

# Azerbaijan and Central Asia: From Shared Turkic Heritage to a Full-Fledged Strategic Partnership

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Zhanat Momynkulov\*

This article examines the evolution of a strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states, focusing on the transformation of their relations from a shared historical and cultural foundation to the pursuit of new regional interests. The study highlights the role of common Turkic identity, linguistic ties, geography, and cultural heritage as a soft power base that now complements pragmatic cooperation in economics, energy, transport, and security. Special attention is given to activities within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the growing significance of trans-Caspian connectivity projects that strengthen regional integration, enhance Eurasian integration, and reduce dependency on traditional power centres. The analysis shows that Azerbaijan's proactive diplomacy and Central Asia's multi-vector foreign policy complement one another, creating dual engines of Turkic connectivity across the Caspian. Key questions of Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan relations are analysed separately to highlight their specific dynamics within the broader regional context. The analysis concludes that this emerging alliance represents not merely cultural solidarity but a strategic axis of Eurasian stability and autonomy.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Central Asia, Organization of Turkic States, regional cooperation, strategic partnership.



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\* **Zhanat Momynkulov** is a Candidate of Philosophical Science and Senior Lecturer at the Department of Political Science of the Eurasian National University named after L.N. Gumilyov, Astana, Kazakhstan.

***Introduction***

Cooperation between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states has gained remarkable momentum in the past three to five years, evolving from symbolic rhetoric into a concrete framework for strategic engagement. This growing partnership reflects not only geopolitical pragmatism but also the shared cultural, historical, and civilizational foundations that bind the Turkic world into a coherent regional identity.

As for the strategic framework of Azerbaijan–Central Asia cooperation in the 21st century, regional connectivity, energy logistics and security, and cultural diplomacy have become decisive factors shaping Eurasia’s strategic landscape. Within this context, Azerbaijan serves as a natural bridge between the Caspian Caucasus and Central Asia, linking continental transport, energy, and digital routes. The relevance

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of this cooperation lies in its potential to diversify regional economies, reduce geographic isolation and dependency on external powers, and foster intra-Turkic solidarity in a multipolar world.

The key question is, “Why is Azerbaijan interested in forging closer ties with Central Asia?”. Azerbaijan views Central Asia as an extension of its historical and linguistic community. Beyond cultural affinity, Azerbaijan seeks to consolidate its role as a transit and energy hub, connecting the Caspian Basin with Europe and Asia. By strengthening relations with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and others, Azerbaijan enhances its geopolitical weight and economic diversification in four directions, while balancing between major powers such as Russia, Türkiye, China, the European Union, and Iran.

Another question is, “Why is Azerbaijan strategically important for Central Asia in a broader sense?”. For Central Asian states, Azerbaijan represents a gateway to Western markets through the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and the Middle Corridor. Cooperation with Azerbaijan also helps the region reduce overdependence on northern or eastern transit channels, creating a more autonomous and resilient regional infrastructure. Moreover, Azerbaijan’s post-war experience in state-building and assertive energy diplomacy offers a practical model for Central Asian modernization.

The aim of this research is to examine why Azerbaijan–Central Asia relations are evolving beyond the conventional ‘C5+1’ framework and

transforming into an autonomous intra-regional Turkic axis of Eurasian cooperation. The central research question asks: “What factors make this partnership genuinely strategic rather than merely symbolic?”.

The historical and cultural foundations of these emotional and civilizational bonds constitute the basis for mutual trust, equality, and long-term partnership between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states. The peoples of Azerbaijan and Central Asia share historical ties rooted in common literary traditions, intellectual exchanges, and mutual support during key historical moments across the Caspian Sea. Cultural links, from classical poetry to Turkology studies, have long sustained a sense of fraternity. The former Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict also evoked solidarity and understanding among Turkic nations, reinforcing emotional proximity.

There are three major historical factors that unite Azerbaijan and the Central Asian nations. Their shared Turkic identity, common Islamic civilization, and Soviet legacies shaped similar political patterns and social systems. These factors make reciprocal understanding natural and cooperation smoother, as societies think and feel within a similar mindset and historical frames.

The structure of the article is as follows. The methodology section outlines the analytical and fieldwork approach, while the theoretical framework presents key concepts such as regionalism, identity politics, constructivism, and Eurasian geopolitics. Subsequent sections analyse and examine (1) the important role of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), (2) Azerbaijan’s strategic role in Caspian and Central Asian geopolitics, (3) Central Asian foreign policy in Caspian affairs, and (4) Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan strategic convergence. The conclusion summarizes key findings and answers the research questions.

