



Nº62/2025

WORLD OF DIPLOMACY

DİPLOMATIYA ALƏMİ



AZƏRBAYCAN RESPUBLİKASI XARİCİ İŞLƏR NAZİRLİYİNİN JURNALI  
JOURNAL OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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Securing Peace and Stability in the South Caucasus: A Five-Year Reflection (2020-2025)

Legacy of Heydar Aliyev and the First Constitution of Azerbaijan: Foundations of Sovereignty

Women, Diplomacy and Leadership

The Middle Corridor: A New Silk Road for Global Trade

Azerbaijan's Chairmanship in CICA: Advancing Regional Cooperation and Strategic Dialogue

Azerbaijan in the ECO: Economic Integration and Regional Connectivity

Azerbaijan and the Organization of Turkic States: Strengthening Unity, Deepening Integration



ISSN 1818-4898



# **WORLD OF DIPLOMACY**

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"World of Diplomacy" journal is published since 2002.

Registration №1161, 14 January 2005

ISSN: 1818-4898

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# Introduction

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Dear reader,

The present edition of the World of Diplomacy journal brings together a diverse collection of articles that shed light on major developments in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy, both regionally and globally, over the past five years, including on its growing role in international cooperation and regional connectivity. The journal features articles by state officials and heads of international, regional organizations and platforms, as well as academicians.

This edition is distinguished by the inclusion of a special article dedicated to the “2025-Year of Sovereignty and Constitution in Azerbaijan”, highlighting the role of the National Leader Heydar Aliyev in the adoption of the First Constitution, and paying tribute to his exceptional role in development of statehood and governance of Azerbaijan.

Present issue also underscores Azerbaijan’s efforts to strengthen unity within the Organization of Turkic States, promote economic integration through the Economic Cooperation Organization in 2025, and advance regional dialogue within the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia while also addressing important themes such as women, diplomacy and leadership.

A particular focus of this issue is an in-depth article on the Middle Corridor, co-authored by experts from Azerbaijan, the European Union, Türkiye, China and the United States. Drawing on their diverse professional and regional backgrounds, the authors examine the strategic, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of this important transit route, offering perspectives shaped by their respective national and institutional vision.

The editorial team extends its sincere gratitude to all contributors for their valuable input and commitment to this edition.

We hope our readers will enjoy reading the present edition as much as we enjoyed preparing it.

**SINCERELY,**  
*Editorial Team*

# Securing Peace and Stability in the South Caucasus: A Five-Year Reflection (2020-2025)



**JEYHUN BAYRAMOV**  
*Minister of Foreign Affairs  
of the Republic of Azerbaijan*

## Introduction

The past five years were marked with historic achievements for Azerbaijan under the leadership of H.E. Mr. Ilham Aliyev, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Through strategic vision, principled and pragmatic foreign policy, President Ilham Aliyev has achieved the full restoration of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan after nearly three decades of military occupation by Armenia.

With the end of the decades-long conflict, the restoration of full sovereignty Azerbaijan not only restored justice and international law, but also through its consistent and constructive approach in the post-conflict period demonstrated exemplary commitment and sense of responsibility in promoting the peace process aiming at peaceful coexistence, lasting stability, and good-neighborly relations in the South Caucasus.

Relying on domestic stability and sustainable development, Azerbaijan's efforts to promote international peace and stability, rapid and effective responses to global challenges, international aid activities, expanding international economic cooperation, and its initiation of new mediation directions have collectively enhanced the country's international reputation.

Moreover, by translating its restored sovereignty and achievements into a broader diplomatic, economic, and security role both in the South Caucasus and on the global stage, Azerbaijan has consolidated its position as a confident and proactive regional actor.

These achievements demonstrate Azerbaijan's role not only in safeguarding its national interests but also in shaping regional dynamics, supporting global dialogue and positioning itself as an indispensable center of stability, connectivity and development in a rapidly transforming world.

## Peace Diplomacy and Securing stability in South Caucasus

Despite facing the conflict since regaining its independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has consistently pursued the peaceful resolution of the conflict

with Armenia within the framework of international law. This position was reinforced by four United Nations Security Council resolutions adopted in 1993, which demanded the immediate, full, and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Despite this, the prolonged failure to implement these resolutions, which left nearly 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory under occupation for close to three decades, Azerbaijan demonstrated patience, resilience and a long-term vision for peace and regional stability.

The 44-day Patriotic War in the autumn of 2020 and the liberation of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan marked a decisive turning point, putting an end to military occupation and opening perspective for closing a chapter of prolonged conflict. Winning the war on the battlefield, Azerbaijan embarked on a strategy of ensuring peace on the basis of recognition and acceptance of new realities on the ground.

After achieving victory in the war, Azerbaijan not only restored its territorial integrity and sovereignty, but also launched an unprecedented process of reconstruction and rehabilitation to bring life back to the territories liberated from occupation. The construction of infrastructure across all liberated areas, the restoration of historical and cultural monuments, and the inauguration of strategically important facilities – including schools, healthcare centers and other social institutions, have marked a significant milestone in the revival of these territories. To date, nearly 70,000 former internally displaced persons have returned home and the liberated territories are once again becoming thriving regions.



**RELYING ON DOMESTIC STABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AZERBAIJAN'S EFFORTS TO PROMOTE INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND STABILITY, RAPID AND EFFECTIVE RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES, INTERNATIONAL AID ACTIVITIES, EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION, AND ITS INITIATION OF NEW MEDIATION DIRECTIONS HAVE COLLECTIVELY ENHANCED THE COUNTRY'S INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION.**

Inauguration of Garabagh University Clinic and Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences building

14 September 2025,  
Khankendi city, Azerbaijan



**President Ilham Aliyev with  
the residents of  
Khankendi city  
23 December 2025  
Khankendi city, Azerbaijan**

The post-conflict strategy of Azerbaijan has been distinguished by pragmatism, perseverance and proactive engagement. Azerbaijan instrumentalized its military victory not as an endpoint but as a springboard for building peace in the South Caucasus, that is anchored in respect for international law, and thus is just, sustainable and irreversible.





As a sign of exemplary political wisdom and responsible state behavior, immediately after the end of military phase in 2020, Azerbaijan declared its readiness to open a new page in relations with Armenia and took the exceptional step of offering peace to the defeated side on equal terms, based on universally recognized norms and principles of international law. This visionary approach reshaped regional dynamics in the South Caucasus, removed major threats to peace and security within and beyond the region, and opened new prospects for broader regional cooperation.

In this regard, Azerbaijan initiated the peace agenda, put forward the basic principles for a future bilateral agreement and submitted the first draft and consistently promoted the progress on the text, which continued from October 2022 until March 2025, when the parties concluded their negotiations.

A pivotal breakthrough occurred in August 2025 during the Washington Summit, convened at the initiative of H.E. Mr. Donald Trump, the President of the United States.

**President Ilham Aliyev and First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva with students of Aghali village**  
**19 October 2022,**  
**Zangilan district, Azerbaijan**



**Official meeting between the delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the United States at the White House**  
8 August 2025,  
Washington D.C.,  
United States of America

On 8 August 2025, in Washington, D.C., the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, witnessed by the President of the U.S, signed a Joint Declaration. The parties confirmed that the conflict remained in the past, which is not and will not be subject to any attempt of revision, and they now embark on building good-neighborly relations based on this reality. On the same day, the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia initialed the text of the Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations. Both countries jointly appealed for the closure of the OSCE Minsk Group and related structures as obsolete mechanisms no longer relevant to the peace process.

As part of the agreements announced in Washington, another pivotal outcome of the Summit was the “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” (TRIPP), which will ensure unimpeded access between main part of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, fostering regional connectivity and economic cooperation.

As a result, peace has, de facto, been established, Azerbaijan and Armenia are experiencing the most peaceful and stable period. Both sides move forward in implementing tangible measures in different dimensions at the governmental, parliamentary, and civil society levels.

Series of positive developments – including the lifting of all cargo transit restrictions to Armenia and the shipment of grain from Kazakhstan and additional shipments from Russia to Armenia; the export of domestically produced petroleum products to Armenia; direct visits of the civil society representatives between Baku and Yerevan; the 12th meeting of the State Commissions of Azerbaijan and Armenia on border delimitation in Gabala; demonstrate that peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia is no longer merely theoretical but is already being reflected in practice and actively advanced by Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan, as the initiator of the peace agenda, remains committed to this path, and expects reciprocal political will and responsibility on the part of Armenia.

In this context, good faith and timely implementation of all commitments for finalization of the normalization process is of crucial importance.

The removal by Armenia of territorial claims still embedded in its Constitution will enable the signing and subsequent ratification of the initialed bilateral agreement, and to achieve peace that is irreversible.

In the meantime, timely realization of the “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” (TRIPP) is of utmost importance. This multi-modal connectivity route shall encompass railroad, highway and other communications and must ensure unimpeded connectivity between main part of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic with reciprocal connectivity benefits for Armenia. As it was stated, the importance of the opening of communications is not limited only to making peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan sustainable, but entails significant benefits at much greater scale.

Beyond bilateral implications, TRIPP aligns with the broader role of the region as a transit hub linking East and West, while the Middle Corridor – connecting China to Europe via the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus – has become a central element of Eurasian connectivity and global supply chain diversification.

## **Conclusion**

Looking back over the past five years, it can be confidently concluded that Azerbaijan, under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev, has achieved remarkable outcomes in foreign policy and regional diplomacy. The restoration of sovereign control and constitutional order over formerly occupied territories has provided a fundamentally new impetus for ensuring peace and stability in the South Caucasus.



**AZERBAIJAN, AS  
THE INITIATOR OF  
THE PEACE AGENDA,  
REMAINS COMMITTED  
TO THIS PATH, AND  
EXPECTS RECIPROCAL  
POLITICAL WILL AND  
RESPONSIBILITY ON  
THE PART OF ARMENIA.**



**LOOKING AHEAD, FOREIGN POLICY OF AZERBAIJAN WILL REMAIN ROOTED IN THE PRINCIPLES THAT HAVE GUIDED ITS SUCCESS: RESPECT FOR SOVEREIGNTY, COMMITMENT TO PEACE, PURSUIT OF MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PARTNERSHIPS, AND VISION OF PROSPEROUS AND PEACEFUL SOUTH CAUCASUS.**

For Azerbaijan, peace has always been more than formal conclusion of a treaty. To this end, peace between the States must be translated into mutual understanding and sense of peaceful co-existence at the societal levels. Building economic inter-dependencies and materializing benefits of peace in real terms is equally of paramount importance.

With this understanding, Azerbaijan will continue to build peace that is sustainable and irreversible, and not contingent upon any domestic political, legal developments.

By linking peace diplomacy with connectivity and energy security, Azerbaijan has reshaped the South Caucasus as a space of cooperation rather than confrontation. While unresolved issues – most notably constitutional changes in Armenia – continue to pose challenges, the trajectory of regional relations suggests a gradual normalization grounded in international law and pragmatic collaboration.

As President Ilham Aliyev stated in his speech at the 80th session of the UN General Assembly: “Azerbaijan has entered a new era. We won, both in war and in peace. We ended the occupation and started reconstruction. Justice has triumphed, sovereignty has been strengthened, and de-facto peace reached. We stand prepared to share our positive experience.”

Looking ahead, foreign policy of Azerbaijan will remain rooted in the principles that have guided its success: respect for sovereignty, commitment to peace, pursuit of mutually beneficial partnerships, and vision of prosperous and peaceful South Caucasus. The achievements of 2020 – 2025 clearly prove that this vision is already realized, with Azerbaijan leading the way toward a stable, cooperative and prosperous South Caucasus for the benefit of the region and the wider international community.



*“Azerbaijan has entered a new era. We won, both in war and in peace. We ended the occupation and started reconstruction. Justice has triumphed, sovereignty has been strengthened, and de-facto peace reached. We stand prepared to share our positive experience.”*

President Ilham Aliyev at the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York

# Legacy of Heydar Aliyev and the First Constitution of Azerbaijan: Foundations of Sovereignty



**FARID AHMADOV**  
*Minister of Justice  
of the Republic of Azerbaijan*

After restoring its independence in 1991 the Republic of Azerbaijan encountered severe challenges to its very statehood. The war of aggression initiated by Armenia resulted in the occupation of nearly one-fifth of Azerbaijan's territory and left more than 1 million Azerbaijanis as refugees and internally displaced persons. This conflict not only jeopardized Azerbaijan's territorial integrity but also exacerbated internal political instability, hindering the development of a unified national identity and effective governance, and threatening the viability of the nascent state. Power struggles among competing political factions, exacerbated by external influences, contributed to a volatile environment. During this hard time, in 1993, the return of the National Leader Heydar Aliyev to political power, at the call of the people, played a decisive role in the preservation of Azerbaijan's independence and its formation as a sovereign state, successfully achieving all of its objectives.

