies on various international platforms. Azerbaijan has indicated its willingness to facilitate dialogue within the developing world and to strengthen its role as a facilitator. To that end, the D-8 can serve as a platform to offer Azerbaijan an opportunity to enhance its diplomatic relations with other developing countries, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—but also to act as a bridge between East and West.

Unique Position

The D-8 presents Azerbaijan with an additional platform to foster closer cultural and religious ties with leading states in the Muslim world. One of the key directions of Azerbaijan’s broader foreign policy approach is to emphasize its unique position as a democratic, secular, and Muslim-majority country. In that sense, the D-8 can be seen as a platform presenting a

Baku’s D-8 membership can help shift popular perceptions around the world that are increasingly characterized by Islamophobic populism.

model of governance that balances modernity with traditional Muslim values. To that end, Baku’s D-8 membership can help shift popular perceptions around the world that are increasingly characterized by Islamophobic populism.

Azerbaijan’s membership in the D-8 also opens up new prospects for trade, investment, and economic cooperation with other member states, including Pakistan. As transport and regional connectivity represent another key aspect of Azerbaijan-Pakistan collaboration, D-8 membership can help to expand collaboration in this field. Azerbaijan has notably improved its transit infrastructure along both the North-South and East-West routes, establishing itself as a central hub for regional commerce. In turn, Pakistan is seeking to align its connectivity initiatives with Azerbaijan’s existing transit systems to benefit from the expanding trade and transport networks.

The 28 May 2025 trilateral summit in Lachin, involving the presidents of Azerbaijan and Türkiye and the Prime Minister of Pakistan, marked an important milestone in the strategic alliance between the three countries. With a significant emphasis on strengthening cooperation in regional security, economic integration,

transportation connectivity, and sustainable development, this historic meeting highlighted growing bilateral and trilateral connections. Along with examining new opportunities for cooperative projects in the areas of energy, trade, and strategic infrastructure, the leaders of the three countries reiterated their shared commitment to advancing peace and prosperity across the greater Silk Road region.

The summit also focused on two major transport initiatives: the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) and the International North-South Transport Corridor. These routes create a strategic network connecting China, India, the Silk Road region, and Europe. The Middle Corridor is particularly important as an alternative route between China and Europe, connecting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The leaders discussed opportunities for cooperation in key areas, including the economy, trade, investment, energy security, transportation, and other potential sectors.

To this end, the D-8 platform adds depth to the trilateral format of cooperation among Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Türkiye. Ankara has been a longstanding partner of Islamabad, and in recent years, Baku and Islamabad have

strengthened their ties through a series of visits and agreements. The Azerbaijani and Turkish presidents have both expressed their support for Pakistan amid its recent military conflict with its longtime adversary, India. At the Lachin trilateral, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif stated that "confident that our time-tested relationship would not only be beneficial for the wellbeing of our own people but also contribute to peace and prosperity in the region and beyond. [...] This trilateral format is both very timely and of great importance and [...] gives us the necessary political ownership and the impetus to move forward collectively and in unison in all spheres of our common interest."

Also in Lachin, Aliyev said that Azerbaijan had already contributed more than \$20 billion to the Turkish economy. A \$2 billion investment package is also planned for Pakistan. Development in the areas of energy, industry, trade, digital transformation, and agriculture will be the focus of these monies. The establishment of new financial institutions, reciprocal visits by investment delegations,

and cooperative economic forums were also on the agenda. This is in keeping with one of the D-8's primary goals, which is to improve member states' standing in the global economy, diversify, and open up new trade relations opportunities. To this end, D-8 membership can strengthen diversifying strategic partnerships by investing in mutually beneficial avenues.

For his part, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underscored that the three D-8 countries have a combined population of almost 350 million and a \$1.5 trillion economy. "I would like to particularly emphasize that we stand behind each and every step toward transforming our relations into a strategic partnership," he said. "Our foreign ministers will carry out the required work to institutionalize our trilateral cooperation, and they will prepare a strong framework that reflects the common vision of our countries, particularly in the fields that shape our common agenda such as trade, investments, transportation, energy, defense, industry, and the fight against terrorism," he added. Erdoğan also noted that Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and

Azerbaijan's D-8 membership aligns with President Aliyev's vision of turning Azerbaijan into a center for regional collaboration, innovation, and sustainability.

Pakistan would institutionalize their cooperation by holding regular trilaterals at various levels.

Five Policy Implications

As part of a broader strategic plan to deepen its economic ties and establish itself as a major actor, Azerbaijan's D-8 membership aligns with President Aliyev's vision of turning Azerbaijan into a center for regional collaboration, innovation, and sustainability. This opens up new geopolitical and geo-economic opportunities in several areas.

First, Azerbaijan's membership in the D-8 could help balance its geopolitical interests, especially in interactions with neighboring countries like Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, given its advantageous location between Europe and Asia. Azerbaijan's diplomatic adaptability and regional impact could be increased by fortifying its relations with other Muslim-majority and developing countries. However, the ability to resolve any political or economic disagreements within the group and the alignment of economic objectives would be necessary for such a partnership to succeed.

Second, Azerbaijan's membership can improve its global standing,

particularly in the Global South as a whole. Azerbaijan may take center stage in international economic debates in the developing world and contribute to addressing developmental objectives and challenges. Azerbaijan may be able to advocate for the interests of emerging economies by associating itself with an increasingly vocal voice in international trade discussions and negotiations as a member of the D-8. Relatedly, the D-8's connectivity objectives could be further reinforced by Azerbaijan's uniquely advantageous position in the Silk Road region.

Third, the D-8 platform will help Azerbaijan diversify its economic alliances and lessen its excessive dependence on any foreign country, including Russia. Additionally, Azerbaijan can increase foreign direct investments from D-8 member states, which are eager to invest in infrastructure, renewables, and other sectors. Azerbaijan could also benefit from reduced tariffs and non-tariff barriers in D-8 member states, encouraging exports and economic diversification.

Fourth, Azerbaijan's D-8 membership strengthens its ties with other countries, especially Pakistan and Türkiye. These countries have a long history of cooperation and mutual support, and the addition

of Azerbaijan opens up new opportunities for regional projects and collaboration. Pakistan sees the admission of Azerbaijan as a step toward promoting economic cooperation and improving regional connectivity. Both countries share a vision of regional prosperity and have continuously promoted multilateralism. The D-8 platform presents additional opportunities to build on these common objectives, especially in the areas of commerce, technology, and sustainable development. Another important ally, Türkiye, welcomes Azerbaijan's involvement as a continuation of their long-standing alliance. The organization's general cohesiveness is strengthened by this addition, which also increases its collective voice on the international scene.

Fifth, Azerbaijan's membership in the D-8 not only enhances its

bilateral and multilateral ties with fellow Muslim-majority countries but also reinforces its strategic vision of regional leadership and cooperation. By aligning with Pakistan and Türkiye through both bilateral engagements and trilateral formats, Azerbaijan is capitalizing on the D-8 as a driver for economic integration, political solidarity, and cultural diplomacy. The platform serves as a means to project Azerbaijan's model of secular governance within the Muslim world while simultaneously advancing shared goals in connectivity, trade, energy, and security. As regional dynamics evolve, the D-8 is likely to play an increasingly pivotal role in boosting Azerbaijan's international standing and fostering a collective framework for peace, prosperity, and strategic growth among its member states. **BD**

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CICA and Azerbaijan

Does Membership Have Its Privileges?

Nijat Aliyev

Azerbaijan continues to follow an independent (or multivector or balanced) foreign policy strategy, based on the assessment that it represents the best way to protect and even strengthen its sovereignty. After the liberation of Karabakh, Azerbaijan has increased its efforts in multilateral fora in both Asia and Europe. Consequently, in Baku's conception, the intergovernmental organization Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), established in 1992 and formalized in 1999, is gaining increasing importance as it seeks to enhance its role in fostering security and peace throughout Asia.

This paper explores the impact of Azerbaijan's engagement through CICA, including its ongoing chairmanship (2024-2026), on its

relationships with neighboring countries and, more broadly, its international relations. We aim to understand: How has Azerbaijan's active involvement in CICA helped it strengthen ties with other Asian countries and boost its role in Eurasia? How does joining CICA align with Baku's other international efforts? By addressing these questions, the paper highlights the benefits and challenges of CICA participation for Azerbaijan and explains how CICA influences its diplomatic standing in the South Caucasus and farther afield.

Background

Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed establishing CICA in 1992 to promote homegrown dialogue and

cooperation among Asian countries on security issues. During a ministerial meeting in Almaty in September 1999, convened specifically for this purpose, the organization was founded through the Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations Between the CICA Member-States. The next significant step occurred in June 2002 with the adoption of the Almaty Act, which formalized CICA's structure. Members decide matters by reaching consensus, and its agenda covers topics such as the economy, people, environment, and political security, emphasizing confidence-building strategies rather than strict regulations.

Azerbaijan was among the first countries to support the CICA. Baku's leadership publicly endorsed Nazarbayev's initiative early on, and Azerbaijan was one of the 15 countries present at the 1999 Almaty meeting where the Declaration was signed.

Azerbaijan's accession reflected both geopolitical and economic motives. Politically, Baku recognized the value in participating in a pan-Asian security dialogue that could give it leverage and visibility beyond the South Caucasus.

Economically and strategically, Azerbaijan sought to capitalize on its geostrategic position as a bridge between Asia and Europe. Specifically, Azerbaijan has actively utilized CICA's focus on connectivity, leading the "secure and effective transportation corridors" confidence-building measure (CBM) within CICA, and working with co-coordinators such as China and India to improve transcontinental trade routes.

Baku's principal motivation appears to be integrating the South Caucasus into broader Asian transport and connectivity networks associated in one way or another with the Middle Corridor. Hosting CICA-related meetings—such as an expert meeting in Baku on transport logistics in 2011 and another on digitalization in 2021—further underscores Azerbaijan's commitment to these connectivity projects.

Strategically, joining CICA aligned with Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy posture. By engaging simultaneously with Asian powers through CICA (and, in a different way, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO) while maintaining ties with the EU

CICA reflects Azerbaijan's support for homegrown Asian multilateralism.

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and the U.S., Azerbaijan diversifies its engagements. Experts highlight that Baku works actively in different regional groups: “Baku sees itself as a connectivity hub through projects such as the Baku International Sea Trade Port and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway, essential to the Middle Corridor shared with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” one has noted. These initiatives not only boost trade but have also boosted Azerbaijan’s diplomatic profile in Asia.

