

Azerbaijan's Asian Perspective: Security and Cooperation

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Evolving geopolitical tensions among global powers are exacerbating security and economic issues worldwide, challenging the post-Cold War international order, and exposing the shortcomings of international law. The Caspian region, pivotal for trade and security, faces heightened pressures as the major powers attempt to sway the region's countries into exclusive alliances. Azerbaijan's foreign policy prioritizes regional autonomy, upholding sovereignty, and enhancing multilateral partnerships to safeguard its independence and security. Following the Second Garabagh War, Azerbaijan has bolstered regional cooperation, notably with Central Asia, to strengthen ties through shared cultural and strategic interests. Azerbaijan's role in multilateral organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), positions it as a significant regional player. Investments in transit infrastructure, such as the Middle Corridor and the 'Digital Silk Way' project, enhance Azerbaijan's role as a Eurasian logistics hub connecting Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan's deepening partnerships within these frameworks reflect its commitment to regional stability, economic resilience, and a balanced foreign policy that fosters collective security and prosperity across Asia and beyond.

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Introduction

The contemporary geopolitical standoff among global powers has emerged as a significant factor exacerbating both security and economic challenges on a worldwide scale. The established international order, predominantly shaped by the frameworks and norms developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, now faces considerable strain and appears increasingly fragmented. This decline in order is further intensified by the ineffectiveness of international law, which is marred by pervasive double standards and a notable lack of enforcement mechanisms. In light of these dynamics, there is an imperative for a critical reassessment of existing global governance structures alongside a renewed commitment to uphold accountability and the rule of law in international relations.

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maintain a balance between major geopolitical actors. This will remain a vital element of most countries' foreign policy priorities.

However, we see some global and regional actors in pursuit of making the countries of the Caspian choose between them. This policy is flawed and unconstructive. Although the countries of the region acknowledge the national interests of regional actors, they also have their own interests – foremost, the protection of independence, territory, and sovereignty.

However, the principles of international law, such as territorial integrity and sovereignty, have been challenged by global powers, making the current world order more fragile and fragmented. Although, today, it appears that the achievement of global peace and stability is a remote goal, countries could and should try to create a consensus, at least at a regional level.

Azerbaijan, having suffered from three decades of occupation, has steadfastly advocated for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of international borders. Regrettably, the persistence of double standards, geopolitical manoeuvring, and the

ambiguity of international actors contributed to the continued occupation of Azerbaijani territory from 1993 until 2020. The Second Garabagh War (2020) not only had profound implications for regional security, but also reaffirmed the legitimacy of the use of force in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter. This conflict emphasized that unresolved disputes constitute a threat to international security, yet they can be resolved effectively when actions are undertaken within an appropriate legal framework and supported by efficient military means. The establishment of peace in the South Caucasus has the potential to yield significant consequences for the broader Caspian region.

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Since gaining independence, Azerbaijan has actively promoted multilateralism and the principles of international law. However, for three decades, its primary focus was on restoring its territorial integrity in response to the occupation by Armenia of the former's Garabagh region. With the liberation of these territories in September–November 2020 and September 19–20, 2023, Azerbaijan has now shifted its attention towards enhancing foreign policy cooperation at both regional and global levels.

In this context, strengthening relations with Central Asian countries has become a key priority for Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The two regions share a wealth of commonalities, including linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties, that facilitate closer collaboration. Moreover, they often align in their perspectives on various foreign policy issues, further reinforcing the potential for cooperation between Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

Expanding strategic influence through the SCO and CICA

The South Caucasus is strategically linked to Central Asia through various regional and interregional organizations. Among these, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) stand out as significant platforms

serving as key pillars for enhancing security and collaboration in the broader Eurasian space.

Azerbaijan, which was granted dialogue partner status with the SCO on July 10, 2015, has made significant strides in aligning its interests with the organization's goals. Under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed on March 14, 2016, Azerbaijan and the SCO agreed to collaborate in various fields, such as enhancing regional security and stability; combating terrorism, extremism, separatism, and drug trafficking; and addressing cybercrime and other forms of transnational crime. Additionally, they pledged to cooperate in sectors such as trade, investment, energy, and telecommunications.

Azerbaijan's engagement with the SCO is shaped by multiple factors. Primarily, its involvement offers substantial geopolitical and economic advantages, particularly in the evolving global context. The SCO's vast geographical reach across Eurasia provides Azerbaijan with access to a broad economic space, facilitating trade and economic ties between Asia and Europe. As a result, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as a key transit hub, benefiting from initiatives like the Baku International Sea Trade Port (Alat Port) and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway, vital components of the Middle Corridor, which is aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative. These projects have boosted Azerbaijan's transit potential, enabling it to serve as a critical link in the transportation of goods between Asia and Europe, while also attracting investment.

Beyond economic benefits, Azerbaijan's participation in the SCO strengthens its role in regional security, particularly through the organization's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. It also provides Azerbaijan with a platform to promote its stance on various global issues, including the promotion of multiculturalism and dialogue between civilizations – areas in which the country has considerable expertise.

In pursuing a deeper partnership with the SCO, Azerbaijan is reaffirming its commitment to a balanced foreign policy, seeking to capitalize on opportunities for cooperation with both Eastern and Western powers. Its efforts to enhance its ties with the SCO align with the organization's vision of fostering a secure, collaborative Eurasian community, and also contribute to regional stability. Through this engagement, Azerbaijan

aims to support international transport networks and strengthen its position within the broader geopolitical landscape.