### ***Methodology***

This article employs a qualitative, analytical, and comparative methodology to examine the evolving geopolitical partnership between Azerbaijan and Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan, within the framework of the Turkic world and Caspian regional dynamics. The research is based on an interdisciplinary approach, integrating political science, international relations theory, and regional studies.

Primary sources include official statements, summit communiqués, and policy documents from the Central Asia summits and the OTS, while

secondary sources consist of academic publications, expert analyses, and recent media reports. Comparative analysis is used to assess the convergence of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's foreign policies, focusing on connectivity, energy cooperation, and security frameworks.

The study also employs case-based observation of the 2025 Gabala Summit and trans-Caspian initiatives to evaluate how bilateral and multilateral cooperation contributes to shaping a new geopolitical identity of the Turkic world and strengthening Eurasian integration. The present author acted as a participant observer, attending regional conferences and observing OTS meetings, and engaging with diplomats, experts, and media representatives. This role provided first-hand insight into the evolving discourse on Turkic regionalism and Azerbaijan–Central Asia cooperation.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The analysis of Azerbaijan–Central Asia relations draws upon four complementary theoretical perspectives: regionalism, identity politics, constructivism, and Eurasian geopolitics. From this perspective, the concept of ‘strategic partnership’ in regional studies may be reconsidered as a dynamic and multidimensional framework that transcends traditional bilateral cooperation and reflects a broader process of regional transformation. In this context, a strategic partnership implies long-term, institutionalized cooperation across political, economic, cultural, and security dimensions, grounded in mutual trust and shared strategic objectives rather than temporary alignment. The Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership embodies this evolving model as it moves beyond symbolic diplomacy and ad hoc summits toward structured regional integration through mechanisms such as the OTS, the Caspian Economic Forum, and trans-Caspian connectivity initiatives.

This evolution reflects what Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum describe as ‘new regionalism’, a multidimensional process where regional identity, political will, and institutional capacity converge to create sustainable cooperation beyond state-centric interaction. This framework helps explain how Azerbaijan and Central Asia are shaping a region from within, based on shared culture, interests, and interdependence rather than external imposition.

From the lens of identity politics, inspired by Benedict Anderson's

concept of the imagined community<sup>1</sup> and Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism, the Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership can be seen as a collective reconstruction of Turkic identity in the post-Soviet era. Shared myths, language, and symbols form the emotional foundation of contemporary political cooperation, where culture reinforces strategic interests.<sup>2</sup>

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Alexander Wendt's constructivism provides an interpretive framework for understanding how shared norms, ideas, and perceptions shape political behaviour. The growing trust between Azerbaijan and Central Asia demonstrates that inter-state cooperation is, in parallel, socially constructed through media discourse, identity recognition, and mutual expectations, rather than determined solely by material power.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, the American strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski highlighted Azerbaijan's importance as a 'geopolitical pivot' for Central Asia, emphasizing its role in ensuring the region's westward access and strategic independence, while Kishore Mahbubani's vision of an emerging multipolar Asia underscores the importance of regional self-reliance and strategic pragmatism.<sup>4</sup> Both perspectives situate the Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership within a broader transformation of Eurasia's geopolitical architecture.

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### ***The OTS as a Platform for Connectivity and Regional Cohesion within Central Asia***

Transformation of cooperation formats between Azerbaijan and Central Asia is essential for understanding the emerging dynamics of the

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1 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, pp.1-240.

2 A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.57-192.

3 A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1999, pp. 246-312.

4 K. Mahbubani, *The Asian 21st Century*, (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press), 2022, pp.15-98.

5 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp.35-120.

Central Eurasian or Turkic region. Central Asia and the OTS function as mutually reinforcing and overlapping platforms that activate and amplify each other's regional roles. The OTS provides an institutional and strategic framework for cooperation, while Central Asia contributes the geopolitical and economic core that gives the organization its supplementary substance, regional dimension, and strategic direction. Together, they transform the Turkic space from a cultural concept into an operational axis of Eurasian connectivity and policy coordination.