Within the CICA framework, Azerbaijani officials emphasize such transport and energy linkages as sectors of leadership. Overall, from its initial involvement to the present day, Azerbaijan has been actively engaged in CICA, supporting connectivity CBMs, providing expertise, and hosting meetings. Its level of engagement has been significant: as Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov stated in 2024, Azerbaijan “will build its CICA Chairmanship on its experience as a bridge-builder in global diplomacy, our leadership in multilateral platforms, and our firm commitment to peace, stability, and sustainable development.”

Regional Impact

Through its CICA membership, Azerbaijan gained new diplomatic avenues to strengthen ties with key Asian countries. Baku maintains consistent engagement with Central Asian states, Türkiye, China, Russia, India, Iran, and other countries through CICA. Azerbaijan collaborated with Kazakhstan and Türkiye to improve transportation networks, resulting in the June 2022 Baku Declaration, which established a new framework for the Middle Corridor project, as discussed by the foreign minister at a CICA-related meeting in July 2022.

Using the CICA framework, Azerbaijan’s diplomatic efforts show how it leverages the platform to coordinate trade corridor initiatives with its Turkic partners. Türkiye participates as a member of CICA and often supports Azerbaijan on energy and security issues. During CICA dialogues, both countries emphasize the importance of counterterrorism and maintaining regional stability.

Outside the Turkic realm, CICA membership facilitates communication with other Asian powers. Azerbaijan’s growing

relationship with China, which has now evolved into a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” is reflected in its collaboration with CICA.

Experts note how Baku’s connectivity projects, such as Alat Port and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars rail corridor, align with China’s pursuit of alternative BRI routes. Joining CICA enables coordination with China and other Asian powers on transport and energy initiatives.

Additionally, India (a CICA founder) and Pakistan have been included in transport discussions, and Azerbaijan’s cooperation with Iran (also a member) includes projects like the International North-South Transport Corridor. The CICA platform also promotes joint efforts in renewable energy and logistics. Therefore, the CICA Secretariat recognizes Baku’s leadership in energy infrastructure and suggests that CICA could showcase Azerbaijan’s energy sector achievements.

Azerbaijan utilizes CICA as a platform to foster and showcase its relationships with various regional powers. Its role as the CICA transport CBM coordinator requires frequent consultations

Through its CICA membership, Azerbaijan gained new diplomatic avenues to strengthen ties with key Asian countries.

with co-coordinators from China and India, as well as states pursuing corridor development. These initiatives foster additional connections

with Central Asian republics and Türkiye through economic corridors while engaging East Asian powers in trade and economic growth.

Through these actions, Azerbaijan strengthens its role within regional supply networks. Azerbaijan’s role as a trade transit hub also enhances its global standing amid geopolitical shifts. Through its focus on mutual economic and security objectives with neighboring great powers, the CICA has enabled Azerbaijan to strengthen a wide range of relationships across Asia.

Regional Security Dialogues

CICA aimed to foster closer cooperation among countries in defense and security policies. As a non-military organization, CICA offers its members the opportunity to discuss and address both traditional and non-traditional security challenges in a “soft” or “smart”

manner, borrowing from Joseph Nye's terminology. Being a CICA member, Azerbaijan supports the organization's goal to confront terrorism and new risks. To illustrate this, at the Sixth CICA Summit (2022), the Action Plan reflected the UN strategy against terrorism, and CICA closely coordinates with both the UN Counter-Terrorism Office and the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure.

Under the CICA Security Dimension, Azerbaijan is partnering with these structures by using its knowledge to cut off funding for extremists. The CICA Secretary General has highlighted Azerbaijan's focus on cybersecurity and land disputes within the group. Azerbaijan plans to host a cybersecurity training this year and collaborate on a regional data protection plan.

Azerbaijan focuses on security issues, along with human rights and social concerns, within the scope of its CICA membership. New areas for confidence-building have been added to CICA's list, known as the "Catalogue," including activities specifically designed for women, youth, and volunteers. These efforts help foster peaceful and orderly communities by promoting development and stability. Although specific dialogues regarding the South Caucasus'

territorial conflicts are not within CICA's formal remit, Azerbaijan uses CICA to promote international law and the peaceful resolution of disputes whenever possible. In multilateral statements, Baku underscores the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity—topics aligned with CICA's focus on the rule of law and dialogue.

In practice, however, CICA's security role is mostly symbolic: the forum lacks enforcement mechanisms, and Azerbaijan's military-security interests prioritize other arrangements. Still, Azerbaijan's involvement demonstrates its willingness to cooperate on shared Asian security issues (terrorism, cybercrime, etc.). By helping develop counterterrorism plans and suggesting new CBMs (e.g., humanitarian demining, given Azerbaijan's mine-affected regions), Azerbaijan supports a regional security agenda. These efforts help build regional trust and align with CICA's confidence-building mission, even though tangible results have been limited so far.

Caucasian Impact

CICA has had only an indirect impact on the South Caucasus as a whole. In other words, it "indirectly" influences the region's peace

issues, although none of them fall within its scope. Neither Armenia nor Georgia is a CICA member; consequently, CICA has never aimed to involve itself in conflict resolution in this part of Asia.

However, as Azerbaijan becomes more engaged with CICA, the regional dynamic has changed in several ways. First, the South Caucasus has become more directly connected to Asian markets as the Central Asian and Turkish links established through CICA projects strengthen Azerbaijan's position. For example, the Middle Corridor facilitates the transport of Asian exports via Azerbaijan and Georgia to Europe via Türkiye or the Black Sea. This enhances the strategic importance of all viable South Caucasus transit routes. For Georgia, Baku's leadership in CICA-related transport projects encourages even closer cooperation between Tbilisi and Baku. Therefore, CICA's actions increasingly enable the South Caucasus to participate in Sino-European trade, reducing the region's reliance on any single market power.

Second, what Azerbaijan does within CICA can reshape the way the entire region connects. The way Azerbaijan recognizes regional connectivity through CICA demonstrates that it does not simply think of itself and its role as serving as a

transit line, but as a "five-star hub" (as Taleh Ziyadov has put it in these pages) and, even more ambitiously, also as a network that has a strategic opportunity to become an integral part of the CICA region's value-added production and export chain. As President Aliyev stated, the East-West and North-South corridors (frequently mentioned at CICA meetings) are of great importance to the CICA space—and beyond.

In any case, the advantage Azerbaijan gains as a CICA member is that it can aid all three South Caucasus countries in connecting more with Asian markets by strengthening regional links and by demonstrating to those who live in the South Caucasus the tangible benefits of Azerbaijan's role as a bridge from Asia to Europe and the Gulf region and so on. Since CICA itself does not resolve local disputes, it provides Azerbaijan with a platform to showcase its regional development ideas and to pursue the "international correlations" that weave the entire South Caucasus more closely into an Asian framework.

Diversification

Azerbaijan utilizes CICA as one aspect of its increasingly diversified foreign policy portfolio. Beyond its immediate

neighbors and its Western partners, membership in CICA also reflects Azerbaijan's support for home-grown Asian multilateralism. This influences its involvement in other international organizations. For instance, Baku became an SCO dialogue partner in 2015 and applied to become an observer in 2024; it recently finished its chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement, is winding down its COP29 chairmanship, and will preside over both the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) starting next year. All of this will surely feed into the CICA discussion, which will, in turn, strengthen Azerbaijan's claim to be a global connector.

By actively participating in CICA, Azerbaijan further shows that its external relations and connectivity ambitions extend beyond its immediate neighborhood. Engaging with Asia's diverse membership helps Baku increase its visibility. Official statements highlight that Azerbaijan's leadership of CICA will position the country as a key player in cooperation between Asian countries. As

Bayramov has stated, Azerbaijan's position as a "bridge-builder" in global diplomacy makes it well-suited to lead CICA.

In terms of concrete leverage, CICA provides another platform for Azerbaijan to raise issues of interest. For example, it offers an additional venue beyond UN, NAM, and OIC meetings to express positions on security and development. At the same time, Azerbaijan continues to manage its relations with the EU and its member states. Recent high-

level EU visits to Baku, along with positive signals from Berlin and elsewhere, demonstrate that Europeans are refocusing their interest in Azerbaijan's energy resources and connectivity capabilities. This means CICA membership broadens Azerbaijan's diplomatic connections in Asia and enhances its reputation in the West as a connecting partner. Ultimately, CICA helps expand Azerbaijan's multilateral engagement, supports its independent foreign policy posture, and gives it access to the growing Asian diplomatic landscape.

By actively participating in CICA, Azerbaijan further shows that its external relations and connectivity ambitions extend beyond its immediate neighborhood.

Leverage and Visibility

By presiding over and actively participating in CICA, Azerbaijan increases its international profile. For instance, when Baku hosts a major CICA event, this brings Asian leaders to Azerbaijan and spreads its message across Asia's dynamic media landscape. As CICA press releases highlight, President Aliyev's framing of the Azerbaijani rotating chairmanship emphasizes pan-Asian dialogue and sustainable development. The CICA Summit, scheduled to be held in Baku during Azerbaijan's chairmanship, can, if utilized effectively, enhance Azerbaijan's image as a potential game-changer in Asia.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has been addressing these soft topics through CICA procedures. Under Baku's leadership, CICA has been suggested to focus on societal issues. For example, CICA's current CBM Catalogue now includes provisions for women's empowerment, youth participation, and volunteerism. All these initiatives have been actively promoted by Azerbaijan, which hosted the Baku International Women's Convention (2022) and is establishing a CICA Women's Council for Female Leadership in Asia. Additionally, the first CICA Volunteers' Summit in Baku is

scheduled for this year, coinciding with UNESCO's Year of Volunteers. This sort of program promotes Azerbaijan's spirit of volunteerism and positions Baku as a champion of human development in Asia.

As a result, cultural and educational diplomacy are being bolstered. Azerbaijan is coordinating a CICA Partner Network of universities and is considering including science and education in CICA's CBM Catalogue. Through this effort, Azerbaijani higher education institutions are connecting with other institutions in Asia. (During Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship, ADA University serves as the Chair of the Coordination Council of the Partnership Network of Leading Universities of the CICA Member States (PNLU), which aims to enhance academic and scientific exchanges between member states to advance CICA's human dimension activities further.) A different approach connects environment and energy: Azerbaijan hosted COP29 in 2024 and now seeks to leverage CICA as a platform for a regional green agenda, proposing an environmental council to foster cooperation on climate change across Asia.