Under the leadership of Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan prioritized the establishment of democratic institutions to secure sovereignty and political stability. The state-building process commenced, and gradually political and societal stability emerged, providing a foundation for independent statehood. Azerbaijan's international profile improved through increased diplomatic recognition and the formation of key international partnerships, which attracted foreign investment and stimulated economic growth. In that period National Leader Heydar Aliyev, recognizing the importance of a comprehensive and modern constitution, personally took on the responsibility of overseeing the drafting process. He stated the following in this regard: "We must prepare such a draft and, ultimately, adopt such a Constitution that will serve as the Fundamental Law, a historical document ensuring the long-term stability of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan based on democratic principles. The separation of powers – executive, legislative, and judicial powers – must all be based on the will of the people and ensured through elections".

Inauguration ceremony of  
National Leader Heydar Aliyev,  
10 October 1993





Inauguration ceremony of  
National Leader Heydar Aliyev,  
10 October 1993

“

**DURING THIS HARD TIME, IN 1993, THE RETURN OF THE NATIONAL LEADER HEYDAR ALIYEV TO POLITICAL POWER, AT THE CALL OF THE PEOPLE, PLAYED A DECISIVE ROLE IN THE PRESERVATION OF AZERBAIJAN'S INDEPENDENCE AND ITS FORMATION AS A SOVEREIGN STATE, SUCCESSFULLY ACHIEVING ALL OF ITS OBJECTIVES.**

Thus, with the aim of preparing the draft of the first Constitution, the Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan established a Commission of 33 members, chaired by Heydar Aliyev. Adopted by referendum in 1995, the Constitution was conceived as both an immediate response to prevailing challenges and a durable framework for governance and democratic advancement. It was established as the supreme law, guiding future legislation and institutionalizing the principles of sovereignty, democracy, and the rule of law, even amid persistent internal and external threats.

By affirming in Article 2 of the Constitution the right of the people to determine their future and establish governance structures, the Constitution positions Azerbaijan as a sovereign state in which citizen participation is fundamental. The referendum process exemplifies this principle by providing citizens with a direct and constitutionally protected mechanism to influence significant state matters, including constitutional amendments, national policy decisions, and issues of enduring public importance. This mechanism reinforces the concept that the Constitution of Azerbaijan is a dynamic agreement between the state and its citizens and that the sovereignty resides with the people, whose collective decisions shape the nation's constitutional view, complementing representative democracy by ensuring that political authority is not confined to elected institutions but can be exercised directly by the people on matters central to statehood

and individual rights. As the National Leader Heydar Aliyev has stated during the first meeting of the Commission tasked with drafting the Constitution, “the state should serve the interests of the people. The people should not exist for the state, but the state should exist for the people. These principles must form the foundation of our Constitution”.

The Constitution of Azerbaijan establishes the foundational framework for state governance, embedding principles of democratic rule and a commitment to human rights. This structure is articulated in Article 7(I) of the Constitution, which defines the state as democratic, secular, and unitary, all governed by the rule of law. These characteristics collectively constitute the constitutional identity of Azerbaijan, covering the essential principles underpinning the nation’s constitutional order. As emphasized by the National Leader Heydar Aliyev, “the general principles must reflect the ongoing process of building a legal, democratic, secular, and civilized state. In order to accelerate this development and to define its final stages in advance – not merely to establish a state, but to ensure the harmonious functioning of the state we aim to fully construct – our fundamental law, the Constitution, must conform to and comprise all of these requirements”. This vision is further realized through the principle of separation of powers, explicitly outlined in Article 7(III), ensuring that the legislative, executive, and judicial branches remain distinct and independent. Furthermore, checks and balances are embedded in the system, as seen in Articles 95 and 109, which require parliamentary consent not only for the confirmation of certain public office nominations but also for key state decisions, such as matters of war and peace, further ensuring the legislative branch plays a crucial role in significant national issues and governance.

Following the establishment of institutional and structural foundations, the Constitution of Azerbaijan prioritizes safeguarding fundamental rights. Consequently, the section on fundamental rights and freedoms occupies a central position, reflecting a commitment to human dignity and equality as foundational principles of national life. The Constitution of Azerbaijan distinguishes itself through the breadth and depth of its enumeration of fundamental rights. It provides a higher level of protection for civil and political rights compared to the obligations imposed by international treaties, ensuring that these fundamental freedoms are safeguarded beyond the minimal standards set by international law. Unlike many democratic constitutions that focus primarily on civil and political freedoms, Azerbaijan’s Constitution also encompasses a comprehensive range of



**UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF HEYDAR ALIYEV, AZERBAIJAN PRIORITIZED THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS TO SECURE SOVEREIGNTY AND POLITICAL STABILITY.**



**THE CONSTITUTION NOT ONLY LAID THE FOUNDATION OF AZERBAIJAN'S POLITICAL AND LEGAL SYSTEM, BUT ALSO ESTABLISHED THE LEGAL BASIS FOR THE COUNTRY'S FUTURE DEVELOPMENT STAGES, INCLUDING THE REFORMS AND STATE GOVERNANCE STRATEGY IMPLEMENTED UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE PRESIDENT ILHAM ALIYEV.**

social, economic, and cultural rights. For example, even while international tribunals such as the European Court of Human Rights had already begun to recognize the right to live in healthy environment as part of the broader right to life and right to respect for private and family life in *López Ostra v. Spain* in 1994 – just one year prior to the adoption of the Constitution – Azerbaijan was ahead of the curve by enshrining it as a distinct fundamental right in its Constitution. The Constitution, with this approach, acknowledges that the effective exercise of civil and political rights is closely linked to economic and social well-being. For instance, without education, individuals may be unable to participate fully in democratic processes; without healthcare, they may lack the capacity to contribute productively to society. Accordingly, rights to education, healthcare, social security, and cultural development are constitutionally protected, aligning the Constitution of Azerbaijan with international human rights standards that advocate for the progressive realization of social rights, as articulated in various United Nations agreements and declarations.

Rather than relying on broad declarations, the Constitution often provides concrete obligations for the state to fulfill, thereby transforming constitutional promises into enforceable duties. This detailed formulation elevates the Constitution from a symbolic document to a practical instrument of governance, directly empowering individuals to enjoy and defend their rights before state institutions and, where necessary, in courts.

Another significant feature of the Constitution is that it places profound emphasis on the family institution as the fundamental unit of society, granting it special protection under the state's laws. It is not coincidence that the National Leader Heydar Aliyev has also emphasized that the Constitution, while adhering to the international human rights standards, must also follow our cultural and historical values. Following this viewpoint, Article 17 underlines the central role the family plays in maintaining social stability, promoting moral values, and ensuring the continuity of the nation.

Simultaneously, it should be added that Azerbaijan, as a monist state, integrates international law directly into its domestic legal framework, reflecting its unwavering commitment to respect and uphold its international obligations. Article 148(II) signifies that once a treaty is ratified, it automatically becomes part of the country's legal order, without the need for additional legislative action to incorporate it into domestic law. Furthermore, Article 151 reinforces this commitment by establishing the primacy of international treaties over domestic legislative acts in the event

of a conflict. Specifically, in cases where there is a contradiction between international treaties and national laws, except for the Constitution and acts adopted through referendum, the international treaties shall prevail. The monist approach adopted by Azerbaijan guarantees that international law is directly applicable and enforceable within the domestic legal system, thus aligning national legal practices with global standards and ensuring the full respect of its obligations under international treaties.

The Constitution not only laid the foundation of Azerbaijan's political and legal system, but also established the legal basis for the country's future development stages, including the reforms and state governance strategy implemented under the leadership of the President Ilham Aliyev. During the presidency of Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan witnessed significant advancements in the development of its state governance. New amendments to the Constitution through referendums not only strengthened the protection of fundamental freedoms but also streamlined the governance structure, improving efficiency and responsiveness in addressing national issues. President Ilham Aliyev's leadership ensured that the Constitution evolved in line with both domestic priorities and international standards. This forward-thinking approach contributed to a more robust and adaptive governance system, assisting Azerbaijan to address new challenges while reinforcing its commitment to democratic values and the well-being of its people.

In line with this commitment to enhancing democratic governance, a significant reform introduced through the referendums was, inter alia, the introduction of the popular legislative initiative, which allowed citizens to vote to propose legislation directly. Another key reform was the expansion of the substantive protections of fundamental rights, including the right to a fair trial. Additionally, the Constitution was also updated to respond to new challenges posed by emerging technologies, as the legal system of Azerbaijan continued to adapt to the digital age. New provisions aimed to protect individuals from unwarranted intrusions into their privacy by regulating how information technology could be used to disclose personal details. The new amendments prohibited the use of information technologies to expose an individual's private life without explicit consent, or in cases where anonymized data was being processed.

Despite the significant reforms and advancements made under the Constitution, nearly 20% of Azerbaijan's territory, occupied by Armenia, remained beyond the reach of the Constitution for almost 30 years,



**BY THE DECREE OF  
THE PRESIDENT OF  
THE REPUBLIC OF  
AZERBAIJAN, DATED  
28 DECEMBER 2024,  
THE YEAR 2025 WAS  
DECLARED THE "YEAR  
OF THE CONSTITUTION  
AND SOVEREIGNTY,"  
UNDERSCORING  
THE NATION'S FIRM  
COMMITMENT TO  
CONSTITUTIONAL  
PRINCIPLES AND  
THE REAFFIRMATION  
OF ITS TERRITORIAL  
INTEGRITY.**

“

**AS NOTED IN THE PRESIDENTIAL DECREE, THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN WILL CONTINUE ITS INDEPENDENT POLICY WITH GREATER COURAGE AND PRINCIPLES, GUIDED BY THE NATIONAL INTERESTS OF OUR PEOPLE AND IN LINE WITH NEW REALITIES. BASED ON THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE CONSTITUTION AND ITS SOVEREIGN RIGHTS, AZERBAIJAN WILL CONFIDENTLY MOVE FORWARD TOWARDS ACHIEVING ITS STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES.**

preventing the exercise of people's sovereign rights, as guaranteed in Article 2 of the Constitution. In 2020 following the historic victory in the Patriotic War and successful anti-terror measures carried out under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev in September 2023, Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty were completely restored, and the full force of the Constitution of Azerbaijan was reinstated across all territories liberated from occupation.

Additionally, by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, dated 28 December 2024, the year 2025 was declared the "Year of the Constitution and Sovereignty," underscoring the nation's firm commitment to constitutional principles and the reaffirmation of its territorial integrity. Under the continued leadership of Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan remains committed to upholding the Constitution and ensuring its full implementation across all territories. As noted in the Presidential Decree, the Republic of Azerbaijan will continue its independent policy with greater courage and principles, guided by the national interests of our people and in line with new realities. Based on the requirements of the Constitution and its sovereign rights, Azerbaijan will confidently move forward towards achieving its strategic objectives.

# Women, Diplomacy and Leadership

## **The Tangible Bridge: Women, Heritage, and the New Diplomacy**

The course of history bends not only through great declarations, but through the persistent work of those who know that cultural preservation and social advancement must proceed together. At ICESCO, we see how tradition and modernity merge in our 53 Member States, highlighting leadership that values heritage and embraces change. The global discussion of women, leadership, and diplomacy is not simply a matter of representation; it is a fundamental issue of the nature of good government and the architecture of a more peaceful, interconnected world. It is an appeal to move away from abstract models and consider tangible models of influence.

In the context of global cooperation, we prefer to discuss soft power, the ability to shape outcomes through attraction rather than force. But this term can sometimes feel abstract. In practice, it is the patience of building knowledge through education, holding fast the threads of our shared inheritance through culture, and acting on our shared moral responsibilities through humanitarianism. It is in this practiced, tangible form of diplomacy that women's leadership has come not just to be beneficial, but essential.

## **The Historical Foundation for Modern Leadership**

The history of Azerbaijan contributes a remarkable chapter to the broader narrative of women's leadership in public life. In 1918, when the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) granted the voting rights to women, becoming the first Muslim majority country to do so, demonstrating that the way to gender equality is not necessarily one Western path. This decision was not made in a vacuum. It was the culmination of a period of intense intellectual ferment, where poets, writers, and public figures fought for modernization, secularism, and universal rights within an Islamic cultural context. This illumination was also heavily shaped by the legacy of great Azerbaijani female thinkers and benefactors, including Mahsati Ganjavi and Khurshidbanu Natavan, whose creative legacies advanced social and cultural renovation. The ADR's move was, therefore, not an exception, nor

## **DR. SALIM M. ALMALIK**

*Secretary-General, Islamic  
World Educational, Scientific  
and Cultural Organization  
(ICESCO)*



**I BELIEVE THAT ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, PEACE, AND PROSPERITY IN SOCIETIES IS CHALLENGING UNLESS THE RIGHTS AND WELL-BEING OF WOMEN ARE SECURED COMPREHENSIVELY ACROSS ALL FACETS OF LIFE.**



**IN THIS REGARD, THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF HER EXCELLENCY MEHRIBAN ALIYEVA ACQUIRE SPECIAL IMPORTANCE.**

a deviation from cultural mores, but the society's expression of its judicial progress.