This strategic approach is further reflected in Azerbaijan's growing role in regional diplomacy, exemplified by its recent election as chair of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) for the term 2024–2026. As part of its leadership role, Azerbaijan is set to host the CICA Council of Foreign Ministers in December 2024 and the CICA Council of Heads of State and Government summit in 2026.

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Azerbaijan plays a crucial role in CICA due to its strategic position as a regional transport hub. This is closely tied to the country's geographical location and its proactive approach to fostering global interconnectedness. In today's multilateral diplomacy, transport networks are a key focus, as they are essential for facilitating international cooperation. However, without the development of a robust system of connectivity, sustaining the positive momentum of globalization would be a significant challenge. Azerbaijan has significant potential to further strengthen its productive cooperation within the CICA framework, as the organization recognizes the country's achievements in multilateral diplomacy.

Azerbaijan is becoming more fully integrated into international cooperation mechanisms, and its CICA presidency is anticipated to bring notable benefits as the country evolves into a global transport and logistics hub. This transformation is expected to drive economic growth and enhance security. Azerbaijan already plays an important role within CICA, an organization comprising most Asian nations, and this contribution is likely to deepen under its leadership. One of Azerbaijan's priorities will be to strengthen Asia's influence on global issues. CICA is also expanding its work in global mediation, and there are plans to support its institutional development, including the adoption of a new charter in response to changing global dynamics.

Strengthening relations with Central Asia and the Organization of Turkic States

Azerbaijan's deepening cooperation with Central Asian countries marks this direction as a priority in its foreign policy. This commitment to regional and multilateral collaboration was further demonstrated at the 6th Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State on August 9, 2024, at which Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev, underscored the shared historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties between Azerbaijan and Central Asian nations. During this summit, leaders signed a Roadmap for Regional Cooperation Development and an Action Plan for Industrial Cooperation for 2025–2027, thereby formally establishing Azerbaijan as a strategic ally committed to strengthening the capacities of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The advancement of relations with the Central Asian countries is vital for Azerbaijan. This partnership across the Caspian Sea has advanced in multiple spheres and is poised to grow further through joint initiatives to deepen ties in science, culture, transport, and logistics.

In August 2024, the first-ever meeting of energy ministers from Central Asia and Azerbaijan took place in Astana, resulting in the signing of a pivotal communiqué on cooperation in the energy sector. This agreement lays the foundation for enhanced partnerships across all critical areas of the energy industry, reinforcing a shared commitment to energy security, technological innovation, and infrastructure development. As the Central Asian region and Azerbaijan occupy a strategically vital position in global energy logistics, this cooperation is poised to bolster the sustainability and reliability of international energy supplies. By fostering collaboration on energy efficiency and resource management, the communiqué signals a unified regional approach to addressing global energy challenges and advancing each nation's developmental objectives within a framework of regional stability and shared prosperity. Renewable energy cooperation as part of this regional collaboration is also significant, as exemplified by a memorandum between Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan to unify energy systems.

As ties between Azerbaijan and Central Asia strengthen, the significance of transit along the Middle Corridor is growing. Azerbaijan is enhancing

the capacity of Baku International Sea Trade Port, expanding its commercial fleet, and increasing the capacity of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. In the realm of information technology, Azerbaijan is developing the ‘Digital Silk Way’ project to create a reliable digital business environment connecting Central Asia to Europe and Türkiye. Investment projects and joint funds have been established bilaterally between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, alongside efforts to improve digital infrastructure.

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Another regional cooperation framework through which Azerbaijan is strengthening its relationships with Central Asian countries is the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The member states of the OTS are committed to deepening their integration, which is of paramount importance for interconnectedness and the prosperity of their peoples. The OTS’s informal meeting in the city of Shusha on July 6, 2024, focusing on “Building a Sustainable Future through Transport, Connectivity, and Climate Action”, clearly outlined these objectives. Leaders from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan participated, emphasizing the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration. The OTS, which enhances cooperation in 30 diverse areas, including politics, economics, culture, and education, celebrated its 15th anniversary in October 2024.

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On November 6, 2024, at the 11th Summit of the Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States, President Ilham Aliyev affirmed Azerbaijan’s commitment to strengthening the organization. Highlighting the significance of collaboration in defence, security, and the defence industry, President Aliyev emphasized the importance of these ties in the face of rising global threats. Azerbaijan has recently expanded its cooperation with member states’ law enforcement and security agencies, increasing joint military exercises and opening its military education institutions to students from OTS member states, and thus demonstrating mutual trust and solidarity.

Azerbaijan has seen a significant rise in transportation activity along the Middle Corridor, which connects Central Asia to Türkiye through Azerbaijan. In the first nine months of 2024, transit traffic with member

and observer states of the OTS rose by approximately 15% compared to the same period in 2023. Azerbaijan continues to invest in this corridor to enhance its capacity, and new digitalization and trade facilitation projects along the Middle Corridor are expected to improve logistics and reduce costs, further strengthening regional connectivity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Azerbaijan's foreign policy demonstrates a clear commitment to strengthening its role within Asia and emphasizing partnerships and cooperative frameworks that bridge regional divides. Through regional cooperation frameworks with Central Asian countries and active participation in multilateral organizations such as CICA, SCO, and OTS, Azerbaijan is enhancing its outreach across Asia. These efforts align with Azerbaijan's vision of Asia as a collaborative force in global stability and economic growth. By prioritizing critical infrastructure projects like the Middle Corridor, as well as the Digital Silk Way project, Azerbaijan is transforming itself into a vital logistics hub that connects Asia with Europe. This perspective shapes Azerbaijan's investments in security and economic resilience, fostering regional stability and economic prosperity.