In summary, Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship transforms "soft" aspects—such as culture, youth, and environmental cooperation—into

channels that enhance the country's standing. By integrating Azerbaijan's internal achievements (in education, gender equality, and climate) into the CICA framework, it strategically augments the country's diplomatic prominence. Observers have noted that these significant contributions lead to "tangible benefits" and foster genuine "mutual understanding" among people.

Overall, CICA enhances Azerbaijan's soft power by enabling it to take a leading role in setting standards for specific social and developmental issues that are unique to Asia.

Influence and Agenda Setting

Through its chairmanship and active diplomatic posture, Azerbaijan is shaping CICA's policy agenda in line with its strategic interests. It offers an ambitious program based on institutional reforms and sectoral cooperation. Official statements outline three main priorities for its chairmanship: making CICA a more

institutionalized organization, enhancing connectivity and transport cooperation, and promoting sustainable development, which encompasses digitalization and a green economy.

A tangible goal is to adopt a Charter at the 2026 summit, which would define the organization's legal status and strengthen its Secretariat. This translates into the convening of expert meetings to draft such a document, giving weight to Baku's plan to institutionalize CICA's framework.

In terms of sectoral cooperation, Azerbaijan's chairmanship focuses on transport, energy, and technology. Baku has suggested various initiatives in these areas, including a CICA Port Leaders Conference to enhance multi-modal infrastructure, a meeting on Digital Transformation and Innovation, and summits on agriculture and tourism. These projects reflect Azerbaijan's development agenda (e.g., developing the Alat

port, promoting ICT and renewable energy. Baku has also championed an environmental council (informed by experience gained during its COP29

Through its chairmanship and active diplomatic posture, Azerbaijan is shaping CICA's policy agenda in line with its strategic interests.

presidency) and plans to share best practices on demining (a major post-conflict issue for Azerbaijan), as noted above. In diplomacy, Azerbaijan is working to expand CICA's partnerships by supporting memoranda with the UN, ECO, SCO, and other organizations to coordinate efforts on anti-terrorism, climate action, and trade issues.

By driving these initiatives, Azerbaijan seems to be gaining agenda-setting leverage within CICA. For example, the theme of the 2024 CICA Council was "Stronger CICA, Connectivity, Digitalization, and Sustainable Growth in Asia," a formulation proposed by Azerbaijan. As chair, Baku secures key positions (e.g., coordinators of transportation CBMs) that enable it to convene discussions and draft action plans. These roles allow Azerbaijan to project its policy interests and priorities onto a pan-Asian stage. In effect, Baku is using CICA to legitimize and internationalize initiatives that advance both its regional development goals (e.g., the Middle Corridor) and broader objectives.

CICA vs. Other Platforms

Azerbaijan participates in multiple regional organizations, each with a different scope. Compared to the SCO, CICA has

a broader membership but less institutional depth. Led by China and Russia, the SCO is a security-oriented organization with a standing anti-terror apparatus and greater economic integration.

By contrast, CICA is more of a consultative forum, addressing a wider range of issues through a consensus-based approach, channeled through the CICA Catalogue of CBMs across what the relevant document calls "five dimensions of cooperation with 18 priority areas," namely: *military-political dimension; new challenges and threats (combating terrorism, ICT security, combating illicit drugs, epidemiological safety, public health and pharmaceuticals); economic dimension (small and medium enterprises development, energy security, information technology, tourism, secure transportation corridors, agriculture, finance, trade and investment); environmental dimension (sustainable development, natural disaster management, environmental protection); and human dimension.*

One scholar has noted that both CICA and the SCO "play crucial roles in fostering cooperation and addressing security concerns in Asia." Still, the SCO's approach is driven by its founding powers, whereas CICA emphasizes inclusive

dialogue. For Azerbaijan, engagement with the SCO offers tangible security cooperation, while CICA affords broader diplomatic engagement with countries that are and are not in the SCO.

The OTS is another key forum for Azerbaijan. A culturally and ethnolinguistically focused organization, President Aliyev stated in his most recent inaugural address that the OTS is “the main international organization for us because it is our family. We have no other family. Our family is the Turkic world.”

OTS tends to champion projects reflecting the shared Turkic heritage of its members (the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway was an OTS flagship) and has a strong identity-building role for its member and observer states. In comparison, CICA is non-identitarian and covers all of Asia. OTS cooperation typically runs parallel to Azerbaijan’s bilateral ties with Türkiye and the Central Asian states, while CICA connects Azerbaijan to a much broader pan-Asian community of nations.

Thus, while OTS strengthens Azerbaijan’s regional identity among Turkic peoples, CICA positions it as an Asian state in constant touch with the others.

The EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) represents a different orientation. It links Azerbaijan (and five other former Soviet states) with the European Union on political and economic reforms. The EaP has been useful for promoting trade and energy (e.g., Southern Gas Corridor) with the EU, but less so for seeking to get Azerbaijan to align with EU “values” and norms and so on. Progress has thus been uneven, and relations have had their ups and downs, depending on the outcome of intra-EU deliberations and fluctuations in the EU Commission’s process of rank-ordering priorities. Recently, the EU has renewed its interest in Azerbaijan as an energy partner, in line with a more focused approach to the terms outlined in the July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding between Baku and Brussels on the strategic energy partnership between the two parties.

CICA, by contrast, has no Western-style conditionality and does not—by design—pressure any state (member or not) to implement political reforms. It provides Azerbaijan with a stable and predictable alternative form of multilateral engagement, far outside the EU’s preferred frameworks. In terms of effectiveness, the EaP does deliver significant aid and market access, whereas CICA

offers fewer tangible benefits and is less prominent in Western media. For identity-building purposes, the EaP could act as an anchor to bring Azerbaijan closer to “Europe” (similar to the Council of Europe’s approach in some ways). Meanwhile, CICA signals an “Asian identity” or at least acknowledges Asia’s role in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy.

CICA complements these other platforms in an essentially frictionless manner. Admittedly, it has limited enforcement capacity, but that is not its purpose. CICA is also more open and diverse in its membership and the issues it addresses than the SCO. Unlike the OTS (an exclusive cultural bloc) or the EaP (an obviously Western project), CICA encompasses the entire Asian continent without ideological limitations.

Azerbaijan’s active participation in all these organizations—CICA, SCO, OTS, EaP—demonstrates its intent to straddle multiple spheres. Each platform promotes different objectives: CICA expands Asian cooperation, the SCO strengthens security connections (as does engagement in PfP), the OTS enhances Turkic solidarity, and the EaP links it to Europe. Compared to others, CICA is less targeted but more inclusive, making it a

distinctively Asian forum that complements Azerbaijan’s other efforts.

Challenges and Limitations

Although CICA may offer significant potential benefits, it is hindered by observable limitations. It remains an informal forum without expansive budgetary allocations or enforcement powers. Membership actions remain voluntary, and there is no rapid-response mechanism for crises. As the CICA Ministerial Council itself noted in 2024, CICA “remains a unique, comprehensive intergovernmental forum” based on consensus—this wording underscores its consultative nature. In practice, CICA’s initiatives are often general declarations rather than binding decisions. This limits the tangible impact of Azerbaijan’s participation: ambitious plans (like a CICA Charter or new councils) could take years to come to fruition.

CICA’s visibility remains relatively low compared to other organizations. Internationally, it garners little media coverage outside Asia, so Azerbaijan’s chairmanship does not automatically translate into enhanced global prestige. There

is also some overlap with other groupings. For example, the SCO and the Economic Cooperation Organization address many security and economic issues that CICA also covers, and the OTS overlaps in transport and cultural projects.

Therefore, while Azerbaijan actively works to transform CICA, Baku recognizes that progress is likely to be gradual. However, this should not be interpreted to mean that CICA will never develop into a strong organization over time. But it does indicate that at present, no CICA member considers the organization their main multilateral point of engagement.

Bridging Aspirations and Realities

Azerbaijan's active engagement within the CICA framework has opened new opportunities for diversifying its external engagement. Supporters of strengthening the country's pan-Asian linkages have welcomed the news from Baku: CICA has expanded Azerbaijan's diplomatic reach across Asia, allowing the country to present a modern and responsible image to a new audience. It has also lent further credence to the

prudence of Azerbaijan's decision to follow an independent (or multivector or balanced) foreign policy strategy.

At the same time, since CICA remains, at its core, an informal and nonbinding group, Azerbaijan cannot rely on it to secure significant and dependable security guarantees. The broad, voluntary nature of CICA's agenda, along with its overlap with other organizations, highlights its current institutional limitations. Nonetheless, deepening relationships through the CICA platform constitutes a notable achievement in itself. However, for Azerbaijan, much of the progress, especially tangible advancements, still mainly comes from bilateral partnerships or other multilateral fora.

The bottom line is that Azerbaijan's participation in CICA has not produced strategically game-changing outcomes. But it has played a large role in consolidating Azerbaijan's status among Asian countries. It has also provided a new and complimentary channel for Baku's diplomatic outreach, but it cannot serve as a substitute for other types of multilateral engagement.

Looking ahead, we can expect more cooperation between

Azerbaijan and CICA in areas of mutual practical benefit (e.g., transport, energy, and information technology). The completion of the CICA Charter and procedural updates could strengthen the institution's credibility in the longer term. As Bayramov has

stated, Azerbaijan's work at CICA should focus on "connectivity, digitalization, and sustainable growth in Asia." By prioritizing these practical goals, Azerbaijan can fully leverage CICA as a valuable instrument of its foreign policy. ^{BD}

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Optimizing Azerbaijan's CICA Chairmanship

Madina Alasgarova, Aysel Bayramova, Fatima Huseynli, Ashley Nhabete, and Goncha Salahova

The Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) is a multinational and multilateral platform designed to enhance dialogue and foster cooperation among its 28 member states, including Azerbaijan. With a mission to improve security, stability, and confidence-building in the region, CICA stands out as a unique format that focuses exclusively on security issues, distinct from frameworks like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It is, in fact, the most inclusive pan-Asian security forum.

Currently, the established Western-centric security formats

are experiencing erosion and legitimacy crises that undermine their ability to address the security concerns of Eurasia in general and the Silk Road region in particular. Consequently, CICA's role as an exclusively non-Western security platform is gaining prominence across Asia. Azerbaijan's 2024-2026 CICA chairmanship presents a strategic opportunity to advance regional and pan-Asian security cooperation—or at least serve as a more effective platform for dialogue, free from the presence of outsiders.