This ideology is turned into action through the policies implemented by Her Excellency Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva, First Lady of Azerbaijan, the First Vice-President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and ICESCO Goodwill Ambassador since 2006. Her Excellency embodied these principles as a natural culmination of the national tradition, recognizing centuries of women's priceless role in society and a decades-long progress in Azerbaijan. Her work is a compelling case study, one that echoes our own mandate here at ICESCO to help our Member States build sustainable, smarter, and more peaceful societies.

When we at ICESCO champion women's education and empowerment, we do so not as importers of western concepts, but as inheritors of a noble tradition which has always valued human potential and dignity, regardless of gender.

### **ICESCO's Vision: Empowerment as Heritage**

Our vision for ICESCO is to build a science-led future guided by our own moral and cultural norms. This can be forged through a multi-faceted approach integrating education, science, heritage, and communication. Youth and women are our target in our endeavors towards this vision. This commitment is reflected within ICESCO, where women constitute nearly half of our workforce and almost half of leadership positions. We also intensified this imperative by proclaiming 2021 as the Year of Women under the high patronage of His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco. It was not simply symbolic; it launched a series of concrete programs.

Furthermore, ICESCO recognized outstanding female achievements throughout the Islamic world by launching the Women in Sports initiative, hosting the Women Pioneering Oscar and organizing different trainings designed for young women leaders in STEM fields, as well other activities that bridge the digital divide and promote women entrepreneurship.

It is also in this spirit that we recognize other exemplary leaders, such as Her Excellency Dr. Maryam Mohamed Fadel Al-Dah, First Lady of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, a dedicated advocate for women's right and children's welfare, who was appointed as an ICESCO Goodwill Ambassador in recognition of her leading humanitarian roles, constructive social efforts and initiatives at the national and international levels.



We embarked on these efforts because the proof is evident: societies that educate and include women in all aspects of life are more stable, more prosperous, and better equipped to address modern challenges. It is an investment in our joint human capital. I believe that achieving sustainable development, peace, and prosperity in societies is challenging unless the rights and well-being of women are secured comprehensively across all facets of life. In this regard, the contributions of Her Excellency Mehriban Aliyeva acquire special importance. Her leadership stands as a distinguished model of integration, where vision is consistently translated into meaningful action.

The appointment of women to high office in Azerbaijan sends a strong message about the growing recognition of women's leadership in the modern era. Beyond its symbolism, this development carries practical significance: when women participate in decision-making at the highest levels, policies are enriched by a broader and more diverse understanding of societal needs. The emphasis on social welfare, education, and cultural heritage that is so characteristic of so many projects in Azerbaijan might be just this sort of more reflective model of governance. Leadership by women brings new voices to policy discussions, with long-term sustainability, social harmony, and integrated development as top priorities.

President Ilham Aliyev and  
First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva  
with ICESCO Director General,  
2 October 2023  
Baku, Azerbaijan



**OUR VISION FOR ICESCO  
IS TO BUILD A SCIENCE-  
LED FUTURE GUIDED  
BY OUR OWN MORAL  
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THIS CAN BE FORGED  
THROUGH A MULTI-  
FACETED APPROACH  
INTEGRATING  
EDUCATION, SCIENCE,  
HERITAGE, AND  
COMMUNICATION.**



**AZERBAIJAN'S LOCATION AT THE CROSSROADS OF EAST AND WEST MAKES IT A NATURAL PLACE TO UNITE VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES. THE COUNTRY'S STEADFAST COMMITMENT TO THIS CONVERSATION, PROMOTED AT THE VERY TOP LEADERSHIP LEVELS, POSITIONS THE COUNTRY AS A KEY MEDIATOR AND IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTOR TO BUILDING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND LESSENING INTERNATIONAL TENSIONS THROUGH SUSTAINED DIPLOMATIC AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT.**

## **Diplomacy in Action: Azerbaijan and the Architecture of Dialogue**

This tangible, value-driven leadership finds one of its clearest expressions in the realm of cultural diplomacy. In a world more divided today than ever before, cultural diplomacy gains even further relevance. It requires self-awareness and empathy as well as receptivity to others. Azerbaijan's initiatives in the field of intercultural dialogue, particularly under the umbrella of the Baku Process, which began as a visionary mission initiated by President of Azerbaijan His Excellency Ilham Aliyev, demonstrate how a state can take a flagship initiative towards facilitating civilizational engagement. Kicked off in 2008, this platform has become an internationally recognized hub for intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Its primary goal is to foster a global environment where diversity is seen not as a threat, but as a source of mutual enrichment. ICESCO is privileged to be a key partner of the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, the fundament of the Baku Process, with Azerbaijan to create these bridges of life. We work alongside other key partners such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and UNESCO, creating a coalition for global understanding.

Azerbaijan's location at the crossroads of East and West makes it a natural place to unite various perspectives. The country's steadfast commitment to this conversation, promoted at the very top leadership levels, positions the country as a key mediator and important contributor to building mutual understanding and lessening international tensions through sustained diplomatic and cultural engagement.

## **Preservation as Progress: Cultivating a Living Heritage**

Culture needs to be maintained healthy in the 21st century, an evolutionary process that tackles issues of the time while preserving the required strings that connect us to our past. This is the philosophy behind ICESCO's actions in culture in the Islamic world, where we are not interested in embalming the tradition, but making it relevant and dynamic.

In Azerbaijan, this synergy between preservation and development is particularly strong. The nation's insistence to preserve its music, its carpet-weaving, its literature, and other cultural heritage is an investment in sustainability of culture, not a nostalgia exercise. Her Excellency Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva's role in these cultural diplomatic endeavors has been particularly outstanding.

The activities of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation under Her Excellency Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva's leadership have consistently demonstrated how cultural programs can address the social challenges of the time. The

restoration of the monuments of the past in Azerbaijan and in other countries is a prime example. Within Azerbaijan, this project has been definitively multicultural. The Foundation has subsidized the restoration of historic mosques as well as the Saint Mary Orthodox Church in Baku, the Catholic Cathedral of “the Holy Virgin Mary”, and certain synagogues. This physical support for its affluent religious history is fortifying the nation's role as an intercultural dialogue center. Revitalization of the Icherisheher- Old City of Baku, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is another example of devotion to sustaining the nation's unique historical identity for generations to follow.

This work extends to the promotion of Azerbaijan's own rich traditions. The Heydar Aliyev Foundation has been key in having Azerbaijani Mugham, a complex form of traditional music, and the art of Azerbaijani carpet-weaving inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The organization of international music festivals, the sponsorship of cultural exchange, and the promotion of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage on the international stage all contribute to a better-informed image of Islamic world civilization as complex and diverse. This is diplomacy through action.

For instance, the Foundation provided funding for the restoration of cultural treasures far beyond Azerbaijan's borders. This includes restoration of two stained-glass windows in the Strasbourg Cathedral and contributing to the restoration of several art objects in the Palace of Versailles. In a particularly notable project, the Foundation financed the restoration of the early Christian Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter in the Vatican, a contribution that enabled the public reopening of sacred historical site and was highlighted as a model of international cultural cooperation.

### **The Engine of Development: Education Rooted in Culture**

The reform of education systems is perhaps one of the most important tasks the world faces today. At ICESCO, we continually advocate for educational reforms which are scientifically rational and culturally relevant, rendering young people internationally competitive without deracinating them. The balance is crucial. Over the years, cutting-edge support has been provided by ICESCO to member states, including technical assistance, policy recommendations, and concrete, actionable activities on the ground.

The investment and establishment of our 23 chairs in world-class educational institutions, the support of excellence programs for high-



**THE ACTIVITIES OF THE HEYDAR ALIYEV FOUNDATION UNDER HER EXCELLENCY MRS. MEHRIBAN ALIYEVA'S LEADERSHIP HAVE CONSISTENTLY DEMONSTRATED HOW CULTURAL PROGRAMS CAN ADDRESS THE SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF THE TIME. THE RESTORATION OF THE MONUMENTS OF THE PAST IN AZERBAIJAN AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES IS A PRIME EXAMPLE.**

achieving young people, and the scholarship grants are measures that place premium on education as a human right and as an investment in society as well. The cultural initiatives in convincing communities that educating girls is not deviating from tradition but rather implementing Islam's core focus on seeking knowledge are also essential. When we bring up a child, we do not just transform one life; we also contribute to transforming society as a whole. Muscat Declaration, adopted in 2024 during the 3<sup>rd</sup> ICESCO Education Ministers Conference, stands as a landmark articulation of our collective efforts. It commits us to practical steps for enhancing educational governance, accountability, and resilience, while recognizing the pivotal role of families, communities, and regional partners in guiding this transformation.

This reciprocal collaboration on education and culture was reinforced and expanded once more in recent times. In May 2024, we were privileged to welcome Her Excellency Leyla Aliyeva, Vice-President of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, in our Rabat headquarters. We signed a new partnership agreement to support the “Educational and Social Support for Internally Displaced and Girls and Boarders in Burkina Faso” project of ICESCO, further emphasizing the Foundation’s humanitarian mission. This meeting was not procedural in nature; it opened a new page in a strategic partnership, reaffirming the shared vision of ICESCO and the Heydar Aliyev Foundation to build an open and innovative future.

**ICESCO and the Heydar Aliyev Foundation signed a sponsorship agreement to implement ICESCO’s “Educational and Social Support Project for Internally Displaced Girls and Boarders in Burkina Faso.”**  
14 October 2024  
Rabat, Morocco





### **The Integral Model: Humanitarian Values as Development**

Authentic development must be integral, not only acknowledging economic indicators but also social cohesion and humanitarian values. This integral approach requires leadership with an awareness of the interdependence of the different spheres of human activity. The humanitarian component of development work, sometimes pushed aside in technocratic agendas, continues to be essential to our conception of sustainable development in the Islamic world.

Activities of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, under the leadership of Her Excellency Mehriban Aliyeva, exemplify this holistic approach with clarity. Most impressive is their relentless attention to vulnerable groups of individuals. For example, the Foundation has organized public health campaigns of significant size in both Azerbaijan and around the world from Europe to Asia. The Azerbaijanis' humanitarian efforts targeted at afflicted populations testify to this deep solidarity that transcends borders.

### **Investment in Tomorrow: Nurturing the Youth**

No leadership conversation is complete without a focus on the future. The most defining demographic fact of the Islamic world, and one we greatly

Meeting of Leyla Aliyeva with  
Director-General of ICESCO  
14 October 2024  
Rabat, Morocco.

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**THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF VISIONARY LEADERS LIKE HER EXCELLENCY MEHRIBAN ALIYEVA TEACH US THAT THE FUTURE IS NOT AN EITHER-OR CHOICE BETWEEN OUR PAST AND OUR ASPIRATIONS, BUT RATHER THE GOOD SENSE TO HONOR BOTH. THAT VISION DRIVES ICESCO'S WORK AND IT IS A VISION THAT COMES TO LIFE IN INTRINSIC LEADERSHIP AND ACTION.**

Inauguration of new Regional Office of ICESCO in Baku

29 April 2025

value, is its youthfulness. At ICESCO, we understand that youth engagement isn't just about preparing future leaders but also about recognizing young people as current agents of change. This is evident in our internal practices, with more than the third of our workforce being young professionals.

Our initiatives, which address a wide range of interests and needs, range from innovative technology and entrepreneurial programs to youth-centered cultural initiatives.

Flagship initiatives like the Youth Peace Ambassadors Program (YPAs) empower young people to actively promote intercultural dialogue, tolerance, and peace in their communities and worldwide. The global Youth Peace Ambassadors Program aims to empower youth worldwide to serve as leaders in peace efforts. Key actions include supporting international initiatives such as the ICESCO Youth Peace Ambassador Program and Leadership Training in Peace and Security (Peace 360°) to





engage youth in peacebuilding within the Islamic world and beyond. It also focuses on creating global networks of youth peace ambassadors who lead various peace efforts and establishing mentorship programs that connect young individuals with seasoned peacebuilders from multiple sectors, including government and academia. To date, 180 YPAs are coming from 68 countries. The Young Professionals Program (YPP) is another important part of our efforts. This highly competitive program, fully funded and supported by the Republic of Azerbaijan, invites talented graduates and entry level professionals from our Member States to ICESCO's headquarters, providing them with hands-on training in international cooperation to nurture a new generation of leaders rooted in their heritage but capable of addressing global challenges with empathy and vision. By equipping youth to lead a multi-faceted world with their feet grounded in their heritage, we're making a commitment to a generation of the very integrated and empathetic leadership qualities described above.