The Azerbaijan–Central Asia relationship has undergone a visible transformation from cultural symbolism to institutional mechanisms. In the 1990s, cooperation was largely expressed through shared cultural and linguistic initiatives celebrating common Turkic identity. In that period, the idea of ‘Pan-Turkism’ emerged as a unifying discourse among newly independent Turkic republics. Yet, even without the ideology of Pan-Turkism, the peoples of these nations remained conscious of their linguistic and cultural kinship. Over time, this symbolic stage evolved into structured and goal-oriented regionalism supported by formal institutions. Today's partnership builds upon that awareness, transforming shared heritage into pragmatic cooperation and benefit.

Central Asia is moving towards a new phase of strategic unity among member states. Amid intensifying global turbulence, the OTS is entering a new era characterized by institutional maturity and strategic coherence. The 12th OTS Summit, held in October 2025 in Gabala, Azerbaijan, marked a turning point in the organization's evolution and signalled a transition from cultural symbolism to the formulation of concrete mechanisms of cooperation, including discussion of defence and security issues.

Growing international instability, spanning from Ukraine to the Middle East and Afghanistan, is prompting Turkic nations to strengthen their unity and collective resilience. In this context, the OTS is increasingly viewed not merely as a cultural forum but as a platform for regional partnership that brings together its member states around common strategic interests. The emerging ‘Turkic Security Belt’ thus represents a developing axis of stability at the crossroads of Eurasian geopolitical rivalries.<sup>6</sup>

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6 Momyunkulov, Zh. “Zhanat Momyunkulov: OTG vstupaet v novuyu epokhu strategicheskogo edinstva na fone global'noi turbulentnosti”, *Azertag.az*, October 7, 2025, Available at: [https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/zhanat\\_momyunkulov\\_otg\\_vstupaet\\_v\\_novuyu\\_epokhu\\_strategicheskogo\\_edinstva\\_na\\_fone\\_globalnoi\\_turbulentnosti-3790871](https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/zhanat_momyunkulov_otg_vstupaet_v_novuyu_epokhu_strategicheskogo_edinstva_na_fone_globalnoi_turbulentnosti-3790871) (Accessed: October 10, 2025).

Among the initiatives discussed at the Gabala Summit were the establishment of a Council on Cybersecurity within the OTS framework, the organization of joint meetings of foreign ministers and intelligence heads, and proposals for enhanced military cooperation. In 2026, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev notably called for joint military exercises of Turkic states, reflecting Azerbaijan's proactive approach to transforming the organization into a more cohesive strategic actor. A major focus of the summit was the TITR, also known as the Middle Corridor, linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Europe. This route forms the backbone of the transport autonomy of Turkic states and serves as a cornerstone of the emerging Eurasian security and connectivity architecture. Key priorities include tariff harmonization, technical standardization, port security, and the creation of a joint coordination mechanism, all of which strengthen interregional linkages and position the OTS as a strategic East–West axis of the 21st century.

Equally significant is deepening energy cooperation, as harmonized export strategies among Kazakhstan, the Caspian states, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye underpin the region's energy autonomy and sustainable development. Alongside this, digital integration, through the creation of a unified digital space, e-commerce platforms, and cybersecurity initiatives, has become a new pillar of cooperation between Central Asia and Azerbaijan. The humanitarian and cultural Turkic agenda continues to serve as the soft power dimension of trans-Caspian cooperation, reinforcing a shared civilizational identity and promoting intersocietal cohesion.

In summary, the OTS is transforming from a cultural entity into a strategic platform capable of ensuring political autonomy and regional stability. The Turkic world today is evolving into a space of pragmatic solidarity, marked by cooperation without confrontation and unity without ideology. This shift reflects a broader movement – from symbols to strategies, and from cultural kinship to the formation of an independent political subject in Eurasia.

### ***The Unique and Central Role of Azerbaijan for the Central Asian Region***

The evolving cooperation between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan, whose strategic significance has grown rapidly in recent years due to bilateral and multilateral platforms, now provides a

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framework of stability and coordination for both official Baku, Tashkent, and Astana. Within the Caspian region, Azerbaijan is emerging as a new anchor point of the Turkic project, serving as a vital link between the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Azerbaijan's strategic geography has enabled Baku to emerge as a key player in regional connectivity, logistics routes, energy security, and Turkic cooperation. Azerbaijan plays a leading role in shaping collective strategies for transport, trade, and defence coordination in the region.