Drawing on its successful experience in advancing efforts to institutionalize the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Azerbaijan,

The authors graduated in Spring 2025 from ADA University's School of Public and International Affairs. An earlier version of this paper was submitted as a Capstone paper, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in International Studies under the supervision of Dr. Farid Shafiyev. The views expressed in this essay are their own.

with its growing influence in multilateral formats, is well-positioned to advance the process to transform CICA from a discussion format into a more structured and impactful platform—that is to say, into a fully-fledged intergovernmental organization. To that end, this paper offers concrete and actionable policy proposals to ensure that Azerbaijan's chairmanship is productive and beneficial for its member states. None are game-changing, but taken as a whole, we believe they can help move the needle noticeably forward.

Our approach is informed by a conviction that CICA can support Azerbaijan in navigating an increasingly complex geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape, promoting security in Asia through various confidence-building measures (CBMs), and fostering new partnerships across the continent. Parts of this paper should thus also be understood as contributing to the discourse on the expanding role of the non-Western regional multilateral frameworks in a changing and highly fragmented international order.

Context

The proposal to establish CICA was put forward on 5 October 1992 by then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan at the UN General Assembly. The primary objective of this initiative was to establish a robust and comprehensive organization for peace and security in Asia. The main initial documents regulating the activities of CICA are the Declaration on the Principles Guiding Relations between CICA Member States, adopted in 1999, and the Almaty Act, adopted in 2002.

By the Sixth Meeting of CICA Ministers of Foreign Affairs in 2021, Nazarbayev's successor as President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, was in a position to state that "CICA already possesses all the essential features of an international organization, including foundational documents, decisionmaking and working bodies, operational budget, and Permanent Secretariat." At the same time, CICA has become "matchless in terms of inclusiveness and representativeness. [...] CICA is not only a pan-Asian security mechanism, but also

CICA's role as an exclusively non-Western security platform is gaining prominence across Asia.

an epitome of Asia's complicated security environment," as Chen Donxiao, President of Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), has written.

In contrast to the Western Hemisphere and the European continent, Asia has been relatively lacking in collective structures for ensuring peace and security in the region. After the dissolution of the USSR, the emergence of a new geopolitical order further necessitated a structured framework for establishing cooperation in Asia.

It stands to reason that the historical, political, economic, and geographical heterogeneity of Asian countries challenges the ease of structural unity as opposed to Europe and the Americas. However, the implementation of ground-level CBMs enhances interstate cooperation efforts. In addition, considering the political priorities of Western coalitions, the shared challenges of Asian countries were not adequately addressed by existing international organizations. Thus, CICA is a forum that recognizes a close link between peace, security,

CICA is a forum that recognizes a close link between peace, security, and stability in Asia, and understands that these will both affect and be affected by what happens or does not happen in the rest of the world.

and stability in Asia, and understands that these will both affect and be affected by what happens or does not happen in the rest of the world.

The logic of this approach can be presented as follows: in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, regional security cannot be evaluated in isolation, as the security environment in one region can have a spillover effect in others. Thus, ensuring lasting peace and voicing the unheard concerns of the states lies at the core principles of CICA. Such principles include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Establishing peace, security, and stability in Asia;
- Strengthening cooperation through multilateral approaches;
- Promoting trade and economic cooperation;
- Partnership on environmental protection issues;
- Cooperation within the framework of CBMs in the humanitarian field;
- Combating illicit drug trafficking;
- Fighting against terrorism in all of its forms and manifestations;

- Promoting dialogues among civilizations, cultures, and religions; and
- Cooperation to promote connectivity through modes of transport linkages

CICA has also been influenced by some of those who championed the establishment of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which eventually became the OSCE, which identifies itself as the world's largest regional security organization, with nearly 60 participating states from North America, Europe, and Asia. In fact, CICA was conceived at least in part as a mechanism to initiate an Asian version of the CSCE's "Helsinki Agenda."

The aims and activities of both groupings converge in areas such as the political-economic dimension of security, combating terrorism, conflict prevention, economic and environmental activities, and cooperation in the human dimension, coinciding with the OSCE's "three baskets." There are also similarities between CICA's CBMs and those outlined in the Helsinki Final Act.

However, CICA should not be viewed as the "Asian analogue" to the CSCE, or be identified as "Asia's OSCE," because the nature of the challenges faced by

the CICA region is considerably different from those that were or are currently being faced in the OSCE space. Moreover, the CSCE was established in the context of the détente phase of the Cold War, with its members divided into three main groups, namely, the West (NATO), the East (Warsaw Pact) and the Neutral and Non-Aligned Countries (NNAC), which managed to co-exist in an era of relative peace but sometimes high tension. During that same period, what is now the CICA space witnessed horrific and brutal conflicts. But this did not result in the establishment of a CSCE-equivalent—not only for geopolitical reasons, but also for socio-economic ones.

Fast-forwarding to 2025 highlights that the OSCE itself is facing its most acute legitimacy crisis among any intergovernmental security organization worldwide. Understanding the reasons behind this phenomenon is essential for CICA member states to minimize risks on the path to CICA's institutional development.

The rise of regionalism in the post-Cold War era reflects the relative increase in the political and economic weight of the "rest" compared to the West. In one of his writings, Italian political scientist Giovanni Barbieri identified

“non-Western” regionalism as generally addressing “sovereignty concerns” and prioritizing “boundary preservation” while noting that “regional institutions in those areas show a tendency towards low levels of formality, light bureaucracies, and non-binding outcomes.”

The foregoing seems to describe the overarching posture of CICA member states, none of whom are interested in pursuing modes of cooperation that would soften sovereignty in favor of anything that resembles “political integration,” which in turn results in the loss of sovereignty through “pooling.” The practical application of this cornerstone of Asian statecraft sometimes makes it easier, rather than harder, to forge a positive form of consensus, as all member states appear to be in sufficient agreement on the outer limits of what can be achieved through CICA. This includes a strong awareness of geopolitical circumstances, both within the CICA space (its pan-Asian context) and more broadly.

Institutional Evolution

CICA is in the midst of transitioning into a more fully-fledged international organization, focusing on promoting peace, security, integration, and

cooperation across Asia. The current stage of this process started with the adoption of the Roadmap for CICA Transformation at the CICA Ministerial Council Meeting on 9 September 2023. According to the relevant document, the goals of transformation consist of “defining the overarching areas of future cooperation [across Asia] and strengthening the organizational and institutional base of [member states’] interaction.” The institutional transition process has been one of the main focus areas ever since.

Within the framework of ongoing reform, CICA is positioning itself to serve as Asia’s premier discussion platform, where all member states can gather to exchange views and clarify their positions. The central focus of CICA’s institutional development and transformation is to strengthen its framework, expand its regional and global influence, and address contemporary challenges faced by member states through structured initiatives and strategies.

As part of its institutional development, CICA now implements CBMs across what the relevant document calls “five dimensions of cooperation with 18 priority areas,” namely: military-political dimension; new challenges and threats

(combating terrorism, ICT security, combating illicit drugs, epidemiological safety, public health and pharmaceuticals); economic dimension (small and medium enterprises development, energy security, information technology, tourism, secure transportation corridors, agriculture, finance, trade and investment); environmental dimension (sustainable development, natural disaster management, environmental protection); and human dimension.

This is, more or less, where things stand at present, as Azerbaijan approaches the midpoint of its chairmanship of a perhaps soon-to-be fully-fledged intergovernmental organization, in which geographic belonging is the primary factor driving the cooperation process.

In other words, nothing resembling the “Asian values” period of the 1990s, which suggested a substantive or normative conception of a “pan-Asian identity,” is presently on offer in the context of CICA. This lack of “Asian awareness,” as Chen Dongxiao has put it, represents an often-underappreciated impediment to the establishment of an overarching security mechanism in the region.

Chairmanship Priorities

The priorities of Azerbaijan’s CICA chairmanship revolve around its chosen theme, namely “Stronger CICA, Connectivity, Digitalization, and Sustainable Growth in Asia.” Baku’s focus is on transport connectivity, promoting small and medium enterprises (SMEs), women’s entrepreneurship, the green economy, and fostering people-to-people contacts, tourism potential, and additional CICA Youth Council activities.

The country has also emphasized its intention and willingness to explore the promotion of humanitarian demining as an area of interaction within CICA to address the challenges faced by several member states due to contamination of their lands/territories with landmines and explosive remnants of war. By focusing on such a concrete and non-polarizing issue within its CICA chairmanship, Azerbaijan has the potential to reassert itself as an advocate for peace, security, and stability in the region, thereby highlighting a problem that continues directly to undermine its national security.

It is against this background that we offer the following set of four interrelated modest proposals and

recommendations for advancing Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship. We repeat: none are game-changing, but taken as a whole, we believe they can help move the needle forward.

Recommendations

First, leverage the CICA chairmanship to showcase Azerbaijan's identity as a non-aligned, multicultural hub connecting Europe and Asia. Aside from substantive considerations, this recommendation also falls within the purview of "public diplomacy." We will not reiterate or elaborate on what one of the premier scholars on this topic, Alan K. Henrikson, wrote on the subject in the Winter 2023-2024 edition of *Baku Dialogues*. Instead, we will refer to a remark made by John H. Herz (most famous for having conceived of the concept of the "security dilemma") in 1981: "It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that today half of power politics consists of image making. With the rising importance of publics in foreign affairs, image making has steadily increased."

The conduct of member states within international organizations has the potential to either

bolster or tarnish an organization's reputation. Keystone states, such as Azerbaijan, particularly regard the potential of international organizations as a platform through which they can engage in discourse, frame global issues, and construct new identities in their relationships through multilateralism and coalition-building. They also tend to focus on policy areas where they have the most competence and discursive capacity, and then build upon that foundation.

Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship activities should be understood in light of the foregoing—that is to say, to be in the service of helping the country both entrench and more successfully project an image that builds up its international standing and reputation. An Uzbekistan-based scholar, Jovhar Museyibzada, has noted that past Azerbaijani multilateral chairmanships have helped the country establish a "positive identity [abroad] by increasing awareness, reducing negative perceptions, and providing authentic associations." Therefore, through its chairmanship of CICA, Azerbaijan has the opportunity to elevate its pan-Asian standing and reputation as a country that genuinely and actively contributes to confidence-building efforts.

Second, utilize the CICA chairmanship to leverage the low-risk/high-reward potential of on-the-job training for Azerbaijani junior diplomats and civil servants, thereby building capacity for future multilateral engagements. This is an under-appreciated advantage of CICA's nascent stage of institutional development. Such an initiative, which should extend past Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship, could go beyond the standard operating procedure of supporting various meetings hosted in Baku or other parts of the country. Opportunities for seconding staff at CICA headquarters in Almaty should also be considered, along with arrangements to work alongside friendly foreign diplomats in CICA ministries (foreign ministries but also line ministries). This could also include one-on-one exchanges of junior diplomats.