**Inauguration of new Regional  
Office of ICESCO in Baku  
29 April 2025**



ICESCO AND IDEA Public Union signed a protocol of intent on the sidelines of the COP29, Baku, Azerbaijan 19 November 2024

Moreover, the “By Youth for Youth” International Forum in Baku and Shusha in 2024, the 1<sup>st</sup> Youth Biennial of the Islamic World and most recently the conclusion of 2<sup>nd</sup> International Youth Forum on Multiculturalism in Baku are depictions of our commitment to youth empowerment together with Azerbaijan.

Also, we emphasize great importance to cooperation with the International Dialogue for Environmental Action (IDEA) campaign, founded by Her Excellency Leyla Aliyeva, which has mobilized thousands of young people for environmental protection and sustainable development projects. We also had a great opportunity to welcome two young women interns in our headquarters in 2025 within the frameworks of a co-shared project with IDEA.

At ICESCO, youth are not a distant promise, they are today’s innovators and change makers. Our mission is to nurture their potential, amplify their voices, and support them in leading the transformation toward a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.

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**THE AZERBAIJANI EXPERIENCE PROVIDES ONE PATHWAY TO MERGING RAPID MODERNIZATION WITH THE PRESERVATION OF OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE.**

## As we look to the future...

Leadership that grasps both the richness of our traditions and the imperative of our modern moment is required in the road ahead. The Azerbaijani experience provides one pathway to merging rapid modernization with the preservation of our cultural heritage. The model presented is one in which the cultural and educational return on investment is social cohesion, global standing, and a moral compass.

The leadership of those who understand that the progress of women strengthens societies that the conservation of culture requires action, and that humanitarian efforts are a demonstration of the values in our very conscience will show the way forward. At ICESCO, we invite all nations to join us in advancing initiatives that promote cultural heritage, education, and women's leadership.

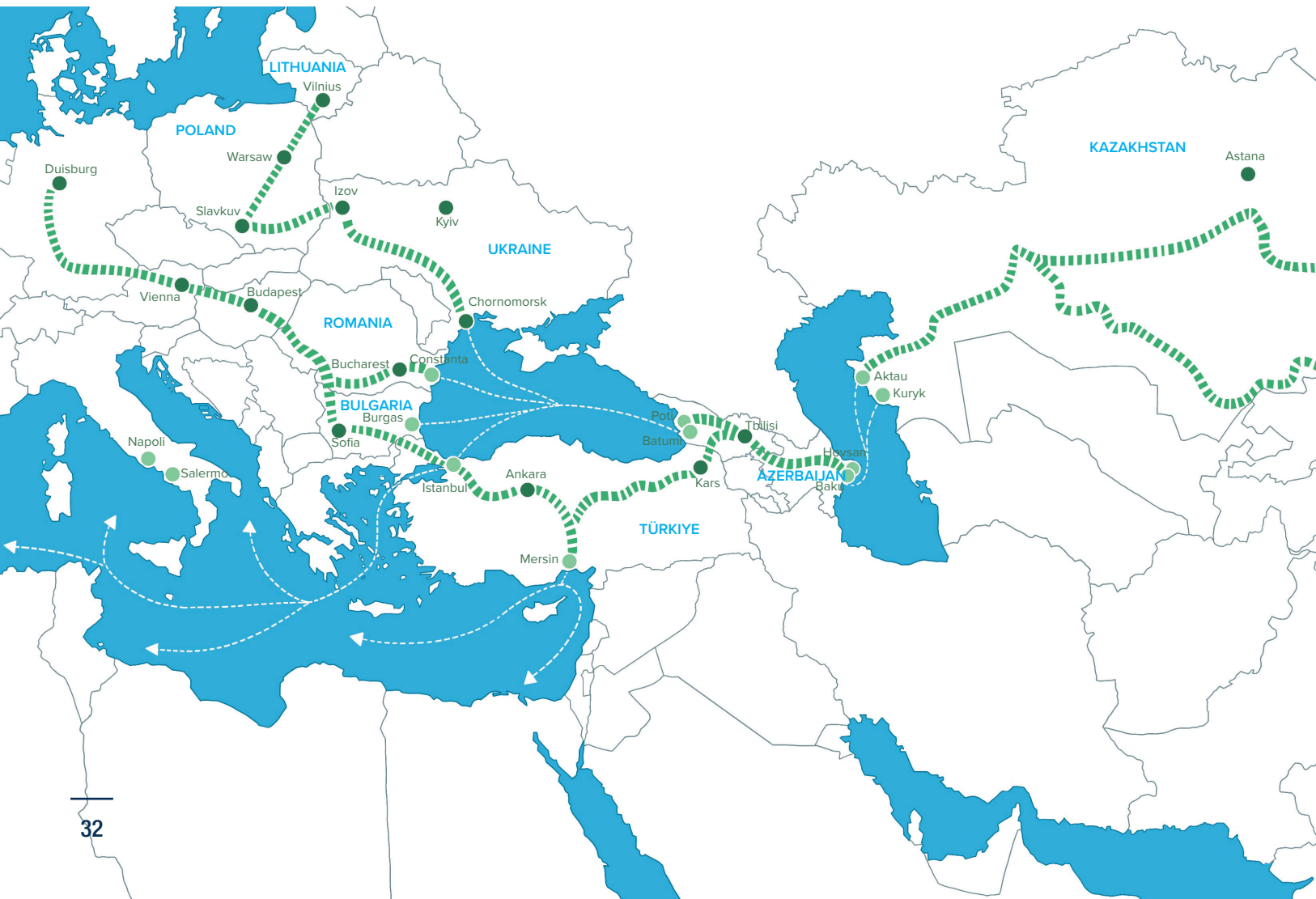
The achievements of visionary leaders like Her Excellency Mehriban Aliyeva teach us that the future is not an either-or choice between our past and our aspirations, but rather the good sense to honor both. That vision drives ICESCO's work and it is a vision that comes to life in intrinsic leadership and action.



**WE EMPHASIZE GREAT IMPORTANCE TO COOPERATION WITH THE INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION (IDEA) CAMPAIGN, FOUNDED BY HER EXCELLENCY LEYLA ALIYEVA, WHICH HAS MOBILIZED THOUSANDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS.**

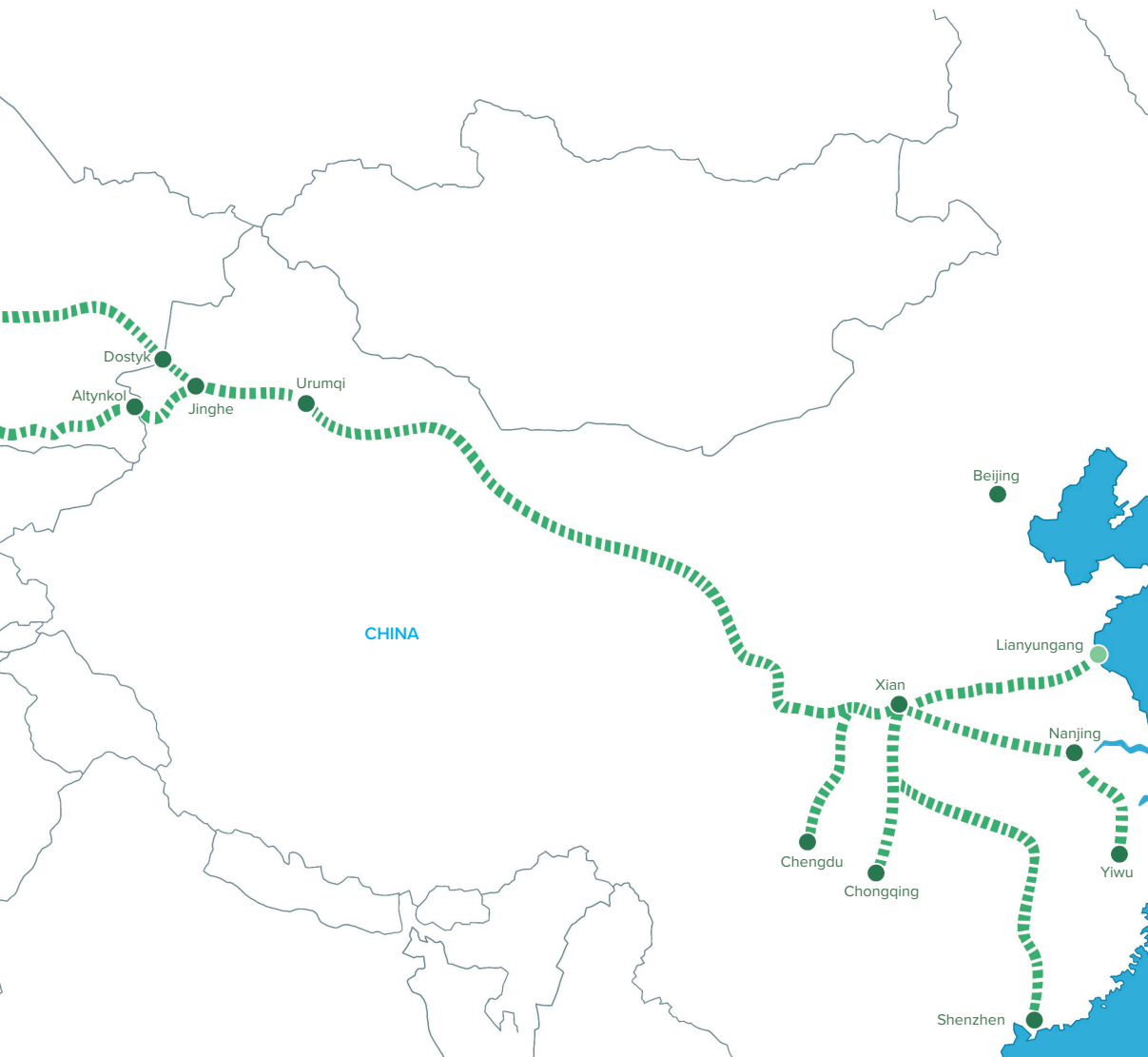
# The Middle Corridor:

The Middle Corridor, which has gained particular relevance within the global transport and logistics system, constitutes one of the principal routes of the historic Great Silk Road, later referred to as the East–West transport corridor. This corridor, originating from the ancient Silk Road, was formed along three primary routes facilitating cargo movement between China and Europe and in opposite direction: the northern, southern, and middle routes. Among them, the Middle Corridor stands out due to its favorable geographic positioning and rapidly expanding transit potential. The growing relevance of the Middle Corridor has attracted increasing attention from both regional and global actors.



# A New Silk Road for Global Trade

This article examines the Middle Corridor through the perspectives of Azerbaijan, the European Union, Türkiye, China, and the United States. By incorporating the viewpoints of both regional stakeholders and major global actors, the analysis aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the corridor's strategic, economic, and geopolitical significance. The article further seeks to present differing approaches, priorities, and interests related to the Middle Corridor, thereby offering a multidimensional understanding of its role in shaping regional connectivity and global trade dynamics.



Source: Association of Legal Entities "International Association Trans-Caspian International Transport Route"  
<https://middlecorridor.com/en/>

# The Middle Corridor: Azerbaijan's Perspective

## **PROF. DR. VUSAL GASIMLI**

*Executive director  
of the Center for Analysis of  
Economic Reforms and  
Communication, Professor,  
Doctor of Economic Sciences*

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), which constitutes a highway, railway and ferry system linking China with Europe, is of significant importance for international transportation and cross-border trade.

Shifting regional and global dynamics further increases the attractiveness of the Middle Corridor. First of all, secure transportation is currently possible via Middle Corridor. Secondly, the Middle Corridor is shorter than the North-South corridor and other alternatives and requires less transportation time.

In 2024, construction and reconstruction works were completed to increase the cargo-handling capacity of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line, which plays an important role in the functioning of the Middle Corridor, to 5 million tons thereby further expanding the capabilities of the Middle Corridor.

Projects implemented consistently and systematically over many years, the development of modern transport infrastructure, the establishment of the Alat Free Economic Zone, the adoption of an integrated approach across different modes of transport, the creation of the Coordination Council on Transit Freight Transportation and the establishment of Azerbaijan Transport and Communications Holding, the development of a digital environment providing a single entry point for import-export, transit, transport, and logistics operations, as well as the adoption of decision to introduce the “Single Window” information system for the “smart” management of cargo flows, constitute important steps that have transformed the Republic of Azerbaijan into a leading participant in international transport connectivity. As President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Mr. Ilham Aliyev has noted, “Today it is impossible to imagine the transport map of Eurasia without Azerbaijan and its transport infrastructure.”