Azerbaijan is deepening its strategic ties with Central Asian countries, participating in regional summits, and fostering bilateral relationships. This alignment is driven by shared interests in countering regional challenges and exploring new economic opportunities. During the last two years or so, Baku's cooperation with Central Asia has developed at an unprecedented pace, marked by the strengthening of formal and informal contacts, expansion of business and diplomatic exchanges, and a rising awareness of shared interests in politics, economics, transport, communications, and the media sphere. At the same time, cultural and humanitarian ties between Central Asia and the South Caucasus are experiencing renewed vitality, reinforcing the sense of common civilizational belonging across the two regions.

A crucial factor behind this dynamic is the growing recognition by the presidents and peoples of the above-mentioned states of their collective role in consolidating regional unity. Uzbekistan, in particular, sees itself as one of the key initiators of this project, regarding it as a promising direction for its foreign policy. Regional states are becoming strategic partners and potential allies, shaping a new system of geopolitical and economic interaction amid the broader confrontation between the West and Russia. Recently, Azerbaijan has regularly taken part in Central Asia summits, including high-level inter-regional (Summits of CA states + Azerbaijan) and intra-regional (C5+ Summits with external partners such as the U.S., China, the EU, etc.) meetings.

Under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan has pursued one of the most dynamic, multi-layered, and multidimensional foreign policies in the post-Soviet space. Guided by offensive pragmatism and strategic foresight, Azerbaijan has successfully balanced its relations among major global and regional powers, maintaining strong partnerships with Türkiye, Israel, the EU, Middle Eastern countries, and the United

States, while engaging constructively with Russia, Iran, and other actors. Azerbaijan's diplomacy exemplifies agility and confidence; it has positioned itself as a bridge between East and West, and North and South – leveraging its energy resources, transport corridors, and strategic geography. Through initiatives such as the Middle Corridor, Baku contributes to Europe–Asia connectivity and economic diversification, linking Central Asia with Europe through the Caspian. Its close alliance with Türkiye reinforces defence and technological cooperation, while deepening ties with Israel and the Gulf states demonstrate Azerbaijan's pragmatic and interest-driven approach in the Middle East.

The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) published an analysis exploring Azerbaijan's evolving geopolitical strategy toward Central Asia, noting Azerbaijan's ability to balance relations with Russia, Türkiye, and Western actors while strengthening Turkic integration. The study underlines Azerbaijan's role as a 'bridge state', linking Caspian energy networks, transport corridors, and security dialogue across Eurasia.<sup>7</sup> The victory of Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 resonated deeply in Central Asia's public consciousness, strengthening respect for and solidarity with the Azerbaijani people. This emotional connection adds a new layer of mutual trust and political affinity between similar nations. Ultimately, the revival of unity between Turkic nations depends on the creation of a comprehensive system of cooperation adapted to evolving geopolitical realities. The Türkiye–Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership demonstrates how shared historical roots and pragmatic coordination can transform the Turkic world from a cultural idea into a functional geopolitical and economic community capable of ensuring stability, autonomy, and development across Eurasia.<sup>8</sup>

In Central Asia, Azerbaijan's leadership in the OTS has revitalized regional cohesion, turning solidarity into economic and security cooperation. Overall, President Ilham Aliyev's foreign policy is characterized by a rare combination of realism, balance, and boldness, making Azerbaijan a respected, active, and influential player in global

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7 R. Huseynov and G. Mammadova, "Azerbaijan's Pivot to Central Asia", RUSI Commentary, *Royal United Services Institute*, April 8, 2024, Available at: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/azerbaijans-pivot-central-asia> (Accessed: October 10, 2025).

8 Momynkulov, Zh. "Kazakhstanskii ekspert: Azerbaydzhan de-fakto stanovitsya odnoi iz srednikh derzhav", *Azertag.az*, August 13, 2024, Available at: [https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/kazakhstanskii\\_ekspert\\_azerbaidzhan\\_de\\_fakto\\_stanovitsya\\_odnoi\\_iz\\_srednikh\\_derzhav-3135998](https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/kazakhstanskii_ekspert_azerbaidzhan_de_fakto_stanovitsya_odnoi_iz_srednikh_derzhav-3135998) (Accessed: October 10, 2025).

and regional affairs. For Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan represents a bridge to Europe through the trans-Caspian transport corridor and the Middle Corridor initiatives. Conversely, for Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan serves as a gateway to the East, expanding Baku's strategic outreach toward Central Asia and beyond. Azerbaijan's growing role as a transit hub and transport artery of the Turkic world underlines its importance in connecting the Eurasian space from the Caspian to the Black Sea.