A related approach could involve funding targeted executive training courses (through ADA University, which is already a standard practice) that focus specifically on multilateral diplomacy, emphasizing organizations such as CICA, OTS, OIC, the D-8, and others.

The logic here is CICA-wide: diplomats and civil servants in all CICA member states need to get to know each other much better

than they currently do. Any reasonable initiative or program that can achieve this should be seriously considered.

Third, utilize the CICA chairmanship to focus more broadly on the next generation. This should involve taking the CICA Youth Council (YCICA) to the next level by engaging young people from CICA member states.

We understand that Baku is already working on this, as youth engagement is a key element of Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship. Within the framework of YCICA, the chairmanship has already planned various events. Some have already taken place: the International Essay Contest for CICA Youth was held in March 2025, and the CICA Youth Brainstorming Competition in April 2025. Three other events are expected to take place in the fourth quarter of 2025: a Side Event on "SDGs in Action" on the sidelines of the 8th CICA Youth Council Meeting, the 8th CICA Youth Council Meeting itself, and a Rally of the Volunteer Movement Leaders of CICA Countries.

However, we recommended that more be done.

For instance, we propose establishing a *national* CICA Youth

Platform. Azerbaijan did something similar in the nascent stage of establishing, first, a NAM youth network and then, in 2021, the NAM Youth Organization (NAMYO). This could involve selecting aspiring diplomats and civil servants (advanced undergraduate and graduate students) to volunteer or observe expert-level CICA meetings chaired by Azerbaijan through internship and traineeship opportunities.

At the CICA level, the Partner Network of Leading Universities (PLNU) program, which ADA University coordinates, could be expanded to include students, not just faculty and staff at these universities. This could take the form of establishing a format similar to the Model United Nations (MUN). Therefore, a ModelCICA could be launched, and simulations mimicking MUN conference formats could be organized.

Simulation conferences have become increasingly popular among Azerbaijani youth organizations in recent years (e.g., BSU, 2024; ICYF-ERC, 2024; IOM, 2023). The Azerbaijani Student Youth Organizations Union has been actively building an MUN community and organizing various large-scale youth conferences that simulate the UN, ICJ, OIC, NATO, and other international organizations. These efforts have involved youths

from universities and even high schools, helping to familiarize young people with these institutions from an early age.

A sets of steps similar to NAMYO's implementation could be used for CICA. A Youth Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia could be organized in 2026. With support from student organizations and intra-university groups such as university simulation conference clubs, this Youth Conference could be popularized and attract many young participants. The organizers of other youth conferences could help organize the initial events and committees.

Consistently organizing different types of YCICA events will increase the number of young people familiar with the format and willing to use their energy to improve CICA later on. Many young people who have participated in simulation conferences of various organizations have gone on to work in actual diplomatic roles, contributing to the meetings of the organizations they had simulated as university students.

Fourth, leverage the CICA chairmanship to advance CICA's institutional development. Focusing on less contentious issues,

such as economic connectivity and humanitarian demining, can help build consensus and strengthen CICA's organizational framework in order to achieve the adoption of the CICA Charter by 2026. This may also involve adjusting the approach Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship takes for this effort.

Unless institutionalized, CICA will remain merely a declaration of intent rather than a forum where security issues are addressed in a coordinated fashion. As previously discussed, institutionalization has been a primary goal and focus for CICA, and previous chairmanships have taken steps toward this aim.

During his visit to Azerbaijan, CICA Secretary-General Kairat Sarybay stated that "CICA member states view transformation as an evolutionary process and do not set artificial deadlines for its completion." He also mentioned that "the most important task of Azerbaijan's presidency will be the successful completion of the transformation negotiation process with the adoption of the CICA Charter at the next CICA Summit in 2026." By

applying lessons learned from Azerbaijan's chairmanship in other multilateral frameworks, including the organization of an annual Special Working Group event, implementing CBMs concerning each state, and providing platforms for youth and women, CICA can achieve better institutionalization and exert considerable influence over the region.

Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship presents a transformative opportunity to strengthen CICA's role in coordinating security cooperation in Asia. By leveraging its geopolitical position, diplomatic expertise, and commitment to inclusive multilateralism, Azerbaijan can make a significant contribution to building a more connected, stable, and prosperous Asia. These efforts would not only boost CICA's standing and influence but also enhance Azerbaijan's reputation as a dynamic leader in the changing landscape of international relations. Our proposals and recommendations were presented with the above considerations in mind. **BD**



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Azerbaijan's Multilateralist Posture

Yalchin Rafiyev

Baku Dialogues:

We are honored to feature an interview with Mr. Yalchin Rafiyev, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Lead Negotiator for COP29. The general topic of this conversation is multilateralism and Azerbaijan's growing involvement in various multilateral forums.

Mr. Deputy Foreign Minister, let's focus the bulk of our time together on the newer multilateral organizations—the ones that are contributing to a transformation of the way that the world sees multilateralism. Perhaps a good starting point is for you to outline Azerbaijan's overall posture toward multilateralism, which, of course, begins with the UN, the world's sole *universal* multilateral, inter-governmental institution.

Rafiyev:

Azerbaijan is a firm believer in—and a strong advocate of—multilateralism. That is our view, full stop. As a country that is not part of any political or military alliance, Azerbaijan has always counted on the multilateral system to work for the advancement of justice—for the restoration of justice—in world politics. In our case, this was primarily in relation to the conflict that we had for about three decades, but at the same time, to all the

Yalchin Rafiyev is a Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Lead Negotiator for COP29. He previously led the ministry's International Security Department. An honors graduate of Baku State University, he subsequently completed post-graduate programs at the NATO Defense College and the International Anti-Corruption Academy. The interview was conducted in June and July 2025 by Damjan Krnjević Mišković. The views expressed in this conversation are solely those of the participants.

issues that we have experienced, including the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, Azerbaijan held the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement. And the multilateral system at that time worked for humanity through the World Health Organization and others.

This testifies to the fact that, sometimes, those UN specialized multilateral institutions really can help us, and help the world, to navigate difficulties and overcome challenges. Just imagine the horrendous results that we would have seen across the globe—especially in the developing world—without the WHO and the results and organizational know-how they brought to the table in terms of dealing with, and ultimately helping to overcome, that pandemic.

So, this illustrates a reason why Azerbaijan is a firm believer in—and a strong advocate of—multilateralism, despite the fact that the multilateral system is currently going through a very difficult time.

Azerbaijan thinks that, still, there is room for the possibility of continuing to have an efficient system. COP29, over which we presided, was one of the examples of that. Just as a reminder, COP29 took place just a few days after the election of the U.S. president, who is considered to be quite skeptical about climate action and climate negotiations.

Baku Dialogues:

Right. Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election on 5 November 2024 and COP29 started on 11 November 2024, which meant that the American delegation, which was led by John Podesta, was in the position of representing a lame duck administration. Now, Podesta was concurrently Senior Adviser to U.S. President Joe Biden on International Climate Policy and Senior Adviser on Clean Energy Innovation and Implementation. So had Biden or, later, the person who replaced him as the Democrat candidate, Vice President Kamala Harris, he would have been at full operational strength. But he was weakened severely, because all his colleagues knew that the Biden-Harris approach was done. Because, as you said, President Trump was skeptical about the climate action climate negotiations, but more broadly about the whole climate action agenda and the utility of multilateralism for advancing American interests. Still, COP29 was a success.

Rafiyev:

Yes, because the outcome of COP29 demonstrated that if we put collective efforts in place, then we can have an outcome that serves the interests of humanity—even in adverse political circumstances. But not only because of that.

Baku Dialogues:

Right. Your colleague, Elnur Soltanov, who is the COP29 CEO and a Deputy Energy Minister, stated in the Winter 2024-2025 edition of *Baku Dialogues* that ultimately, the global climate architecture is built on finance. So, ultimately, it's about money—climate money. He said, “With finance, this is where the promises start being felt—where the promises made start hurting the checkbook.”

Of course, you know all this. In fact, because you're the Chief Negotiator, you know this probably more fully than anyone else. And we can get back to COP29 a little later on. But first, I want to stay on the broad topic of multilateralism, because what you said—that the multilateral system is in a difficult time—is particularly true in the context of the United Nations system, which is the crown of multilateralism in the world.

And so, I would like to touch upon the New York aspect of this—with New York being the location of the UN General Assembly and the Security Council and the headquarters of the organization's professional bureaucracy. Because it's clear that there's a level of dysfunction that is very difficult to imagine being overcome.

On the other hand, as you mentioned, the specialized agencies—particularly the UNFCCC, which is headquartered not in New York but in Bonn—which in a technical sense did a marvelous job coordinating with the Azerbaijani presidency of COP29, but at the same time the way they see their role points to the limits of the situation that the sovereign states find themselves in multilaterally—again, in the context of the UN system being the crown of multilateralism. Because, as you said, COP29 took place right after Trump's election.

But it wasn't just that. It was the fact that what are they called the Annex 1 and 2 parties to the UNFCCC—that is, the core of the industrialized or developed world required to provide financial resources to enable developing countries to undertake emissions reduction activities under the UNFCCC and to help them adapt to the adverse effects of climate change—tripled their financial commitment. This is evidently not enough. Tripling the quantum was a serious achievement, but it's far less than what most developing countries sought and what the UNFCCC's own studies indicate is needed. Additionally, this commitment does not take effect until 2035, which is ten years from now. And there is no provision to account for inflation.

And this really does raise the issue of the viability of these, let's call them “legacy” multilateral institutions. Now, we can talk about various aspects of this, but perhaps you can focus on this aspect of the question: how does Azerbaijan see its place in these “legacy” institutions, and how can it benefit from them, in the context of its multilateralist approach, which includes now, let's call them the “non-legacy” or the “newer” multilateral organizations.

It does raise a question that was not being considered in the foreign ministries of most countries ten or 15 years ago, which goes beyond the age-old question of the limits of the UN system, as demonstrated on the one hand by the successes, but also by the new, more radical question of viability, given what took place at COP29. And the latter almost points to an alternative way of approaching or looking at multilateralism.

Perhaps I can phrase the question this way: How does Azerbaijan understand the limits of the UN system in the context of its independent, multivectoral, or balanced foreign policy, which clearly has an important multilateral aspect?