The processes unfolding in region and globally, together with the anticipated operation of the Zangezur Corridor in the near future may shorten distances, further enhance operational efficiency, and contribute to an increase in transport volumes along the Middle Corridor, which constitutes an additional advantage of this route.

As noted above, in recent years a wide range of programs and projects have been successfully implemented to maximize the effective use of the country's transport and logistics potential, with particular emphasis on the rehabilitation and modernization of highways, railways, ports, and logistics centers. These infrastructure investments not only support growth in transport volumes but also stimulate the construction sector, create employment opportunities, foster

the development of industrial and processing sectors, and enhance overall export capacity.

According to studies conducted by the World Bank, current annual throughput capacity of the Middle Corridor, which stands at 5.8 million tons, is projected to reach 11.0 million tons by 2030, while transit time between China and the western borders of Europe are expected to be reduced by half.

Taken together, these developments reaffirm that the objective of Azerbaijan's transport strategy extends beyond the construction of modern infrastructure and the generation of increased transport revenues. It also seeks to promote comprehensive regional development by adhering to principles of green growth, environmental sustainability, and digital governance. This approach is of critical importance for all countries involved in transport connectivity, as it supports economic development, regional integration, strategic transit positioning, and enhanced geopolitical relevance.

## **The EU's Vision for the Middle Corridor: Europe's Gateway to the South Caucasus and Central Asia**

The Middle Corridor, or Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (TCTC) in EU terminology, has emerged as one of the twenty-first century's most compelling infrastructure opportunities. Its strategic geography places it in a uniquely advantageous position as a transformative trade artery linking Europe with the Greater Caspian Region and Central Asia. Shorter transit times, relative geopolitical stability, and strong economic potential have made it a core pillar of the European Union's (EU) strategic sovereignty. For the EU, enhancing the Corridor's efficiency, competitiveness, and reliability is not merely centered around creating an alternative route, but about embedding a viable, market-competitive corridor within Europe's broader security and connectivity architecture.

**LUCA URCIUOLO**

*Associate Research Fellow  
at the European Institute for  
Asian Studies*

Regional connectivity has become a cornerstone of the EU's priorities at a time when disrupted supply chains and intensifying geopolitical rivalry are reshaping global trade. Infrastructure now functions as a driver of economic growth and an instrument for strengthening strategic stability, deepening partnerships, and projecting regulatory influence. Reinforcing cross-border transport, energy, and digital links is therefore essential both for consolidating the EU's internal market and for strengthening cooperation with neighboring and strategic partners.

In this regard the EU's Black Sea Strategy is of exceptional importance as it serves as a key reference point for aligning these ambitions with broader European integration objectives. Launched in May 2025, this strategic approach aims to make the Black Sea region more secure, interconnected, and prosperous through enhanced security cooperation, infrastructure-driven growth, and reinforced environmental and climate resilience. Recognizing the region's dual strategic importance for security and trade, it seeks to deepen cooperation in the Black Sea and Greater Caspian Regions, bringing the EU closer to Central Asia.

The Strategy provides a renewed policy framework structured around three Flagships: Security and Resilience; Prosperity and Growth; and Environmental Protection and Sustainability. Under the Prosperity and Growth Flagship, a dedicated Connectivity Agenda underscores the strategic importance of the TCTC.

The evolution of the EU customs union – now a system that safeguards supply chains, enforces product and environmental standards, and manages preferential trade agreements – provides a compelling model for regulatory coherence that could guide practices along the TCTC.

To establish the Middle Corridor not simply as an alternative route, but as a credible, competitive, and market-ready option, the EU should support the alignment of customs frameworks, digitalizing clearance procedures, and developing joint data and risk-management systems. Such measures would strengthen trust among Corridor partners, reduce logistical bottlenecks, and integrate regional supply chains more closely with European and global markets.

The EU may therefore adopt a strategy specifically focused on the Trans-Caspian Corridor. Current infrastructure between the Mediterranean and the Caspian remains underdeveloped, and the Global Gateway framework's wide scope and budgetary limitations hinder its ability to firmly support strategic investments in the region. A more pragmatic approach would combine dedicated de-risking mechanisms, including investors' risk guarantees, political risk insurance, and EU-backed investment support, to facilitate private-sector participation. In this scenario, Azerbaijan serves as the linchpin for the Middle Corridor, given its strategic location.

Ultimately, the Middle Corridor offers a transformative opportunity to deepen Europe's strategic, economic, and geopolitical engagement with the South Caucasus and Central Asia. By combining targeted infrastructure investments, harmonized customs and regulatory frameworks, digitalization, and pragmatic de-risking measures, the EU may assume a coordinating and facilitating role in establishing a reliable, competitive, and market-ready transit route. In doing so, it may position itself as a preferential partner along the TCTC. Equally, the EU has emphasized during "TCTC and Connectivity Investors Forum" in Tashkent, 27 November 2025 that a closer coordination with partner countries, international financial institutions, and the private sector will be essential to ensure that investments are aligned, meaningful, and lasting. Moreover, beyond trade, the Corridor has the potential to enhance regional stability, resilience, and prosperity, demonstrating that practical, coordinated action can translate strategic vision into tangible benefits for the EU and its partners.

# The Middle Corridor from Türkiye's Perspective: Strategic Connectivity and the Importance of the Zangezur Corridor

For Türkiye, the Middle Corridor is a key component of its national transport and development strategy. Situated at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, and maintaining economic and political ties with the Caucasus and Central Asia, Türkiye aims to strengthen connectivity to enhance its role as a regional logistics hub and deepen its relations with the Turkic states. In this context, Türkiye's geographic position and strategic ambitions have made the Middle Corridor a central pillar of its national connectivity vision.

## **PROF. DR. HÜSEYİN BAĞCI**

*President of the Foreign Policy Institute, Professor at Middle East Technical University*

## **DR. GÜLSÜM AKBULUT**

*University Lecturer, CEO, ANKUDA (Ankara Global Advisory Group)*

Railway infrastructure is the primary mode through which the Middle Corridor functions. From Türkiye's perspective, rail-based connectivity determines transit capacity, route continuity, and integration with European transport networks. Accordingly, railway investments are the most concrete and measurable aspect of Türkiye's contribution to the corridor. Within this framework, the BTK Railway, operational since October 30, 2017, serves as the main rail gateway of the Middle Corridor into Türkiye, directly connecting it to the South Caucasus.

On August 8, 2025, a Joint Declaration signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Washington, witnessed by U.S. President Donald Trump, established the foundation for the "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" (TRIPP), also known as the Zangezur Corridor. This corridor will ensure uninterrupted connectivity between the main territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.

In this regard, the Zangezur Corridor is expected to become a critical extension of the Middle Corridor, providing a strategic transport link between Asia and Europe. Its development would not only expand international cargo transit capabilities but also foster regional economic growth and deepen integration into global value chains. Beyond transport, the corridor offers significant opportunities for energy transit, renewable electricity exports, and fiber-optic connectivity, contributing to the region's emergence as an international center for trade and digital communications.

Consequently, the Zangezur section of the Middle Corridor will play an important role in shortening travel distances and expanding trade and transport capacity. Moreover, full operation of the corridor is expected to generate economic benefits through operating revenues, accident-related cost savings, climate-related gains, time savings, and reduced road maintenance costs across the region.

Currently, a freight train starting in China passes through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, and Azerbaijan, continues across Türkiye, and reaches Europe via Edirne. This journey will become faster and more efficient due to ongoing mega-investments in Türkiye, supported by international financial institutions and Türkiye's budget allocations. Although completion timelines vary, most projects are expected to be finished within three to five years. Once the Zangezur Corridor projects are completed, the train will also be able to enter Türkiye via the Nakhchivan border, in addition to the BTK railway line. This alternative route will ease traffic along the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars corridor and shorten overall travel times.

## ■ Chinese perspective: Alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with the Middle Corridor. Opportunities and Challenges

### DR. LIU CHANG

*Assistant Research Fellow,  
Institute of Russian, Eastern  
European and Central Asian  
Studies, Chinese Academy of  
Social Sciences*

The Middle Corridor, leveraging its diversified routes, multimodal transportation, and multilateral cooperation, has emerged as a "stabilizer" and "connector" for Eurasian supply chains. It has built critical connectivity in three dimensions – logistics corridors, regional economy, and rule coordination – effectively mitigating risks associated with over-reliance on a single corridor and geopolitical uncertainties. Originating in China, passing through Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and Georgia, and extending to Türkiye and European countries, this multimodal corridor is built along the ancient Silk Road, linking the two ends of Eurasia through a combination of railway, road, and maritime transportation, and is significantly shorter than traditional maritime routes.

The Middle Corridor has gradually become a core carrier of the southern route for China-Europe Railway Express, a key hub for the westward extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a pillar of supply chain resilience, and an important strategic fulcrum for China's western opening-up.

In October 2023, China incorporated the Middle Corridor into the "Eight Major Actions" for high-quality BRI cooperation, demonstrating its high recognition of the corridor's strategic value. In November 2025, China Railway Container Transport Co., Ltd. acquired a stake in the Middle Corridor company, holding 25% of the shares together with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to jointly operate the southern route of China-Europe Railway Express. This signifies China's formal integration into the Middle Corridor's operation system, shifting from policy support to in-depth participation in operations.

The Middle Corridor is one of the shortest multimodal routes between China and Europe in terms of geographical distance. At present, China and Azerbaijan have incorporated corridor

cooperation into the framework of their comprehensive strategic partnership, laying a political foundation for its long-term stable development.

The alignment between the BRI, Azerbaijan's "Revive the Silk Road" strategy, and its 2030 socio-economic development strategy has been deepened, forming a multi-level policy coordination effect. In the field of infrastructure, the two sides have focused on upgrading key nodes such as the Port of Baku and expanding the capacity of the BTK Railway. The Xi'an Terminal in Kazakhstan has been officially put into operation, and the construction of the Aktau Port Container Hub is also progressing—these projects will significantly enhance the corridor's cargo handling capacity.

The value of the Middle Corridor has long exceeded transportation itself, it has become a "catalyst" for activating the regional economy. China's advantages in manufacturing, digital technology, and capital, combined with Azerbaijan's energy endowments and Kazakhstan's mineral resources, have created new cooperation formats in new energy, high-end manufacturing, and agricultural machinery.

## The Middle Corridor from the U.S. perspective

An assessment of the U.S. President Donald Trump's foreign policy through a realist perspective helps explain the increasing shift of American strategic attention toward partnerships along the Middle Corridor. Relations with Azerbaijan provide a clear illustration of this strategic orientation.

**DR. JAMES JAY CARAFANO**  
*Senior Counselor to the President and E.W. Richardson Fellow, Leading expert in national security and foreign policy challenges.*

The U.S. has an important interest in developing relations with the South Caucasus and Central Asia – a more stable and peaceful Eurasian flank benefits the U.S. – lessening security concerns and demands for Europe, Middle East, and South Asia; increasing U.S. access to several regions, enhancing energy security and affordable, reliable, dependable energy for Western Europe (which also benefits the U.S.), and creates new economic partnerships and opportunities for the U.S. including upstream and midstream access to raw materials.

Azerbaijan is a keystone state in the region with significant resources, a strategic transportation and energy hub.

The combination of interests and the forward leaning efforts of Azerbaijan and Armenia to not only reach an enduring peace, but engage the U.S. as a partner, particularly in developing the Zangezur corridor which provides an additional internodal network connecting the Central Asia and the South Caucasus to global markets, explains why the U.S. administration readily

agreed to affirm the peace agreement and invest in the development and management of the network connecting the main part of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic

U.S. President D. Trump's willingness to more deeply engage in the region should be taken as a sign by the U.S. that Washington is interested and willing to do much more to see the Middle Corridor become an increasingly robust and important link in the world's global supply chains.

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## CONCLUSION

Taken together, the perspectives of Azerbaijan, the EU, Türkiye, China, and the United States demonstrate that the Middle Corridor has evolved from a regional transit route into a strategically significant Eurasian connectivity platform.

Azerbaijan stands at its core as a logistical linchpin, combining infrastructure investment, digital governance, and regional cooperation to enhance efficiency and security. For the EU, the Middle Corridor supports more diversified, reliable, and efficient supply chains, strengthens connectivity with neighboring regions, and contributes to greater stability and resilience in trade flows between Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia; for Türkiye, it strengthens rail-based connectivity and regional integration, for China, it complements the Belt and Road Initiative by diversifying routes and stabilizing Eurasian trade, and for the United States, it contributes to regional stability, energy security, and broader geopolitical engagement. Collectively, these dynamics underscore that the Middle Corridor is not merely an alternative route, but a long-term driver of economic growth, regional integration, and geopolitical relevance across Eurasia.