### *The Foreign Policies of Central Asian Countries in Caspian Geopolitics*

Central Asia's engagement in Caspian geopolitics reflects the region's evolving role as both a bridge between and a battleground for influence between major powers such as Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran, and the West. The Caspian Sea has become a central hub of transport, energy, and strategic connectivity, and among the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan stands out as the principal actor linking the steppe, the Caucasus, and global markets. Azerbaijan is increasingly being recognized as a key partner by Central Asian states, offering an alternative route to global markets. Its involvement in regional affairs has enhanced its influence and enabled fostering closer ties with Central Asia. These states welcomed the recent initialization of the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, on August 8, 2025, in Washington, DC, viewing it as a significant step toward regional stability and the establishment of a beneficial South Caucasus trade corridor between Central Asia and Europe.

**Uzbekistan** is expanding its regional influence in Central Asia and beyond. The strengthened alliance between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan in 2024 not only paved the way for deeper engagement between Azerbaijan and the broader Central Asian region but also set a positive precedent for potential similar agreements with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The shared cultural and linguistic heritage between Azerbaijan and Central Asia provides a strong foundation for expanding cooperation and fostering closer political, economic, and societal ties across the region.<sup>9</sup>

Azerbaijan is also a viable partner for landlocked Uzbekistan to get access to Turkish and European markets by joining the flagship Middle

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<sup>9</sup> Azertag, *President: Relations between Azerbaijan and Central Asian States are of special nature*, November 16, 2025, Available at: [https://azertag.az/en/xeber/president\\_relations\\_between\\_azerbaijan\\_and\\_central\\_asian\\_states\\_are\\_of\\_special\\_nature-3863423](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/president_relations_between_azerbaijan_and_central_asian_states_are_of_special_nature-3863423) (Accessed: November 20, 2025).

Corridor transit route project. Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have built a strong strategic partnership grounded in shared Turkic identity, economic pragmatism, and mutual political trust. Cooperation focuses on transport, trade, textile, and industrial collaboration, with both countries viewing the Middle Corridor as a key driver of regional integration. Recent agreements on logistics, energy, and defence industries reflect their commitment to deeper coordination, directly or within regional structures. Uzbekistan has adopted a more competition-driven, outward-looking, and reformist strategy under its recent leadership, enhancing cooperation with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in the energy and transport sectors. These three countries could build a small triangle-like resilient bloc inside any regional platform. By seeking new export routes and deeper involvement in regional initiatives, Uzbekistan is strengthening its position as a regional economic hub. Its active engagement with the OTS and Caspian connectivity projects underscores its growing geopolitical relevance and resilience.

Turkmenistan is an energy supplier with a neutral stance. Azerbaijan's relations with Turkmenistan, though improved, have witnessed long-standing disputes over Caspian energy fields such as Dostluk (formerly Kapaz/Serdar). However, recent diplomatic progress has transformed competition into cooperation, opening prospects for joint exploration and participation in energy projects. Ties with both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan illustrate Azerbaijan's growing role as a connector and mediator within the Turkic and Caspian geopolitical framework. Turkmenistan's vast gas reserves make it a crucial player in the Caspian energy landscape, though its constitutionally enshrined neutrality limits overt political alignments. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan is increasingly interested in trans-Caspian cooperation with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to diversify its export markets and to participate in energy projects connecting it to Europe, as well as in the direction of North–South corridors.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are secondary but no less important strategic players in the region. While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lack direct access to the Caspian Sea, they are becoming indirect beneficiaries of regional connectivity and are holders of vast water resources in the region. Both countries prioritize infrastructure and logistics development, seeking integration with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's trade networks. Their participation in broader trans-Eurasian initiatives provides economic and political dividends, even if their influence in Caspian geopolitics remains limited.

Javid Valiyev, from the Baku-based AIR Center, emphasizes the deepening strategic convergence between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics, highlighting shared cultural identity, energy cooperation, and growing interregional connectivity. He argues that Baku's diplomatic outreach reflects a pragmatic effort to transform the solidarity of Turkic states into an institutionalized political and economic partnership under the OTS framework.<sup>10</sup>

Kazakhstan's foreign policy is shaped by pragmatism and balance. As one of the world's top oil and gas producers, it exports energy through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) to Russia while simultaneously developing alternative routes through Azerbaijan and China. This diversification enhances its strategic independence and strengthens economic resilience. Kazakhstan is a driving force behind the Middle Corridor, the China–Europe transport link via the Caspian Sea and cooperates closely with Azerbaijan to improve maritime transport and logistics. As the largest Central Asian state, it has assumed a leadership role within various platforms, promoting regional diplomacy and economic integration. Astana's multi-vector foreign policy enables it to maintain productive relations with Russia, China, Türkiye, and Western partners, ensuring geopolitical flexibility and stability.