Rafiyev:

There is a lot to unpack in what you have mentioned, and I won't be able to get into all of it: it would take too long. But let me start by saying that the limits for the moment, of course, are that the multilateral system—and when we say multilateralism, of course, in the core of it is the UN—is an institutional heritage or legacy from 80 years ago, from global realities

reflective of power relationships from that moment in time. This year, we are celebrating the eightieth anniversary of the United Nations, and whatever was inherited from that time is, of course, no longer fitting for what we are experiencing now in international politics, economic development, and other challenges.

So, the first limitation is that the entire system itself is old-fashioned and outdated.

The second is that the UN and other legacy regional organizations and the old-fashioned integration mechanisms have some values and principles that are enumerated and sometimes explicitly defined on paper, but when you look at how these are reflected in practice, you see that these values and principles are completely different. This inconsistency between the very values and principles of such organizations vis-à-vis the real activities in practice is one of the issues that lead to an assessment that there are, in reality, very few organizations that truly deliver for their member states. Or at least for all their member states. And let's not forget that multilateralism is about states—multilateralism is an inter-*state* system.

The third limitation concerns multipolarity. The legacy organizations were born in a condition of bipolarity, and then there was this unipolar moment, but now we are in a multipolar world. This predates the Trump Administration, but with his return to the White House, we can say that the concept of a multipolar world is being reinstated.

Baku Dialogues:

One could even say “reinstated through the front door,” that is, without the objection of United States, which seems to be willing to accept the geopolitical and geoeconomic reality that it no longer has the capability—and, of course, the political will—to underwrite a world in which America sat alone at the “head of the table,” as Joe Biden put it, and saw nothing wrong with determine the seating chart, the rules of etiquette, and the menu—irrespective of everyone else's dietary preferences.

So, yes, as you were saying, the concept of the multipolar world is being reinstated...

Rafiyev:

...yes, and given these new circumstances, the number of multilateral organizations, institutions, and formats will grow. That's something that we can expect to happen in the future—in fact, it's already happening.

Now, for Azerbaijan, regional organizations are becoming increasingly more important. We hosted the summit of ECO—the Economic Cooperation Organization—in July in liberated Khankendi. We became the first new member of the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation in its nearly 30-year history. And the D-8 includes very important countries in terms of economic development and political influence. Each of these D-8 member states is important in its own right, but when they come together as the D-8, I think further cementing their concertedness within the organization itself is needed. And the D-8 also needs some further institutionalization to realize its full potential—in order for its structure and other aspects to more accurately reflect current realities.

Baku Dialogues:

Let's leave aside the ECO Summit and focus on what you said about the D-8—about it needing to be further cemented—both institutionally and in terms of its mandate. Could you say that Azerbaijan has noticed this, and the existing member states have noticed this, but Azerbaijan is the new kid in town? Because, as you pointed out, Azerbaijan is the first country since the inception of the D8 to be admitted. You're the first D-8 expansion country.

Given that everybody in the D-8 understands that further cementing, as you put it, is required, but also that you're new to the D-8, do you see a role for Azerbaijan to spearhead reform—to try to strengthen and deepen the institutional foundations of the D-8, and its relevance and influence?

Rafiyev:

I think we have a reason to aim for that, and we have a reason to claim a mandate for that. Because during our chairmanship of the Non-Aligned

Movement, we were also the new kid in town, as you put it. We had been a member for only about eight years when our chairmanship began, and this was not a problem. We were able to scale up NAM's activities and implement institutional reforms to address current realities. And we did that. We have proved that if a country—even a country without a long history of membership in a movement or organization—wants to chair or preside over a movement or an organization with a vision and a clear focus on what you want to do, then it's possible to do it, to succeed.

Also, COP29 is another example. It was a story of a country with a very low capacity in the climate negotiations—non-existent, almost—and with a very low national institutional memory on the climate negotiations, which in only ten months was able to focus its efforts and deliver a truly breakthrough outcome at COP29.

Now, with the D-8, we are not acting in a similar capacity as we did with the NAM chairmanship and the COP29 presidency. Still, these two examples inspired us—they lead us to believe that we can also do something similar within the framework of the D-8. That we can leverage our experience, know-how, enthusiasm, and the institutional memory we have now gathered from our leadership in other multilateral organizations.

And we also have a willingness—a political willingness coming from the top of our country. This is an organization that we want to strengthen. We think this is worthwhile—for the D-8, and for Azerbaijan.

So, we already have some plans on how to do this, and we have, in fact, already started to implement some of those plans. We have prepared some concepts. We want to develop some centers of the D-8 that will be needed very much. And all this is now in the process of consultation with the member states.

Baku Dialogues:

Do you see an openness on the part of the Egyptian D-8 championship for such initiatives?

Rafiyev:

Yes, and also from the D-8 Secretary General. They are both open to these initiatives. In fact, the Egyptian chairmanship even proposed that we host a ministerial meeting focused on our ideas, even before we finalized the ratification process—of course, we have now finalized it. But the Egyptians proposed this even before that.

And we are now preparing to host such a ministerial. This is not a foreign ministers' meeting, but rather a meeting of line ministries. So, in October 2025, we will host the D-8 ministries of economy and climate. But later, of course, it could be on a rotational basis, other ministries, including foreign ministries.

Baku Dialogues:

Sure, but convening the line ministries you mentioned is, in a way, the best, the most direct way to raise the visibility of the D-8, right? Because the member states are neither great in number nor geographically proximate, the D-8 is not a global organization; yet, it also is, in a certain sense: its reach is global, one could say. And if you can deepen the economic relationship between the members of the D-8, then that would do the trick, so to speak. Should this be seen as an indicator of your level of ambition to raise the profile and influence of the D-8?

Before you answer, if I may, it seems to me that the highest level of economic ambition would be to sign some kind of free trade accord. So, I'm not suggesting you would want to start from that, but that you might be open to the idea of working up to it.

Rafiyev:

Of course, in today's world, economic and connectivity relationships are even more important than in the past. We see this nowadays in the case of the United States—this is the most visible example. How economic interests are at the very top.

And we think that we need to work hard within the D-8 as well—to build confidence among member states that, if we work together in that direction, then it would be possible.

Geographically, of course, some member states are distant from each other—they are far from being territorially connected, or territorially proximate, even. But I think this is not an impediment that cannot be overcome, since there is always a logistical possibility of access for trade with each other. I see a big potential for that. By taking small steps in the direction of economic topics of shared interest, we can further build on this success, strengthen our efforts, and keep going.

Baku Dialogues:

But there's also something about a common characteristic of the members of the D-8 in this economic context. All the members are what I and others call “keystone states,” including Azerbaijan. Each has a power of attraction to their neighbors and their neighbors' neighbors. Each is centripetal. And this power is achieved not through fear or the threat of domination, and so on. And so, in a way, the D-8—although the membership is small in number—has this ability to attract. Each member state is, at the very least, a regional economic center. And so, if trade were to be enhanced between the members, then it should follow that trade between the neighbors of each of the D-8 members would be enhanced, and this would somehow be associated with a more active D-8.

Rafiyev:

Sure. The D-8 would become a significant market in this sense, as each member has existing trade and economic cooperation mechanisms with their neighbors. So, if we look beyond just the D-8 members—if we consider the geoeconomic context of each D-8 member—then we can cast a wider economic net than just the D-8 members. At the very least, this could encompass their immediate neighbors.

Baku Dialogues:

Exactly. So, if, for instance, Azerbaijan were to establish an enhanced economic presence in Nigeria, then all of a sudden, Nigeria's neighborhood would become more accessible.

Rafiyev:

Yes, because Nigeria is part of ECOWAS, Indonesia is part of ASEAN, and so on. So, yes, I think there are a lot of untapped opportunities. For us, but also for all the other D-8 countries. For Azerbaijan, there is clearly room to grow in terms of economic relations with all these countries.

Baku Dialogues:

And not just economically, but politically and diplomatically, too.

Rafiyev:

We need some tools—a vehicle for that—and the D-8 could be one of them.

Baku Dialogues:

I would like to revisit something you mentioned earlier about the lack of institutional memory in the COP universe. I have two questions to ask you about this. First, could you comment on how your experience as the COP29 Chief Negotiator and, more broadly, Azerbaijan's experience as the COP29 presidency, affects the dynamic between the UNFCCC Secretariat and the various COP presidencies?

In some instances involving international organizations—the multilateral aspect of the international system—we hear whispers that Secretariats have more power than they should in terms of agenda-setting, priorities, and so

on. Now, there is a solid reason for this, and it has to do with maintaining continuity. And there is the counterargument, which is that multilateralism is, at bottom, intergovernmentalism. And so that any international or regional organization should be driven by its member states. I recently heard someone refer to it as the “bureaucratic impetus to want to monopolize institutional memory.”

Rafiyev:

When I spoke earlier about institutional memory, I meant that in the previous 28 COPs, Azerbaijan had not been an active part of the discussions—of the climate negotiations. We made no secret about this. And that is one of the main reasons why it took some time for our COP29 presidency to build the capacity to understand what was happening in the negotiation process—the key concepts, the key issues to which we should pay more attention. Because climate action is one of the most fragmented topics that you can find in the whole international system—in the large and complicated world of multilateral negotiations within the UN system. And when it came to finance—since we were discussing climate finance—this topic further aggravated an already difficult and complex situation in terms of the negotiations.

So, our lack of institutional memory meant that we had to get up to speed, and this took some of our time. We had to reach a level of competent understanding of what happened before—the nuances, the various positions, and so on.

Our interaction with the UNFCCC Secretariat in this regard was also important. The officials in the Secretariat helped us to build this capacity in a short period of time, because they are the ones who have been within it since the beginning of the process. And they helped us a lot.

Another difficulty was that COP28 resulted in a milestone achievement of a global stocktake, where, in paragraph 28, the parties called upon themselves to “contribute [...] pathways and approaches [to transition] away from fossil fuels in energy systems.”

This formulation—“transition away from fossil fuels”—was the most significant mitigation outcome ever achieved in the COP processes.

Therefore, there was some expectation from, let’s call it the wider international community, that COP29 could—should—reach beyond that on the mitigation front.

However, our narrative from the very beginning was that COP28 was a mitigation COP, and that COP29 would be about finance—it had to be. And that necessarily meant that we would pay more attention to finance rather than adding to the language. Because there was no realistic room to go beyond the “transition away from” formulation. You remember that there were those who advocated for “phase down” or “phase out,” but that was not going to be acceptable to all the parties a year later, because it was tried at COP28.