Assessments indicate that the Middle Corridor, in addition to promising long-term economic returns, possesses significant strategic importance in terms of global and regional integration and is expected to cover an even broader geographical area in the future.

The Middle Corridor is not merely a transport route but also a value chain that serves as a means of integrating Azerbaijan and Central Asia into the global economic space. In other words, leveraging the corridor's value-creation potential and ensuring the comprehensive use of transport and logistics capabilities will not only support regional development but also enable faster and more efficient integration. From this perspective, adopting a holistic approach to harnessing the corridor's full potential is considered both appropriate and necessary.

# Azerbaijan's Chairmanship in CICA: Advancing Regional Cooperation and Strategic Dialogue

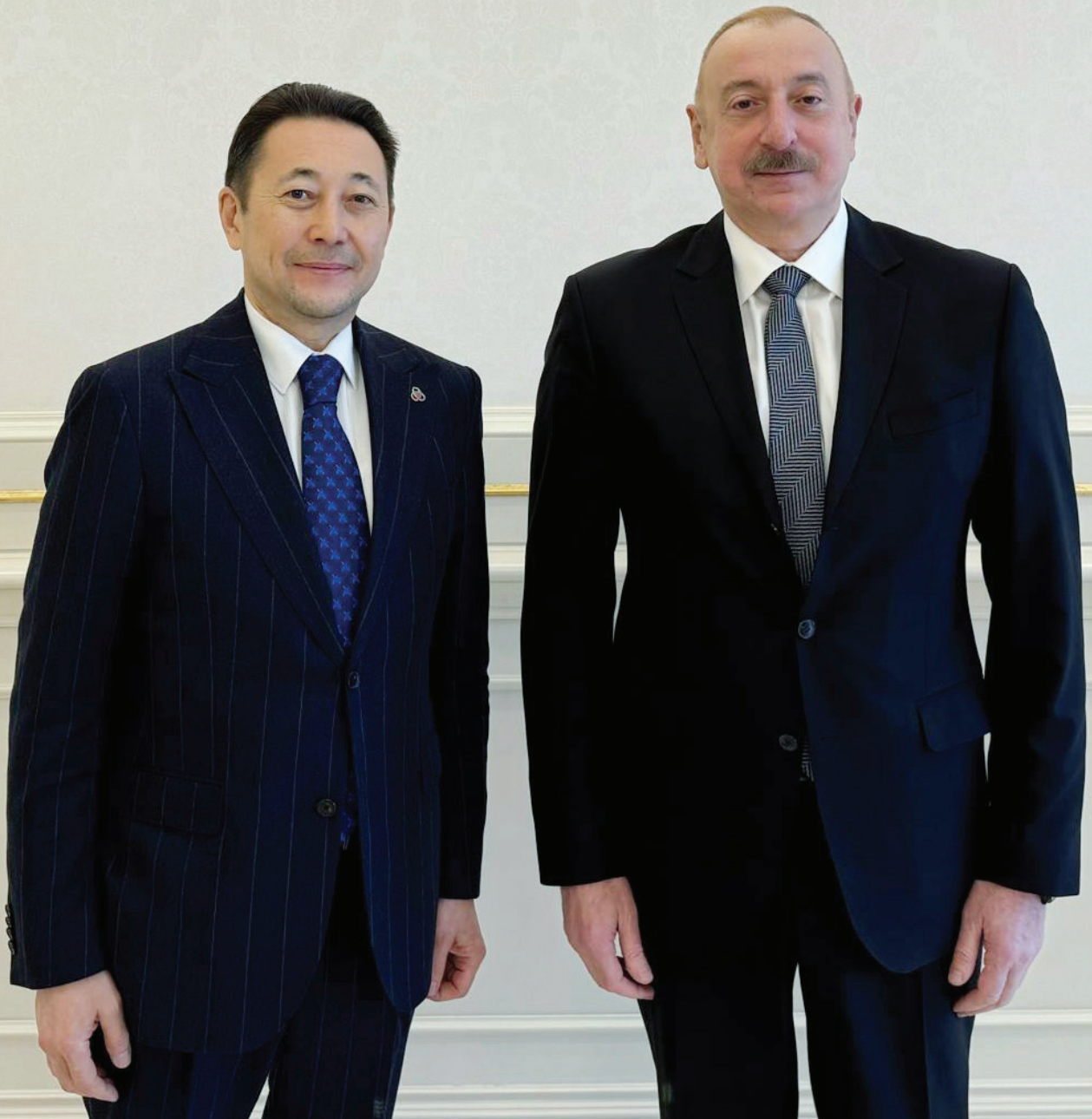
In December 2024, with broad support from the Member States, the Republic of Azerbaijan assumed the CICA Chairmanship for 2024 – 2026 and set a clear course under the theme “Stronger CICA: Connectivity, Digitalization and Sustainable Growth in Asia.” From the outset, the approach has been practical and consistent: to preserve CICA’s character as a consensus-based intergovernmental forum for confidence building while aligning cooperation with concrete needs across diverse regions. Over the past year, the Secretariat has worked under the guidance of the Chairmanship to translate Chairmanship’s program into tangible outcomes.

The transformation process has provided the organizing thread of this Chairmanship. Building on the Astana Statement and the Road Map for CICA Transformation, the Chairmanship placed the transformation process high on the agenda. From February 2025, Member States engaged in structured deliberations on the draft CICA Charter. Throughout, the process has remained inclusive and respectful of all views, fully in keeping with CICA’s consensus-based tradition.

A major milestone so far reached in Azerbaijan’s Chairmanship was the informal Meeting of the CICA Ministerial Council, convened on 25 September 2025 in New York on the margins of the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly. The meeting resulted in the adoption of four landmark political documents: two commemorative statements marking the 80th anniversaries of the end of World War II and the founding of the United Nations, as well as the regulations establishing the CICA Finance Summit and the CICA Women Council. The political statements reaffirmed CICA Member States’ commitment to peace, collective memory, and the principles of the UN Charter – a timely reminder of the value of multilateralism and shared responsibility at a moment of heightened global uncertainty. The decisions on establishment of two new advisory bodies, in turn, advanced the Organization’s institutional development.

## **AMB. KAIRAT SARYBAY**

*Secretary General of the  
Conference on Interaction and  
Confidence Building Measures  
in Asia (CICA)*



**CICA Secretary General  
Ambassador Kairat  
Sarybay received by  
President  
Ilham Aliyev  
15 January 2025,  
Baku, Azerbaijan.**

Building on this strong institutional momentum, the process of renewal continued across advisory and working bodies. Under the Chairmanship of Azerbaijan, particular emphasis has been placed on operationalizing the decisions of the Ministerial Council and ensuring that newly established mechanisms deliver tangible outcomes. The recently adopted CICA Finance Summit and Women Council, as noted above, have now moved into the implementation phase. The Finance Summit is being shaped as a standing platform for financial authorities, regulators, development partners, and the private sector to exchange expertise on stability, reform, and innovation in support of sustainable development, including improved access to finance for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The Women Council brings together national institutions to share

effective policy approaches that enhance women's participation in public life and the economy, translating inclusive principles into concrete action. Together, these mechanisms exemplify the Chairmanship's results-oriented approach and add early, practical value to CICA's evolving institutional architecture.

Durable cooperation is sustained by knowledge and expertise. Following ministerial approval in December 2024, the Partnership Network of Leading Universities (PNLU) was set in motion with ADA University (Azerbaijan) serving as a Chair of Coordination Council of the PNLU with the first meeting of Coordination Council held in February 2025.

The PNLU brings together around 200 universities across the region and aims to foster cultural, academic and scientific exchange aligned with CICA's confidence building measures. As more institutions are nominated by Member States, the PNLU is emerging as a practical bridge between analysis and policy, as well as a reliable platform for youth engagement that looks beyond the current biennium.

The advisory bodies have followed the same consistent pace under the Chairmanship's stewardship. In May 2025, Baku hosted the Business Council's Eighth Plenary session alongside the Tenth Business Forum. Discussions centred on digitalization, green transition, resilient value chains and support for SMEs, including women's entrepreneurship. The format combined policy dialogue with practical toolkits and direct exchanges between public and private stakeholders, ensuring that outcomes could be taken forward by administrations and businesses alike. An "SME Landscape in Asia: Interactive Guidebook" – developed as an initiative of the Secretariat – was introduced as a concrete source of information for firms navigating standards, finance and market access.

In September 2025, Baku hosted the 13th Think Tank Forum, bringing together experts to discuss regional security governance, supply chains amid digital transformation, connectivity, and institutional development. The Forum's analytical work fed directly into intergovernmental deliberations, reflecting growing demand for a more structured intersessional programme. Setting the tone for these discussions, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan H.E. Mr. Ilham Aliyev delivered a landmark address outlining the vision and priorities of Azerbaijan's CICA Chairmanship. He underscored that institutional strengthening lies at the core of this vision, highlighting the establishment of new bodies such as the Women Council and Finance Summit as tangible steps expanding the Organization's mandate. By linking CICA's transformation with Azerbaijan's role as a hub of Euro-Asian connectivity, President Ilham Aliyev framed the Forum's debates within a broader strategy of peace, security, and inclusive development.



**THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN ASSUMED THE CICA CHAIRMANSHIP FOR 2024 – 2026 AND SET A CLEAR COURSE UNDER THE THEME “STRONGER CICA: CONNECTIVITY, DIGITALIZATION AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH IN ASIA.”**



**IN DECEMBER 2024, THE PARTNERSHIP NETWORK OF LEADING UNIVERSITIES (PNLU) WAS SET IN MOTION WITH ADA UNIVERSITY (AZERBAIJAN).**



**IN SEPTEMBER 2025, BAKU HOSTED THE 13TH THINK TANK FORUM, BRINGING TOGETHER EXPERTS TO DISCUSS REGIONAL SECURITY GOVERNANCE, SUPPLY CHAINS AMID DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION, CONNECTIVITY, AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT.**

**Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov at Informal meeting of CICA Ministerial Council**  
25 September 2025,  
New York city, USA

The 8th meeting of CICA Youth Council will be held in Baku this November, with a series of events planned under its auspices, including the Rally of volunteer movement leaders, side-event "SDGs in action" and a Youth Brainstorming competition. Additionally, the awarding ceremony of two Chairmanship's youth contests, namely the CICA Essay Contest and AI in Art competition will take place in the frame of the Youth Council meeting.

Confidence-building measures have provided a steady framework for advancing CICA's multidimensional agenda. The 2025 Plan, endorsed by Senior Officials, spans all five dimensions, while the Modalities of Implementation adopted in December 2024 help clarify responsibilities, guide annual reviews and ensure a steady rhythm of cooperation. Coordinators and co-coordinators remain engaged in updating concept papers and action plans, keeping the process dynamic. Within this structure, the Chairmanship's focus on the environment has provided a clear thread linking policy, practice and partnerships. A side event on water security and climate resilience in Dushanbe in May 2025 brought together Member States and international experts to discuss glacier retreat, sustainable water management and climate adaptation. Later, Baku Water Week in September offered a practical platform to explore water diplomacy as a tool for confidence building among neighbours. Looking ahead, upcoming CICA side events are being aligned with major regional and global fora in 2026 to keep environmental cooperation visible, complementary and results-oriented.



Strengthening the Secretariat has been integral to this steady progress. An important milestone that coincided with Azerbaijan's Chairmanship was the inauguration of the new CICA Headquarters in Astana on 2 July 2025, the Day of the Diplomatic Service of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The building, generously provided by the host country, was officially inaugurated by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. While this step reflects Kazakhstan's steadfast support for CICA, it also resonates with one of the main priorities of the Azerbaijani Chairmanship, as outlined in its Vision Paper – the institutional transformation of CICA into a full-fledged international organization. Beyond being a functional space for the work of the Secretariat and other bodies, the new Headquarters embodies the organization's evolution and its long-term commitment to fostering dialogue, mutual trust, and multilateral cooperation across Asia and beyond.

The cultural dimension of the new CICA Headquarters has been enriched by Member States' contributions of national artworks and architectural elements, symbolizing Asia's shared heritage and aspirations. In this regard, Visitors Room was decorated and fully furnished by the Republic of Azerbaijan as a contribution to the new Headquarters. The room reflects the nation's refined aesthetic through ornamental carpets, carved woodwork and classical furniture. Beyond its cultural value, it enhances the Headquarters' representational role and underscores Azerbaijan's commitment to CICA's evolution and dialogue.

