

HIGHLIGHT OF JOURNAL

The South Caucasus as a Digital-Transport Hub:
The Middle Corridor, Data Flows, and Emerging Security Risks
Yunis Gurbanov



CAUCASUS

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Volume 7 • Issue 1 • Summer 2026

The South Caucasus between Regions: Security in a Connected World

ARTICLES

Black Sea-Caspian Cooperation: Security
Challenges and Economic Developments

Yuriy Husyev
and **Emir Rustamov**

*

Structural Transformation in Eurasian
Integration: The C6 Platform and the Strategic
Geopolitics of the Middle Corridor

Hazel Çağan Elbir

*

Azerbaijan's Niche Diplomacy
in the Western Balkans

Nina Miholjčić Ivković

ARTICLES

From Cultural Cooperation to Military
Integration: The Significance of the OTS's
Planned 2026 Joint Military Exercise

Alper Volkan Ertem

*

The South Caucasus, Connectivity and the
European Union's Strategic Turn

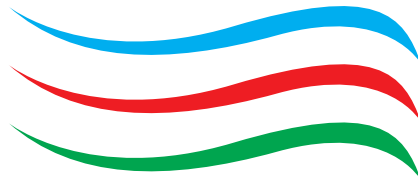
Jordi Xuclà

*

COMMENTARY

From Turkmenbashi to Baku:
The Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan
Trilateral Format in the Greater Caspian Region

Roza Bayramli



CAUCASUS

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Volume 7 • Issue 1 • Summer 2026

The South Caucasus between Regions:
Security in a Connected World

CAUCASUS STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Volume 7 • Issue 1 • Summer 2026

The South Caucasus between Regions: Security in a Connected World



Publisher: Center of Analysis of International Relations

Type of Publication: Periodical (biannual)

Caucasus Strategic Perspectives is a Baku-based academic foreign policy journal that discusses policymaking in and on the Caucasus as well as the region's role in the global context. Each issue of the journal will focus on a global or regional theme and includes perspectives from authors from different countries and backgrounds. The journal focuses largely on the Caucasus neighborhood, but does so with a global outlook. The journal of **Caucasus Strategic Perspectives** is issued by the Center of Analysis of International Relations in Baku.



Editorial Team

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Farid Shafiyev

Executive Editor: Huseyn Sultanli

Review Editors: Vasif Huseynov, Roza Bayramli, Sultan Zahidov

Editorial Assistant: Maryam Ismayilova

Proofreader: Tony Murfin

Designer: Intigam Mahammadli





Editorial Office

Baku Office:

Center of Analysis of International Relations
Mirza Ibrahimov street 8, Baku, AZ1005, Azerbaijan
Tel: (+994 12) 596-82-39
E-mail: cspsubmissions@aircenter.az

Artpoint Reklam MMC
ISSN (print): 2788-5178
ISSN (online): 2788-5186
Baku - 2026

NOTICE: The content of articles published in Caucasus Strategic Perspectives does not represent any institutional viewpoint. The analysis and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Publishers and Editors. The Publishers and Editors accept only the responsibility of giving authors a chance to express differing analyses to engage in intellectual debate.

BOARD OF ADVISERS

Farid Shafiyev (PhD in History), Editor-in-Chief for Caucasus Strategic Perspectives and Chairman of the Center for Analysis of International Relations

Robert Cutler (PhD in Political Science), Senior Research Fellow and Director, Energy Security Program, NATO Association of Canada; and past fellow, Canadian International Council

Hakan Yavuz (PhD in Political Science), Professor of political science at the University of Utah

Giorgi Badridze (Ambassador ret.), Senior Fellow at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

Glen E. Howard, President and Chairman of the Saratoga Foundation

Svante Cornell (PhD in Peace and Conflict Studies), Research Director, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Institute for Security and Development Policy & American Foreign Policy Council

Robert Austin (PhD in History), Associate Director, Centre For European, Russian And Eurasian Studies, University of Toronto

Stanislav Pritchkin (PhD in History), Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) of the Russian Academy of Sciences

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Volume 7 • Issue 1 • Summer 2026

EDITOR’S NOTE	8
---------------	---

HIGHLIGHT OF JOURNAL

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AS A DIGITAL-TRANSPORT HUB: THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR, DATA FLOWS, AND EMERGING SECURITY RISKS	
YUNIS GURBANOV	11

ARTICLES

BLACK SEA-CASPIAN COOPERATION: SECURITY CHALLENGES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS	
YURIY HUSYEV AND EMIR RUSTAMOV	31

STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN EURASIAN INTEGRATION: THE C6 PLATFORM AND THE STRATEGIC GEOPOLITICS OF THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR	
HAZEL ÇAĞAN ELBİR	53

AZERBAIJAN’S NICHE DIPLOMACY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS	
NINA MIHOJČIĆ IVKOVIĆ	67

FROM CULTURAL COOPERATION TO MILITARY INTEGRATION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OTS’S PLANNED 2026 JOINT MILITARY EXERCISE	
ALPER VOLKAN ERTEM	83

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS, CONNECTIVITY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION’S STRATEGIC TURN	
JORDI XUCLÀ	95

COMMENTARY

FROM TURKMENBASHY TO BAKU: THE AZERBAIJAN- TURKMENISTAN-UZBEKISTAN TRILATERAL FORMAT IN THE GREATER CASPIAN REGION	
ROZA BAYRAMLI	111

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE TITLE: “CONNECTIVITY, PARTNERSHIP AND DIPLOMACY: PATHWAYS TO STABILITY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS	
DEADLINE: 1 OCTOBER 2026	119

Editor's Note

The current issue of the Caucasus Strategic Perspectives (CSP) journal entitled *“The South Caucasus between Regions: Security in a Connected World”* is dedicated to the emerging new reality in the South Caucasus, characterized by deepening interconnectedness with neighbouring regions and increasingly shaped by efforts to promote stability and sustainable peace.

The CSP's new issue includes 6 articles and 1 commentary. The CSP's current authors examine the growing indispensability of the South Caucasus to the rapidly developing Middle Corridor, emerging cooperation between the Black Sea and Caspian regions, the increasing significance of the C6 platform amid deepening cooperation between the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, the evolving military dimension of the Organization of Turkic States, recent developments in the European Union's complex role in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan's consolidation of its middle power status in the context of its partnerships in the Western Balkans, etc.

The new issue's **Highlight** is **Yunis Gurbanov's** article titled *“The South Caucasus as a Digital-Transport Hub: The Middle Corridor, Data Flows, and Emerging Security Risks”*. The article discusses the nature of the Middle Corridor, which is changing from a mere transport corridor via a new strategy that integrates connectivity, digitization, cybersecurity and geoeconomics. The author examines how the South Caucasus, and particularly Azerbaijan, is emerging as not only a transit hub connecting Europe and Asia but also potentially as a digital security node that connects Central Asia, the Caspian Sea basin, Türkiye and European markets.

The new issue's **Articles section** begins with the joint article of **Yuriy Husyev** and **Emir Rustamov** titled *“Black Sea–Caspian Region Cooperation: Security Challenges and Economic Developments”*. This article examines the evolving security architecture and economic prospects of the Black Sea–Caspian macro-region, with particular emphasis on the prospects for multilateral cooperation among Ukraine and its strategic partners in this region – Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania. The analysis demonstrates that, although security dilemmas persist, expanding economic interdependence, infrastructure integration and normative convergence offer a pathway towards a more cohesive

macro-regional order. The article concludes that the Black Sea–Caspian region is gradually transitioning from a fragmented geopolitical frontier into a dynamic, though still contested, centre of Eurasian connectivity.

Hazel Çağan Elbir’s article titled “*Structural Transformation in Eurasian Integration: The C6 Platform*” examines, from an academic perspective, a profound structural transformation in Eurasian geopolitics: the evolution of the Central Asia Five (C5) format into the ‘C6’ platform, with Azerbaijan’s fully fledged participation, and the impact of this process on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor, TITR). It analyses the institutionalisation process of the C6 structure, inter-state allied relations in the region, energy security parameters and Türkiye’s catalytic role in this integration process.

Nina Miholjic Ivkovic’s article titled “*Azerbaijan’s Niche Diplomacy in the Western Balkans*” examines how Azerbaijan, as an emerging middle power, uses niche diplomacy to build stronger ties with the states of the Western Balkans and increase regional and international influence. The analysis identifies energy security, infrastructure development and soft power diplomacy as the main niche assets of Azerbaijan’s diplomatic outreach in the Western Balkans.

Jordi Xuclà’s article titled “*The South Caucasus, Connectivity and the European Union’s Strategic Turn*” examines the South Caucasus as an emerging geoeconomic hub and analyses the European Union’s strategic turn towards the region since 2022. The author argues that although the EU has become more dependent on a stable and connected South Caucasus, its institutions have not moved in the same direction. Hence, the EU’s influence in the region will depend on its capacity to align strategic language, institutional discipline and investment decisions.