So, at COP29, what made the process so meaningful—the reason it was so important for the whole international community—was inclusiveness. COP29 was one of the most inclusive UN processes that I have attended, since the civil society organizations themselves were also part of the negotiations. So, as the COP29 presidency, we needed to brief them monthly—to inform them about what’s going on, ask them what they would like to see be the outcome at the end of the negotiation process, and so on. And we had a very inclusive process: I met with nine what are called “observer constituencies,”—you know, farmers, city organizations, business NGOs, youth NGOs, women NGOs, gender NGOs, and so on.

This made it very diverse and inclusive. I heard many valuable perspectives and ideas. And also, what made it more inclusive was how the business community was involved in different capacities, as philanthropies, as those that had social responsibility projects, as those that advanced themselves, their activities, or their institutional setups to be more climate and environmentally friendly. So, all of this was very complex—it was a massive system of undertakings, with the Secretariat bearing the institutional memory and simultaneously supporting our presidency.

But of course, like other parts of the broader UN system, the UNFCCC Secretariat is also sometimes subjected to political influences. This occurs in two senses: seeking to affect the outcomes of the negotiation processes and also sometimes the logistics—to have certain preferences. Here, it depends on the specific presidency: how strong it is in dealing with such matters.

In our case, I think we did well with them. We had very good cooperation with the UNFCCC Secretariat right until the end. And that was one of the keys to our success.

Baku Dialogues:

You mentioned earlier that COP28 was the mitigation COP. And in a way, COP28 was the peak of the mitigation push. But COP29 was the finance COP. It's where the talks were about money—"climate money," as your colleague, whom I quoted earlier, put it. Who gives how much to whom, and under what conditions, and whether the conditions are acceptable to those who are mandated to receive it, and so on. This was a central focus of COP29.

And we know that, all other things being equal, the preference of the developing world is adaptation over mitigation. Because the developing world understands—I think this is now clear to everybody—that meeting the maximalist understanding of all the climate action goals, aspirations, and financing amounts is not going to happen. And so, you had this rising desire to emphasize—much more so than in the past, and certainly much more than at COP28—adaptation over mitigation. And in the concluding document of COP29, there's a passage that underscores earlier commitments to finance mitigation and adaptation in a fifty-fifty split. Half here, half there. And at the same time, this has never happened.

Anyway, it seems to me that part of the reason this fifty-fifty formulation made it into the final text is that the COP29 presidency pushed it. My assumption is based on your earlier discussion about inclusivity in our conversation, where you emphasized the importance of ensuring that the developing world is heard, and so on. And it's also based on the following logic: if the UNFCCC process—the COP process—is going to produce a result, which is unlikely to be the *ideal* result, then the likelihood of that happening increases dramatically the more adaptation is emphasized, which is something that the developed world doesn't want to do. And perhaps some in the developing world also don't really push for this, for various reasons.

Rafiyev:

Exactly. Let me briefly explain the underlying spirit within the whole process. So, you have the wider public—the media, the youth, and others who want to see more mitigation-prone outcomes, because for them, the real outcome of the COP process should be how much you decrease the amount of greenhouse gas emissions. This is the prevailing understanding within the whole NGO and international media universe. And most developed countries are part of this, as well.

And then you have developing countries. As you rightly said, they generally want more adaptation-prone outcomes, because they are the ones bearing the highest burden of changes in the climate.

And for both of them—mitigation and adaptation—you need finance. The third pillar—finance—is much more important than the other two, because without the critical enabler of finance, you cannot do anything. One and two are very much dependent on the third. This is what you have laid out in the Paris Agreement text.

Now, adaptation is something that will always be a top priority for most developing countries, because it's an existential issue for them. For others, like for some of the SIDS—the Small Island Developing States—mitigation is important, too. But even for them, when they talk about mitigation, they talk about the necessity for mitigation to be implemented in *other* countries, because those other countries need to decrease *their* emissions, so that the temperature increase and resulting sea level rises do not go beyond the point at which the SIDS countries literally disappear under water. But for them, also, adaptation is or should be much more important, because they themselves need to adapt—they need to somehow build resilience and build the sea walls. And they need to relocate their hospitals and schools to higher ground on these islands. Their homes, too. And they need adaptation money for that.

But, unfortunately, the political landscape within the COP process is that some of the SIDS and some of the Least-Developed Countries—the LDCs—work very much on the mitigation side, because the developed countries support them in terms of their economic development,

development assistance, and so on. And they forget what they need, in fact, on the ground. So, this is something that is very visible, but also very sensitive. And so, you have this very thin line between their position of being more ambitious on getting real support or politically being backed by some institutions and interests.

Now, when it comes to finance, in the previous 28 COPs, there was not a single decision on finance—on the quantum. In 2009, at COP15 in Copenhagen, a commitment was made to mobilize \$100 billion per year by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries. But this was not the outcome of negotiations. It was more like a declarative statement that was inserted in the text. There was no debate, no discussion. Therefore, the climate finance quantum had never been negotiated at any COP until Baku. At COP29, the \$300 billion quantum was, for the first time ever, a product of negotiations. It is the first UN-negotiated figure. That's my first point.

Secondly, besides *quantitative* financing elements, COP29 put in place *qualitative* elements, like providing categories of payers and contributors. It also referred to the \$1.3 trillion scale-up financing target for 2035 “from all public and private sources,” as the text says. So, from all sources, not only from public sources.

Now, when you look at the general spectrum of the process—the different views—you get to the question of why COP28 was considered so successful. And here, you can point to the international media, because for them, the mitigation outcome is more important, as it's much more visible. The audience understands it more easily.

Baku Dialogues:

Sure. However, in addition, emphasizing adaptation leaves ample room for the cleanest fossil fuel, namely natural gas, to play a role in the global energy mix well past the 2050 deadline, which, at this point, is very unlikely to be met. And that obviously irritates some people who view this issue through a rigidly ideological lens. But the reality is that if there's a switch from burning wood or coal right now, today, then it makes much more sense, in many cases, especially in the developing world, to switch to gas. Instead of switching to wind and solar and hoping that the battery storage

technology will appear imminently and be reliable, viable, scalable, inexpensive, and so on, all so that the switch to renewables can catch up to the aspirations of those who champion that sort of thing.

My point is that, at the end of the day, the more you emphasize adaptation, the better it is—genuinely—for the developing world. It's fairer and more just. It gives them a fair chance to develop, to catch up—not just to survive. Some of them have a serious physical survivability issue, obviously, but that's not enough—that just subsistence. Adaptation increases the likelihood that most developing countries can engage in the world's economic affairs, rather than relying solely on handouts forever. And it seems to me that Azerbaijan understood this in the context of your COP29 presidency.

Rafiyev:

Exactly.

Baku Dialogues:

It also seems to me that Azerbaijan really began to understand the nuances and the complexities of all this through your NAM chairmanship—conceptually, although perhaps not in all the technical particulars, because of the specific subject matter. However, when you began to be seriously and actively engaged in NAM, which culminated in your election to lead the movement, and then even more so when COVID-19 swept across the globe and Azerbaijan was at the forefront of it all—plus there was an extra year, 4+1, of that chairmanship. I think you have come to understand the needs of the developing world deeply—in a deeply objective way. And then the next step on the ladder was COP29—the way you ran the presidency in the run-up to COP29, during the conference, and throughout your term.

Rafiyev:

Yes, that's right. Of course, the NAM chairmanship helped us a lot to understand the dynamics of the multilateral system as well as the needs and requirements of the developing countries.

And also our engagement through AIDA—the Azerbaijan International Development Agency. We closely follow CARICOM and the Pacific Island Forum, enabling us to understand the needs and requirements of countries belonging to these regional organizations. We try to alleviate the suffering of the people from various aspects. We also work with the Commonwealth Secretariat, where, before COP29, we reached an agreement to donate \$10 million to Commonwealth SIDS countries. There are other examples.

So, yes, before COP29, we had an understanding. And during our COP29 presidency, we have built on that.

Let me next turn to your other issue. Some are questioning whether COP29 was successful in adaptation-related outcomes. And my answer is, “yes.” We achieved an agreement on an adaptation roadmap. We have the Baku Adaptation Dialogues that will take place at every subsequent COP. And we have the Baku Work Program on Indigenous Peoples. This last is also a matter of adaptation that we put a lot of effort into getting everyone to agree. And we finally got it done. So, yes. Our previous experience in multilateral diplomacy has been invaluable.

Baku Dialogues:

I’d like to come back to something you said at the beginning of this conversation. The context was multilateralism—that multilateralism is, at the end of the day, about states—you said that “multilateralism is an inter-*state* system.” You mentioned that very few multilateral organizations effectively deliver for *all* their member states.

And I’d like to ask for your view about the multilateral organizations that genuinely deliver for all their members—ones to which Azerbaijan is a party. So, multilateral organizations that are action-oriented or results-oriented.

Rafiyev:

There are two types of organization to which Azerbaijan is a party, and from which we have benefited.

Organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement provided significant political support to Azerbaijan during the conflict period. We really benefited from being a member of these two organizations, because over 30 years, we got a lot from them. And this is something we will not forget.

When it comes to economic benefits—benefits on the ground, so to speak—where we can feel the concrete benefits now and will continue to do so in the future, I can single out the Organization of Turkic States. There is a very fast integration process underway in the OTS world. So, things like a common alphabet, for instance, as well as a whole host of other cultural and identity matters. Connectivity, obviously. Also investments: the numbers continue to increase. And there could be a common economic area in the future. There is even talk of conducting joint military operations or something similar.

So, in *all* aspects, the cooperation via OTS is going very fast. Every year, we have formal and informal summits of heads of state and government. The leaders have very good chemistry among themselves. And also, the full members are all countries that are part of the Middle Corridor region. Geography binds us to each other—not just a common heritage. We occupy this vast connectivity space. And, naturally, we have economic interests aligning. All this, and much more, means that OTS has very good prospects for the future.

I could also mention a program called SPECA—it’s not an organization in a technical sense. Its full name is the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia. It’s designed to strengthen economic cooperation in what some call the greater Central Asia region.

Baku Dialogues:

At *Baku Dialogues*, we call this the Silk Road region, although it’s not an exact match to what you’re talking about, because the SPECA countries are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. And the Silk Road region encompasses a few others—at least in my conception. Anyway, please continue.

Rafiyev:

SPECA is a UN program. It is supported jointly by the UN Economic Commission for Europe, or UNECE, and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific—here, the acronym is ESCAP.