In May 2025, the Republic of Kazakhstan ratified amendments to the Host Country Agreement extending international civil-service status and corresponding privileges and immunities to contracted personnel and conferring diplomatic status on professional seconded nationals. These changes bring conditions of service in line with international practice and support broader geographic representation in staffing. In parallel, the Convention on Privileges and Immunities has moved close to entry into force. Demonstrating strong leadership as Chair, Azerbaijan complemented these institutional advances with a voluntary financial contribution of 500,000 US dollars to the CICA Secretariat this year, making a tangible investment in its capacity to deliver on its expanding mandate. In this spirit, Azerbaijan initiated the establishment of a second Deputy Secretary General position and subsequently seconded one, along with another professional staff member, underscoring its commitment to strengthening the Secretariat from within.



**UNDER THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF AZERBAIJAN, PARTICULAR EMPHASIS HAS BEEN PLACED ON OPERATIONALIZING THE DECISIONS OF THE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL AND ENSURING THAT NEWLY ESTABLISHED MECHANISMS DELIVER TANGIBLE OUTCOMES. THE RECENTLY ADOPTED CICA FINANCE SUMMIT AND WOMEN COUNCIL, HAVE NOW MOVED INTO THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE.**

Visitors Room in New CICA  
Headquarters decorated and  
furnished by the Republic of Azerbaijan  
Astana, Kazakhstan







**AS OUTLINED IN THE AZERBAIJANI CHAIRMANSHIP'S VISION PAPER, ONE OF ITS KEY PRIORITIES IS TO INCREASE THE INTERNATIONAL VISIBILITY AND INFLUENCE OF CICA THROUGH BUILDING SYNERGY AND INTERACTION WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL PLATFORMS.**

As outlined in the Azerbaijani Chairmanship's Vision Paper, one of its key priorities is to increase the international visibility and influence of CICA through building synergy and interaction with other international and regional platforms. Engagement with the United Nations system has remained the cornerstone of this effort, particularly on issues such as Afghanistan and counter-terrorism, where regional perspectives add real value. At the same time, exchanges with international and regional organizations have focused on practical areas where cooperation can bring results without unnecessary overlap. The aim is clear: to make sure that CICA's experience contributes to broader processes, while also drawing on best practices to strengthen our own work and keep attention on the Chairmanship's priorities.

Targeted resources have begun to support needs on the ground. In March 2025, the CICA Fund approved its first project, developed with the Islamic Organization for Food Security and co-funded by Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, to provide certified seed and fertilizer to vulnerable farmers in central Afghanistan; a proposal to support civil-service training is under consideration. These initiatives align practical assistance with Member State priorities and illustrate how well-designed projects can complement policy work.

The first year of Azerbaijan's Chairmanship has been marked by steady progress, institution-building, and an unbroken focus on implementation. From the adoption of landmark documents in New York and the launch of new mechanisms such as the Finance Summit and Women Council, to advancing the Charter negotiations, strengthening the Secretariat, and expanding CICA's partnerships, each initiative has carried the imprint of constructive leadership. These efforts have consolidated the transformation process, ensuring that CICA continues to evolve as a modern, effective platform for dialogue and cooperation.

As the Organization looks ahead to the 2026 CICA Summit in Baku, this first year stands as a symbolic conclusion to the opening chapter of Azerbaijan's leadership – a chapter defined by vision, delivery, and tangible progress toward a stronger, more interconnected Asia.

# Azerbaijan in the ECO: Economic Integration and Regional Connectivity

Speaking at the fourth ECO Summit in May 1996 in Ashgabat, President Heydar Aliyev highlighted that “no country can achieve economic progress without expanding international cooperation exchanging experiences and consolidating efforts and resources... Our interests in participating in this organization (ECO) are not limited to its economic aspects... we also prioritize cooperation with fraternal countries with which we share common historical roots, deeply rooted traditions and a shared culture.”

Clearly, this was the idea that made ECO one of the first few inter-governmental organizations Azerbaijan joined shortly after regaining independence on October 18, 1991. Five other newly independent states, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as Afghanistan joined ECO in 1992, expanding the Organization to a 10-member strong regional cooperation organization. Collectively, they represent half a billion people and cover around 8 million square kilometers of land mass, while representing 2.3% of global GDP. Joining ECO also reflected the aspirations of all these new members to revive and refresh their linkages with the countries of the region with which they shared common borders, history, culture and religion, in addition to overlapping development priorities being part of the erstwhile silk route.

As successor to the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) established in July 1964 by Pakistan, Türkiye and Iran, and renamed in 1985, ECO is a clear leader and pioneer in regional development cooperation in Asia. In over six decades of existence, covering countries of central, south and west Asia and the Caucuses, interwoven by shared borders and geography, ECO has developed elaborate frameworks and structures to pursue and promote economic integration of the region through a number of foundational agreements, and a wide network of institutions associated with it as its specialized agencies and attached institutions.

**DR. ASAD M. KHAN**

*Secretary General,  
Economic Cooperation  
Organization (ECO)*



**IV Summit of the  
Organization of  
Economic Cooperation  
14 May 1996,  
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan**

Interestingly, ECO is not just defined by the commonalities and overlaps but also by the diversity of its membership that includes countries at different levels of economic development as well as both energy-rich and energy-importing nations. Uniquely, ECO region is home to two transcontinental states (Türkiye and Azerbaijan), and to landlocked, as well as transit states. Apart from being endowed with massive natural and significant human resources, the region has also been host to some of the most impactful civilizations in the history of mankind. This makes the whole region a tourism paradise with 74 UNESCO registered heritage sites and other tourist attractions spread across the member countries.

In its long journey since inception, all the ECO members have made invaluable contributions in jointly working to achieve ECO's vision for deepening regional development cooperation. In this long and unique journey, Azerbaijan stands out as a prominent and consistent contributor to the organization's work and success. Speaking at the 9th ECO Summit,

hosted by Azerbaijan in 2006, President Ilham Aliyev reiterated the country's commitment to advancing regional collaboration, noting that "Azerbaijan will continue to actively participate in the Economic Cooperation Organization. We will continue to contribute to the strengthening of the Organization. This Organization has already turned into a great international Organization."

This commitment is clearly demonstrated by Azerbaijan, by having hosted three ECO Summits – the 9th in May 2006, 12th in October 2012, and the 17th in July this year. Besides this, Azerbaijan hosted four Meetings of the ECO Council of Ministers, including 9th in May 1999, 16th in May 2006, 20th in October 2012, and 27th in October 2023. Azerbaijan also houses the recently established ECO Clean Energy Center dedicated to advancing renewable energy and energy efficiency across the region, and the ECO Research Centre soon to be established in Baku as a think-tank for evidence based policy-making. Moreover, the ECO economic journal that provides insights into recent economic trends and transformation in the region is also brought out from Baku. Another very important measure or yardstick to assess Azerbaijan's commitment to ECO and its development cooperation agenda is its signing and ratification of almost all foundational agreements of ECO in addition to also joining the ECO Trade and Development Bank established in 2005.



**AZERBAIJAN HOSTED THE 17TH ECO SUMMIT IN KHANKENDI, UNDER THE THEME "NEW ECO VISION FOR A SUSTAINABLE AND CLIMATE-RESILIENT FUTURE." THANKS TO THE LEADERSHIP AND CLOSE PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT OF PRESIDENT ILHAM ALIYEV, THE SUMMIT MARKED SEVERAL HISTORIC FIRSTS.**

President Ilham Aliyev received ECO Secretary-General Asad Majeed Khan 12 March 2025, Baku, Azerbaijan





17th Summit of the Economic  
Cooperation Organization  
4 July 2025,  
Khankendi city, Azerbaijan

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**THE 17TH SUMMIT  
WITNESSED THE  
ORGANIZATION OF  
THE FIRST ECO WEEK  
WHERE STAKEHOLDERS,  
BEYOND  
GOVERNMENTS, WERE  
BROUGHT TOGETHER  
TO COLLECTIVELY  
BRAINSTORM THE  
FUTURE PRIORITIES OF  
THE ORGANIZATION.**

Earlier in July this year, Azerbaijan hosted the 17th ECO Summit in Khankendi, under the theme “New ECO Vision for a Sustainable and Climate-Resilient Future.” Thanks to the leadership and close personal involvement of President Ilham Aliyev, the Summit marked several historic firsts. Mainly, in a departure from being just a day event, the 17th Summit witnessed the organization of the first ECO Week where stakeholders, beyond governments, were brought together to collectively brainstorm the future priorities of the organization. As part of this historic initiative, Azerbaijan hosted the maiden ECO Women and Youth Forums, as well as the Sixth ECO Business Forum during the ECO Week where stakeholders from all walks of life were convened from across the region, making these events inclusive and impactful. The proposals and recommendations put forward during these activities are now being considered in the context of finalization of the “Strategic Goals of Economic Cooperation – 2035”, the vision document being developed to guide the organization’s work until 2035.

Another important feature was the invitation of the entire family of the ECO institutions to Summit, which enriched ECO Week besides generating the much-need family spirit in the Organization.

Separately, after hosting the 18th Summit of the Non-aligned Movement in 2019 and successfully convening the UNFCCC (COP29) in Baku in 2024, Azerbaijan is now poised to host the UN World Urban Forum next year. Organizing international conferences of this size and scale, apart from being an outstanding national achievement, makes Azerbaijan a trailblazer for the region and source of great pride for ECO.

As an indispensable member of the Organization, with its unique geography, Azerbaijan is keen to harness its strategic location to advance ECO's shared goals of trade integration, transport connectivity, energy cooperation and sustainable development. Azerbaijan's trade within the ECO region has grown noticeably over the past decade. In 2015, its intra-regional trade was valued at around USD 875 million. This share rose USD 7.95 billion in 2024, registering an approximately nine-folds increase in ten years. Backed by a positive trade balance and expanding free trade and preferential agreements, Azerbaijan continues to deepen regional economic integration and strengthen its role as a key driver of ECO trade.

Azerbaijan also serves as a lynchpin in regional energy security and a key global energy player with significant oil and natural gas reserves in the Caspian Sea region. Despite its abundant oil and gas reserves, Azerbaijan is also determined to embrace green and clean energy, and share its expertise, knowledge, and capacities with the whole region under ECO framework. In this regard, during COP29, Azerbaijan introduced the ECO Regional Initiative on Resource Efficiency Sustainability and Circular Economy (RESCUE). This pioneering initiative seeks to embed climate objectives into connectivity projects and trade corridors. Also, the ECO Clean Energy Centre in Baku is emblematic of its contributions, championing renewable energy adoption and energy efficiency measures to support Member States in their transition to low-carbon development.

Tourism is another area where Azerbaijan is making significant contributions with the potential for more – both as tourist-sending and tourist-receiving country. In the first half of 2025, six ECO members were among the top fifteen tourist sources for Azerbaijan. Shusha's designation as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2026 and its efforts to revive Silk Road tourism highlights Azerbaijan's commitment to heritage-based tourism and will further spotlight the country's rich cultural and historical attractions.



**AS AN INDISPENSABLE MEMBER OF THE ORGANIZATION, WITH ITS UNIQUE GEOGRAPHY, AZERBAIJAN IS KEEN TO HARNESS ITS STRATEGIC LOCATION TO ADVANCE ECO'S SHARED GOALS OF TRADE INTEGRATION, TRANSPORT CONNECTIVITY, ENERGY COOPERATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.**



**FROM HOSTING SEVERAL SUMMITS AND IMPORTANT ECO INSTITUTIONS TO CHAMPION GREEN ENERGY AND CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES, AZERBAIJAN HAS CONSISTENTLY ENRICHED THE ORGANIZATION'S AGENDA.**



**17th Summit of the  
Economic Cooperation  
Organization**  
4 July 2025,  
Khankendi city, Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan plays a central and proactive role in ECO and consistently contributes to its success. From hosting several summits and important ECO institutions to champion green energy and connectivity initiatives, Azerbaijan has consistently enriched the organization's agenda. Its strategic location, rich cultural heritage, and commitment to fostering collaboration among Member States places Azerbaijan as a driving force in shaping ECO's future. As ECO looks ahead, Azerbaijan's role will remain vital in building a more connected, prosperous, and resilient region. With its proactive leadership and strong commitment to regional cooperation, Azerbaijan is set to play an even greater role in ECO. By doing so, it sets a positive example for other Member States and continues to drive the organization's agenda forward effectively.