Kazakhstan today serves as the geopolitical anchor of Central Asia, linking landlocked economies to international markets through the Caspian corridor. Its role in energy, transport, and diplomacy positions the country as one of the most influential actors in the broader Turkic and Eurasian space. Astana's dual energy strategy, exporting oil through Russia's Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) and Azerbaijan's Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, demonstrates its pragmatic approach to diversification. Investments in Aktau port and joint logistics initiatives with Azerbaijan further underline Kazakhstan's ambition to become a key transit hub in the Eurasian supply chain. The country's geographic position makes it indispensable for the Middle Corridor, connecting China to Europe via the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus.

Together with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan is upgrading maritime and rail infrastructure at Aktau and Alat ports to ensure seamless East–West trade. By linking these two ports, the two countries are developing a seamless maritime connection across the Caspian, reducing dependency

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10 Valiyev, J. "Azerbaijan, Central Asia Merge Paths for New Frontier", *Daily Sabah*, September 11, 2024, Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/azerbaijan-central-asia-merge-paths-for-new-frontier> (Accessed: October 11, 2025)

on Russian-controlled transit corridors and enhancing regional economic sovereignty. Their diplomatic coordination within the OTS, Caspian Economic Forum, and other regional platforms reflects deep political trust and shared long-term vision.

Through its multi-vector diplomacy, Kazakhstan maintains equilibrium among competing global powers. In security cooperation, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are deepening defence ties through joint exercises and strategic coordination, often in partnership with Türkiye. It continues to strengthen military-to-military cooperation within the framework of the OTS and regularly participates in joint military training with Türkiye and other Turkic partners, contributing to a broader regional security architecture. These initiatives are strengthening interoperability among Turkic armed forces and contributing to a shared regional security framework.

Energy remains the foundation of their cooperation: Kazakhstan's growing use of the BTC pipeline enables it to bypass Russian routes and integrate more closely with Western markets. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan also support the realization of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, which could bring Kazakh and Turkmen gas to Europe via Azerbaijan. Cooperation between KazMunayGas and SOCAR continues to expand across production, refining, and petrochemical ventures.

Looking ahead, the future of Caspian geopolitics will be shaped by the deepening collaboration between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and the institutional strengthening of the Turkic world. Joint ventures in oil, gas, and renewable energy are likely to expand, consolidating both states' roles as leading Eurasian energy exporters. Infrastructure investments in rail, digital trade, and ports will enhance the global relevance of the Middle Corridor. Furthermore, the ongoing transformation of the OTS into a functional economic bloc will provide a stronger institutional basis for regional cooperation. The potential completion of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline would connect Central Asia directly to European markets, transforming the region's energy landscape. Both Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan will continue pursuing balanced, multi-vector diplomacy, maintaining strategic relations with Türkiye, China, Russia, the European Union, and the United States, while promoting the cohesion and resilience of the wider Turkic world.

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*Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan Strategic Convergence in the Caspian Region and in the Geopolitics of Central Asia*

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan stand at the crossroads of Caspian geopolitics, Turkic integration, and Eurasian connectivity. Their coordinated efforts in energy, transport, and security mark the emergence of a strategic Turkic axis that could redefine the region's balance of power. As leaders of the OTS and architects of the Middle Corridor, they are not only shaping the Caspian future but also strengthening the voice of the region in global affairs.

Mutual relations have reached an unprecedented level of mutual trust, strategic coordination, and political understanding in recent years. Over three decades of independence, the two states have evolved from partners with shared cultural roots into strategic allies with converging geopolitical visions. Former President Nursultan Nazarbayev consistently supported Azerbaijan in difficult times for Baku, and under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, this partnership has deepened, marked by frequent high-level visits and dynamic cooperation across multiple domains. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's frequent visits to Central Asia, particularly to Kazakhstan, reflect Baku's growing recognition of Astana's role in the geopolitical landscape.

The emotional and political solidarity between the two nations strengthened notably after Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War (2020), which resonated deeply within Kazakh society. This success symbolized the restoration of justice and inspired a renewed sense of unity and respect among Turkic peoples. In the wake of these developments, both governments have demonstrated a shared commitment to building a sustainable partnership that transcends rhetoric, anchored in pragmatic economic, transport, and energy cooperation.