In the past few years, Azerbaijan has led the effort to build up SPECA further. In November 2023, we hosted the first SPECA Summit, a full 25 years after the Tashkent Declaration established SPECA. We were not an original member: we became what’s called a “participating state” five years later, in 2002.

SPECA operates on the basis of a geographic logic. We all take into account the geographic proximity of the parties and our region’s geoeconomic location on the Middle Corridor—or the Silk Road, as you put it. And we did our best to reinvigorate this program with the support of the UN and our partners—the other participating states.

So, organizations like these, I would say, on political, economic, and practical terms, are ones for which Azerbaijan has delivered concretely—both for all the member states and for Azerbaijan itself. All of us have benefited. Not just in words, but in concrete action.

Baku Dialogues:

You mentioned OIC. And related to OIC is ICESCO, the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. One of ICESCO’s many events in Azerbaijan last year was hosted by ADA University—it was a thought-provoking, high-profile conference on the topic of strategic foresight in decisionmaking. And Shusha was designated an ICESCO Cultural Capital for the year 2024.

ICESCO has recently established an office in Baku, aiming to serve as a bridgehead for the Islamic world’s cultural organization to engage with not only Azerbaijan but also Central Asia.

And so, it seems as though that is one of those niche organizations—maybe “niche” is the wrong word. So, let’s say specialized organizations that

emphasize the commonality of Islamic civilization, through culture, in a way that can be more than simply symbolically beneficial to Azerbaijan.

This occurs to me because, although you did not use the term, OIC was one of the “pillars” of international support for Azerbaijan throughout the conflict over Karabakh with Armenia. Now, this conflict is effectually over—the treaty hasn’t been signed for reasons we both know, and there is the Zangezur Corridor issue, and so on. But peace and full normalization have really never been closer.

My point here is that we’re at a point where it seems unlikely that Azerbaijan will need, in the time ahead, support from OIC in the same way as you did not that long ago. And so, the question becomes—for a country like Azerbaijan—what next? You could say that part of the answer is, “it’s time to give back to the organization.” And one way of doing that is precisely through this ICESCO office in Baku, and the emphasis on culture and Islamic civilization, and so on, right? So, can you share some thoughts on how Azerbaijan now views its engagement with the Islamic world?

Rafiyev:

Next year, we will host the OIC Summit here in Baku, and then we will preside over OIC for two years. Now, we are working on our vision, our concept, for the presidency.

And I personally believe that we should focus on economic cooperation within OIC.

OIC was founded on the Palestinian issue, and OIC has always been vocal and supportive of the Palestinian cause. But the organization has considerable capacity to build upon and to focus on other areas, including economic cooperation.

It has such important structures. The Islamic Development Bank, which will also have its annual session next year in Azerbaijan, is one of them.

Now, the Islamic Development Bank’s capacity is so vast that it can support all development activities within the OIC system, but we need to create

a conducive political environment for this to happen. And Azerbaijan's presidency could offer this.

You mentioned ICESCO, which is really an organization that can play a more significant role in building solidarity through cultural cooperation in the Islamic context—to stress in a more concrete way the shared values and principles of the Islamic Ummah. ICESCO can build further upon this legacy. Also, we have some bilateral mechanisms with ICESCO that can be replicated in other countries as well—like youth support programs and cultural exchange programs—that can further strengthen OIC.

So, I think OIC has very good potential, and I think that Azerbaijan is keen to make a real effort during our upcoming presidency to move the organization in the direction of fulfilling its potential more fully.

Baku Dialogues:

One of the most important things that I've experienced in the past five or so years that I have lived in Baku is that pretty much all of the countries that are part of the Silk Road region are genuinely vested in the idea of developing their agency more fully—of no longer and never again being objects of great power rivalry, but of being subjects of an international order, equipped with agency.

And you have all of these outsider-led investment and finance mechanisms: banks, funds, and so on. And sure, the countries of the region are formally shareholders in some of these, but clearly have little to no decisionmaking power—even when they vote as a bloc. And in others, they have no say, like the EU budget's funding of EU priorities via Global Gateway or some of the BRI funding vehicles for Chinese firms and projects. And it seems to me that this increases the risk—if not the danger—that, say, the Middle Corridor can just become a transport corridor instead of an economic corridor, since the outside funders are not stakeholders in the region in the same way—if at all—as the countries that are part of the region.

So, again, there's this risk that the Middle Corridor will be just a highway, and there's some toll collecting that passes for economic activity. I'm

exaggerating a little to make the point that there is a possibility that this part of the world won't have a real opportunity to add value to the goods and services that are produced or provided by outsiders. That it won't really contribute to the value chain—not just factories, but also big data and AI centers, and other elements and sectors that drive economic development in the twenty-first century.

And I think this is part of the thinking that informs what you said about making full use of the Islamic Development Bank in the context of Azerbaijan's upcoming OIC presidency.

Rafiyev:

Yes, for sure.

Baku Dialogues:

Azerbaijan is also going to chair OTS next year, and there's an opportunity there, too, to champion homegrown financing mechanisms that could serve as a basis for taking the organizations to the next level—for the strategic benefit of the membership, of their development that is less reliant on outsider financing and the outsider priorities and preferences and conditionalities and so on.

It's undoubtedly part of the thinking that informed our decision to publish an article proposing what its authors called a “Trans-Caspian Development Bank” in the Spring 2025 edition of *Baku Dialogues*.

And, as you said, there clearly needs to be the right political context for such ambitious ideas to ripen and bear fruit. And that has to be connected to a healthy sort of ambition. Like the World Bank used to be, or the IMF, or some of the Asian banks.

What you're suggesting—and what the authors of that proposal we published were suggesting—is a strategic opportunity, with an open door, to do some really serious strategic financing.

Rafiyev:

Exactly. There is a real potential for all that. The Islamic Development Bank is a specific institution that offers highly advantageous benefits to OIC member states, but I think there is a huge untapped potential that can be utilized. And the Middle Corridor is one such untapped potential. Various projects in Africa that need serious financing are also on my mind. Similarly, Middle East-Central Asia linkages exist, with Azerbaijan serving as a connecting link between these two regions.

So, yes, there are a lot of areas where the Islamic Development Bank could be a real asset. And its resources are no less than those of the EBRD, for instance.

Baku Dialogues:

It could be a real game-changer. More so than it has been in a while.

Rafiyev:

Exactly.

Baku Dialogues:

Let me turn to a broader topic. I recently made a list of the multilateral organizations to which Azerbaijan belongs, and there's an increasing number of them that don't involve Westerners. Or where Western powers are not at the center of the agenda setting, whether they're members or not.

But this is not a reflection of Azerbaijani political preferences—that's not my point. Instead, my point is that most “non-legacy” or “newer” multilateral organizations are non-Western. And this is very different from how it used to be. And this is producing different reactions in various Western capitals—especially in those that too easily equate non-Western with anti-Western. Now, I'm not asking you to say anything about that—it would

take our conversation off course. But what I am asking you to do is to say something about Azerbaijan's understanding of how this emerging reality changes things, because it seems to me that, when you look at all these new or newer or non-legacy organizations—I mean not just BRICS or SCO, but a plethora of others—it seems like the Western variable in the overall equation is lighter—it's less weighty. This appears to be a reflection of how the world is indeed undergoing a significant transformation in its geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape.

Rafiyev:

Yes, the growing role of newer regional organizations or, let's say, smaller multilateral organizations, is an important topic. We briefly discussed this earlier, so I'd like to touch on another aspect.

I think that having a large number of member states in an organization makes it more difficult to manage. And not only in terms of administrative management, but also the fact that in many countries, there are frequent changes in government, which can lead to different policies and priorities, and so on. Sometimes, it doesn't even have to be a large membership, like GUAM. In its early stages, we had a very strong organization with real political and economic plans. Many outsiders wanted to establish a dialogue mechanism with it, such as Japan, the U.S., Poland, and others. But later, due to a change in the government of some member states that resulted in changes in priorities, it lost its effectiveness.

BSEC had a similar trajectory: it was a very important organization at its inception, but now it's a paralyzed organization due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict—both are member states. We chair BSEC this year, and the members can't even agree on adopting the agenda for meetings, which take place online—there are no in-person meetings. In short, there are no tangible outcomes—and there is no real expectation that this will change in the near future.

Then you have big organizations—traditional ones—that base themselves on values and principles. These “legacy” organizations are much stronger. The historical record shows this. And then there are some regional ones, if they are *not* built on economic interests, they can more easily become less relevant. On the other hand, those organizations that *are* based on

economic interest—since the member states are benefiting from them—and if they have some institutional mechanisms, like financial ones, or entities supporting the activities of the organization, then these sorts of organizations tend to prove themselves to be much more efficient.

Baku Dialogues:

You mentioned the solidity of the values and the economic foundation of a multilateral organization. Another possibly solid foundation is what we can call the “brotherhood factor.” OTS is obviously much more than that, but the foundation is similar to the Arab League. The Turkic factor, the Arab factor. The idea that OTS is somehow an extended family organization.

Rafiyev:

Yes, all OTS members consider ourselves to be part of an extended family.

Baku Dialogues:

And, naturally, that then creates a firmer-than-usual foundation for enhancing economic ties.

Rafiyev:

Yes, that plays an important role. But you also have to take into account that this family relationship is not something new. It’s coming from very historic times. So, it depends politically on when you are ready to materialize this family kingship or relationship into real opportunities.

Now, geopolitical developments and the difficulties that the member states were experiencing necessitated the establishment of OTS—to coalesce at *this* critical stage, more than ever before. In the case of OTS, it was brotherhood plus these other factors. Brotherhood was a necessary but insufficient condition.

Baku Dialogues:

As a final question, I would like to ask you briefly about CICA, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. I know that CICA does not fall under your direct purview, so I’m not asking for details; however, could you share your general thoughts on CICA’s potential?

Rafiyev:

I think that, in political terms, CICA has real value because it brings together some countries with contradictory views on world politics on many issues. However, at the end of the day, it is sometimes possible to agree on some important issues.

For 2024-2026, Azerbaijan is chairing it. And CICA offers a political platform for countries in Asia to become engaged, including member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, some BRICS member states, and others. This means there is considerable potential. But what needs to be done is to adjust it to the current geopolitical landscape.

Baku Dialogues:

That’s both a succinct and sober way to end our conversation. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Foreign Minister, for taking the time.

Rafiyev:

You’re welcome. Thank you for the invitation. **BD**

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