# Azerbaijan and the Organization of Turkic States: Strengthening Unity, Deepening Integration

## Introduction

The past few years have highlighted the fragility of the global economic system, as events like the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and sanctions exposed the dangers of relying too heavily on specific trade pathways or dominant political powers. As a result, terms like “resilience”, “diversification”, and “connectivity” have moved from technical discourse into the core of strategic policy discussions across Eurasia. One initiative gaining prominence under this lens is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, also known as the Middle Corridor. While it serves a logistical function, it is also embedded in a broader cultural and political vision, connecting countries with Turkic heritage.

Located on the western shore of the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan connects Central Asia with the South Caucasus and Türkiye. The country’s infrastructure and state capacity have turned location into influence. In recent years the same logic was extended from transport to the wider agenda of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). In practice, Azerbaijan’s policies aim at two parallel goals: to keep goods moving faster and safer across Eurasia, and to strengthen unity among Turkic partners through concrete cooperation in economy, culture, education, and digitalisation. The following pages integrate this broader OTS dimension into the analysis of the Middle Corridor and Azerbaijan’s role inside it.

## Geography, Infrastructure, and Governance

While Azerbaijan’s location offers strategic advantages, it is the country’s deliberate policy choices that have translated geographic potential into tangible influence. In practice it commands a rare combination of access: eastwards across the Caspian to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, westwards through Georgia and Türkiye to Europe, and south-north connections that can support alternative north-south chains. For Central Asian exporters the Baku route offers the quickest secure access to western markets. However, geography itself is not enough; reliability matters. Over the last two decades, Azerbaijan invested in roads, rail, ports, customs digitalisation, and logistics services to back its ambitions with predictable performance.

## **PROF. LÁSZLÓ VASA**

*Chief Advisor, Senior Research Fellow, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs Full Professor, Dean, Doctoral School of Regional Sciences, Széchenyi István University*

TÜRK DÖVLƏTLƏRİ TƏŞKİLATININ  
DÖVLƏT BAŞÇILARI ŞURASININ 12-ci ZİRVƏ GÖRÜŞÜ  
6-7 OKTYABR, 2025  
QƏBƏLƏ, AZƏRBAYCAN



12th MEETING  
OF THE  
COUNCIL OF HEADS OF STATE  
OCTOBER 6-7, 2025  
GABALA, AZERBAIJAN



**12th Summit of  
OTS Council of Heads of State,  
7 October 2025,  
Gabala Azerbaijan**

The Port of Alat, located south of Baku, functions as a key logistics center, combining maritime operations with economic infrastructure to support trade. Developed to handle both cargo transit and industrial operations within a free economic zone, the port facilitates storage, processing, and streamlined re-export procedures. Complementing this infrastructure, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway – operational since 2017 – establishes a direct rail connection between the Caspian region and Türkiye. Together, these components form a cohesive corridor that significantly reduces transit times for Eurasian freight and improves route competitiveness.

Long before transport corridors took center stage, Azerbaijan had already demonstrated its capacity to manage complex, cross-border infrastructure projects through energy initiatives. The development of major pipelines like Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the Southern Gas Corridor showcased the country's ability to collaborate with international stakeholders and deliver reliable energy transit. This track record has helped position Azerbaijan as a trusted partner for Central Asian exporters seeking efficient, routes for moving hydrocarbons and industrial goods to European markets.

State capacity underpins the system. Revenues from hydrocarbons were channelled into transport, industrial parks, and digital networks. The government modernised state-owned rail and shipping companies, and promoted a service culture in customs and border management. The aim has been consistent: build a logistics state in which infrastructure, rules, and institutions work together. This is also the basis for a more ambitious objective – to support integration within the OTS on a practical level.

### **Azerbaijan: political anchor in the Turkic world**

Despite not being the largest member of the OTS, Azerbaijan regularly assumes a pivotal leadership and coordination role within the organization. Its close alliance with Türkiye anchors its western connections, while growing economic and diplomatic ties with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have expanded its influence eastward. Azerbaijan's steady engagement with Turkmenistan and its long-standing partnership with Georgia also enhance regional cohesion, ensuring that initiatives like the Middle Corridor benefit from both geographic linkage and institutional support.

Diplomatically, Baku presents the OTS as an open platform rather than a closed block. Balanced relations with the great and middle powers allow Azerbaijan to frame Turkic cooperation as complementary to other regional processes. The restoration of sovereignty over its territories after 2020 removed a long-standing security instability and strengthened the state's authority in the region. In the same period, discussions around the Zangezur connection between mainland of Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Türkiye showed how infrastructure and politics interact. Whether such links advance quickly or slowly, their very negotiation reflects the new balance in the South Caucasus.

In organisational terms the OTS has moved from symbolism to function. Ministerial councils, working groups, and specialised bodies now meet regularly to address transport facilitation, customs harmonisation, digital solutions, and education. Azerbaijan's approach has been pragmatic: focus on specific deliverables that reduce costs and time for business, while at the same time cultivate a narrative of shared heritage and modernisation.



**LONG BEFORE TRANSPORT CORRIDORS TOOK CENTER STAGE, AZERBAIJAN HAD ALREADY DEMONSTRATED ITS CAPACITY TO MANAGE COMPLEX, CROSS-BORDER INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS THROUGH ENERGY INITIATIVES.**



Informal Summit of the  
Organization of Turkic States  
20 May 2025  
Budapest, Hungary

### **Institutions and policy instruments of the OTS**

The OTS provides an umbrella under which several practical instruments are taking shape. The Turkic Investment Fund was established to support collaborative ventures, particularly in cases where commercial lenders are hesitant to provide early-stage financing. A common digital trade agenda aims to link customs, single-window systems, and transit documents in a way that reduces duplication and paperwork along the Corridor. Transport-related working groups coordinate timetables across modes and borders, improve information exchange, and promote common standards for dangerous goods and perishable cargoes. For small and medium-sized enterprises this means lower barriers to enter regional value chains.

Azerbaijan supports these tools with national reforms. The State Customs Committee has expanded electronic declarations and risk management practices, and pilots for pre-arrival data exchange with partners are under way. Rail operators experiment with unified tariffs for block trains moving across multiple OTS members. The Port of Alat's free zone provides a location where firms from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan can

set up light processing to capture more value before shipping goods to Türkiye and the EU.

Education and research also have an institutional side. Azerbaijani universities and think tanks run joint programmes with Turkic partners, including student exchanges, summer schools, and policy workshops. These activities build trust among future officials, managers, and scholars. Over time, personal networks help to solve technical problems that do not reach the political level but can delay real projects.

### **Economic and trade integration linked to the Middle Corridor**

The economic logic of integration is simple: diversified routes reduce risk and cost. For Central Asian exporters of copper, aluminium, fertilisers, grain, and textiles, the Caspian bridge through Azerbaijan is a way to reach Mediterranean and European markets without relying on a single transit state. For Azerbaijani producers, closer OTS links open new markets for construction materials, food processing, machinery repair, and ICT services. As rail connections and port handling become smoother, new cargo types appear: refrigerated goods, e-commerce parcels, automotive parts, and project cargo for renewable energy installations.

Financial instruments matter here. Development banks, export-import credit agencies, and the emerging Turkic Investment Fund can de-risk cross-border projects such as logistics parks, container depots, and intermodal terminals. Azerbaijan's experience with public-private partnerships in energy and transport gives a template for structuring such deals. For firms, predictable customs and transparent tariffs are as important as physical tracks and cranes.

The Middle Corridor's competitiveness depends on time and price. Coordinated timetables across railways, priority handling at Caspian ports, and simplified documentation can reduce total transit time significantly. Each day saved increases the attractiveness of the route for electronics, fashion, and time-sensitive industrial inputs. Azerbaijan's role is to keep the chain moving at the critical junctions and to push for interoperable systems across the OTS.



12th Summit of  
OTS Council of Heads of State,  
7 October 2025  
Gabala, Azerbaijan

### **Digital and green dimensions of integration**

Contemporary approaches to regional integration extend beyond physical infrastructure, emphasizing the use of digital technologies to improve operational transparency and efficiency. Azerbaijan and its OTS counterparts are actively developing digital platforms such as electronic consignment notes (e-CMR), e-TIR systems, and interoperable customs data exchanges. These innovations support real-time coordination and reduce bureaucratic delays. Additionally, as environmental standards evolve globally, Azerbaijan is investing in cleaner transport technologies and sustainable energy corridors. These green initiatives not only lower emissions but also align the Middle Corridor with emerging European regulatory frameworks, potentially increasing its attractiveness for climate-conscious trade partners.

The green transition adds a further dimension. Azerbaijan develops renewable capacity and studies how green electricity, and hydrogen corridors could complement existing energy flows. In transport, incentives for cleaner trucks and locomotives, shore power at ports, and digital queue management can cut emissions without hurting competitiveness. As the EU strengthens its carbon-related policies, greener logistics along the Middle Corridor can become a commercial advantage for OTS members.

## **Security, resilience, and risk management**

Transport corridors gain strategic value only when they demonstrate resilience against disruptions. Weather on the Caspian, regional tensions, or bottlenecks at border crossings can disrupt flows. Azerbaijan promotes contingency planning: alternative sailings when winds are strong, reserved train paths for delayed block trains, and information sharing during peak seasons. Cooperation with Georgia and Türkiye on border capacity is critical, as almost every project runs through Georgian territory to the Black Sea and Anatolia. By investing in redundancy and procedures, Azerbaijan aims to make occasional disruptions manageable rather than catastrophic.

Security also includes cyber aspects. As customs, railways, and ports digitalise, they become targets for cyber incidents. Shared standards within the OTS, staff training, and joint exercises help reduce vulnerabilities. Here again, Azerbaijan's broader security partnership with Türkiye provides practical experience that can be translated into civilian logistics.

## **Illustrative cases and practical lessons**

Three examples show how integration and logistics support each other. First, block trains from Central Asia using the BTK line demonstrate the value of unified tariffs and pre-cleared documents; when all operators treat the shipment as a single product, delays fall sharply. Second, refrigerated cargo moving through Alat has benefited from dedicated inspection facilities and prioritised berthing, which protects shelf life and opens the door for higher-value food exports. Third, joint training programmes between Azerbaijani and Kazakh rail and port staff have created a shared operational language – a small detail that often makes the difference between theory and practice.

These cases are not headlines, but they matter for companies deciding routes. A corridor becomes attractive when it delivers similar or better predictability compared to alternatives. Azerbaijan's contribution is to make such improvements routine rather than exceptional.



**THROUGH ITS ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN TRANSPORT DEVELOPMENT, POLICY ALIGNMENT, AND CULTURAL INITIATIVES, AZERBAIJAN IS HELPING TO SHAPE A MORE CONNECTED, INTEGRATED TURKIC REGION THAT FORMS HISTORICAL UNITY INTO MODERN OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORKS.**

## **Challenges and policy directions**

Despite progress, several challenges remain. Physical capacity at some nodes needs expansion; rail wagons and containers are still in short supply during seasonal peaks; and weather on the Caspian requires flexible scheduling. Documentation is better than before but still involves repetition across borders. Financing for mid-sized logistics projects can be slow, as investors seek guarantees. There is also a strategic challenge: keeping the OTS open and cooperative while avoiding zero-sum competition with neighbours.

Policy directions are clear. First, continue the digital agenda: single submission of data along the chain, mutual recognition of inspections, and wider use of risk-based controls. Second, expand intermodal capacity where it is most needed: additional Ro-Ro ramps, more locomotives for the BTK, and cold-chain facilities. Third, scale up the role of development finance and the Turkic Investment Fund to crowd-in private capital. Fourth, invest in skills: dispatchers, customs officers, and port technicians trained together across OTS members. Fifth, communicate performance data so that shippers and freight forwarders can see the gains in time and reliability.

Finally, culture should not be treated as soft decoration. Academic partnerships, language programmes, and youth exchanges create habits of cooperation that later reduce transaction costs in business and administration. Azerbaijan's consistent support for such programmes contributes to the long-term consolidation of the OTS.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

While it is rather known as the alternative trade path connecting China and Europe, the Middle Corridor has a much broader significance for deepening integration within the Turkic states. It serves as a useful tool for economic, cultural, and political integration among countries with shared linguistic, historical, economic and security ties. Azerbaijan plays an utmost important role in this progress by leveraging its geography, institutional strength, and diplomatic strategy. Through its active

engagement in transport development, policy alignment, and cultural initiatives, Azerbaijan is helping to shape a more connected, integrated Turkic region that forms historical unity into modern operational frameworks.

The OTS has moved in recent years from rhetoric to implementation. Azerbaijan's policies have been part of this shift. The country acts as a bridge and an anchor at the same time: it links Central Asia to the South Caucasus and Türkiye, and it holds together the daily coordination that any corridor requires. As Eurasia continues to evolve, the countries that combine reliable logistics with trusted institutions will shape the map. On both counts, Azerbaijan provides the foundation for strengthening unity and deepening integration in the Turkic world.