From a strategic perspective, Kazakhstan views Azerbaijan as its natural bridge to Europe, while Azerbaijan perceives Kazakhstan as its reliable gateway to the East. This duality has transformed the Caspian Sea into a shared strategic neighbourhood, a hub of economic connectivity and political cooperation. The OTS now provides a stable institutional framework for advancing mutual interests in trade, logistics, and security. The recent joint military exercises with Azerbaijan and Central Asian states, Birstik-2024, symbolized a new phase of trust-based military cooperation, underscoring the

shared responsibility of both nations for regional stability. Azerbaijan has proposed hosting joint military exercises for the OTS in 2026.

Azerbaijan serves as a logistical hub enabling Central Asian states to diversify connectivity toward Europe and reduce dependence on traditional northern and southern routes. Kazakhstan today stands as a “natural and reliable ally” of Azerbaijan. The bilateral relationship has evolved from formal cooperation into a sustainable axis of trust and coordination in the Caspian region. Both states are building multidimensional, sovereign, and modernization-oriented policies while maintaining strategic autonomy within the shifting world order. The joint naval exercises of the two countries and collaboration in digital connectivity, such as the undersea fibre-optic cable project across the Caspian, demonstrate a forward-looking approach toward regional integration and security.

Economically, the TITR has become the backbone of this partnership, offering both countries alternative logistical and energy export opportunities amid global supply chain transformations. The development of the Digital Trade Corridor platform further enhances the region’s connectivity with Asia and Europe. Shared historical experience creates a unique civilizational synergy that enables Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to cooperate seamlessly and understand each other intuitively.<sup>11</sup>

The Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan partnership represents one of the most dynamic and strategically significant axes in the evolving geopolitical architecture of Eurasia. The partnership of the two states has evolved into a genuine strategic alliance. As two Turkic-speaking, energy-rich, and post-Soviet republics located on opposite shores of the Caspian Sea, both countries have emerged as pivotal actors in shaping new corridors of cooperation linking Central Asia to the South Caucasus, Anatolia, and Europe. This partnership goes beyond bilateral pragmatism as it embodies a broader renaissance, promoting regional integration, strategic autonomy, and diversified connectivity amid the ongoing global power reconfiguration.

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11 Umarova, N. “How Will Central Asia Benefit from the Extension of Trans-Caspian Transport Routes?”, *Caspian Policy Center*, July 27, 2025, Available at: <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/category/how-will-central-asia-benefit-from-the-extension-of-trans-caspian-transport-routes> (Accessed: October 12, 2025)

Ultimately, the Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan partnership represents more than a bilateral alignment; it is a cornerstone for constructing a future Eurasian geoeconomics and security architecture based on balance, sovereignty, equality, and mutual respect. Their collaboration within the OTS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Central Asia Plus (CA+), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and other regional mechanisms strengthens not only national interests but also the strategic coherence of the broader Turkic world.

In parallel to institutionalization, economic integration has become a defining trend. Trade and investment between Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries are expanding rapidly, while joint projects in energy, transport, and logistics are turning the Caspian region into a critical bridge between Europe and Asia. These developments mark a shift from rhetorical solidarity to functional regionalism, in which Azerbaijan and Central Asia act as co-creators of a new inter-continental connectivity model rooted in shared identity, economic complementarity, and strategic foresight. At the foundation of this widening strategic partnership lies the shared commitment to regional trust, connectivity, energy diversification, and unity of similar countries.

The trans-Caspian Middle Corridor, as a backbone for cooperation, not only facilitates trade and logistics but also strengthens both states' strategic independence by reducing reliance on traditional routes dominated by Russia or Iran. The Middle Corridor's growing prominence reflects a broader transformation in Eurasian connectivity, and this Caspian-centred corridor stands out as a stable and efficient alternative.

For the European Union, the corridor provides a vital link for energy and goods trade that avoids Russia and complements China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EU's approach to the Caspian region emphasizes energy diversification, sustainability, and digital connectivity. The Global Gateway initiative reflects Europe's ambition to provide an alternative to China's BRI while supporting stability and governance reforms. However, the EU's cautious and bureaucratic style limits its agility compared to Beijing's rapid infrastructure-driven approach. The challenge lies in aligning normative diplomacy with pragmatic engagement, thus ensuring that human rights advocacy does not alienate key partners.

For Türkiye, the corridor reinforces its identity as a Eurasian gateway and logistical bridge between East and West. For Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, it consolidates their positions as indispensable transit hubs and economic mediators of the Turkic world. They have skilfully leveraged China's BRI to modernize their transport infrastructure, developing ports, railways, and logistics hubs. Yet, balancing economic opportunity with strategic autonomy remains a core priority for both governments, requiring careful diplomacy to ensure that external investment strengthens rather than undermines national sovereignty.

For the United States and the United Kingdom, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan represent crucial partners in securing energy diversification and geopolitical balance in Eurasia. The Middle Corridor aligns with Western goals of building resilient supply chains and limiting Russian and Chinese dominance in the region. However, Western engagement often lacks the scale of investment that China provides, creating a credibility gap. The United Kingdom has sought to expand its presence through energy partnerships and financial cooperation, with the Caspian region increasingly viewed as a new frontier for trade diversification.

Russia's long-standing dominance in its 'near abroad' has been significantly weakened. The Ukraine conflict and associated sanctions have constrained Moscow's regional leverage, encouraging Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to pursue more independent foreign policies. Nonetheless, Russia remains a relevant security actor through the Collective Security Treaty Organization and bilateral ties, particularly with Kazakhstan. Yet, the rise of Turkic cooperation and the strengthening of the OTS pose subtle and soft challenges to Russia's influence and its vision of a Eurasian integration framework.

Looking forward strategically, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's strategic partnership is likely to deepen as both states pursue balanced, multi-vector foreign policies. Strengthening the OTS as a functional economic bloc, harmonizing Caspian transit policies, and expanding trilateral cooperation with Türkiye and the EU will further solidify their regional roles. Maintaining neutrality amid the strategic rivalry between China, Russia, and the West will remain critical to sustaining stability. However, potential risks persist, ranging from environmental vulnerabilities in the Caspian Sea and geopolitical turbulence in the Caucasus to internal governance challenges. If successfully managed, the Astana–Baku axis could emerge as the core of a new connectivity

model, in which Turkic states play a central role in shaping the post-unipolar world order.

### *Conclusion*

This study addressed three main research questions: Why is Azerbaijan interested in closer ties with Central Asia? Why is Azerbaijan strategically important for Central Asia? And what makes this partnership genuinely strategic rather than symbolic?

The findings show that Azerbaijan seeks closer ties with Central Asia to consolidate its role as a geopolitical bridge and energy hub linking the Caspian Basin to Europe and Asia while reinforcing Turkic solidarity. For Central Asian states, Azerbaijan represents access to Western markets and alternative connectivity routes, reducing dependency on the northern and eastern channels.

Most importantly, the partnership between Azerbaijan and Central Asia is genuinely strategic rather than symbolic because it combines cultural affinity with institutionalized cooperation through the OTS, joint energy and transport projects, coordinated security policies, and a shared pursuit of regional autonomy. It reflects a pragmatic and multidimensional transformation, rooted in common identity but driven by concrete political, economic, and security interests.

Ultimately, Azerbaijan and Central Asia now function as the dual strategic pillars of a new Turkic Eurasian regionalism, with Azerbaijan anchoring the western Caspian flank and Central Asia forming its eastern foundation. Their cooperation strengthens the resilience and agency of the broader Turkic world amid shifting global power structures, transforming cultural kinship into a sustainable geopolitical partnership.

Azerbaijan and Central Asia can be seen as a true engine of the Turkic World. Azerbaijan has emerged as the western column of this alignment, a dynamic, outward-looking state linking the Caspian to the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Central Asia, led by Kazakhstan and joined increasingly by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, forms the eastern anchor, connecting the Turkic world to China, Russia, and South Asia. Together, they constitute a strategic axis of balance and resilience across the heart of Eurasia.

The Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership enhances regional agency

amid great-power competition, transforming Organization of Turkic States and Central Asia summits from cultural initiatives into instruments of coordinated economic and security policy. Through energy diversification, joint infrastructure projects, and military cooperation, both sides are asserting independent strategic identities. Ultimately, this evolving partnership represents a new model of Turkic power – pragmatic, multidimensional, and forward-looking – positioning Azerbaijan and Central Asia as the architects of a more interconnected, stable, and self-reliant central Eurasia. The study concludes that Azerbaijan–Central Asia cooperation is evolving into a key potential factor of a new type of economic integration, geographical connectivity, and security architecture based on recently emerging Turkic Eurasian regionalism.