Alper Volkan Ertem’s article titled “*From Cultural Cooperation to Military Integration: The Significance of the OTS’s Planned 2026 Joint Military Exercise*” analyses the potential benefits President İlham Aliyev’s proposal to hold a joint military exercise in Azerbaijan would bring to OTS member states and the organization’s international weight as a regional security actor. The study also explores the positive effects that would result from extending the successful military alliance model between Türkiye and Azerbaijan to the other OTS members.

The summer issue also features **Roza Bayramli’s** commentary titled “*From Turkmenbashi to Baku: The Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan–Uzbekistan Trilateral Format in the Greater Caspian Region*”. The

author examines the emerging trilateral format between Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as a practical mechanism for advancing cooperation in transport, energy, and trade across the Greater Caspian region. The trilateral mechanism is assessed within the broader process of institutionalizing the C6 framework, suggesting that smaller, project-oriented formats can serve as effective platforms for testing practical solutions before their wider regional application.

Finally, on behalf of the CSP team, we hope this issue provides food for thought and contributes to and enriches the discussion on subject-matter issues.

Sincerely
Farid Shafiyev
Editor-in-Chief of CSP Journal

The South Caucasus as a Digital-Transport Hub: The Middle Corridor, Data Flows, and Emerging Security Risks

Yunis Gurbanov*

This article discusses the nature of the Middle Corridor, which is changing from a mere transport corridor via a new strategy that integrates connectivity, digitization, cybersecurity and geoeconomics. Specifically, the article discusses how the South Caucasus, and particularly Azerbaijan, is emerging as not only a transit hub connecting Europe and Asia but also potentially as a digital security node that connects Central Asia, the Caspian Sea basin, Türkiye and European markets. The primary focus of this article will be on the evolving connection between two concepts – transport corridors and data corridors – which it will examine through a discussion of digital infrastructure in the Caspian Sea region, digitalized customs and logistics systems, e-commerce sites and cybersecurity cooperation. The key message here is that the future importance of the Middle Corridor will not depend solely on sea ports, railway tracks and roads; it will increasingly rely on securing digital connectivity and establishing cybersecurity strategies along those transit routes. The article considers the changing dynamics of Eurasia by taking note of alternative routes to existing northern ones; the growing relevance of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS); the European Union's (EU) interest in connectivity and digital connections; Chinese Belt and Road logic; and concerns about hybrid threats in the region. In conclusion, the implementation of a safe digital component of the Middle Corridor could help reinforce the South Caucasus' role as a regional centre of geoeconomic initiatives; however, this can only be achieved by overcoming the current fragmentation of infrastructure projects and shifting to an integrated model of digital governance, cybersecurity and international data collaboration.

Keywords: Middle Corridor, Azerbaijan, South Caucasus, digital connectivity, cybersecurity, data corridors, Central Asia.



* **Dr. Yunis Gurbanov** is a Senior Advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), Baku, Azerbaijan, and a Lecturer at the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Cologne and an MPA from Columbia University. His research focuses on geopolitics, energy diplomacy, conflict prevention, and regional security in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the broader Eurasian region

Introduction

The Middle Corridor has often been considered in terms of railways, ports, roads, maritime connections, customs and east–west cargo shipments. This is quite logical, as the initial priority of the Middle Corridor is to link China and Central Asia with the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe via a trans-Caspian multimodal corridor. With the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, the imposition of economic sanctions against Russia, disruption of supply chains and rising interest in alternative transport corridors connecting Europe and Asia, the Middle Corridor has gained additional geopolitical importance. For Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus region, this offers a unique opportunity to enhance their status as a connecting region and a geoeconomic initiative hub.

However, such an understanding is no longer adequate. A corridor in the 21st century is not just a physical space where transport takes place; it is also a digital space for transporting data, payment transactions,

A corridor in the 21st century is not just a physical space where transport takes place; it is also a digital space for transporting data, payment transactions, customs information, cargo monitoring, insurance, cargo clearance, security notifications and business intelligence.

customs information, cargo monitoring, insurance, cargo clearance, security notifications and business intelligence. A corridor that does not have the necessary digital interoperability may be marked on the map, but it will remain slow, costly, vulnerable and strategically deficient. In contrast, a corridor that merges physical infrastructure with secure digital infrastructure could become a regional integration and strategic autonomy platform.

This article, therefore, proposes considering the potential of the Middle Corridor developing into a physical-digital corridor. The competitiveness of the future Middle Corridor would rest on three interconnected layers. The first is the physical infrastructure layer of railways, ports, roads, ships, logistics facilities and energy facilities. The second layer is the digital infrastructure of fibre-optic cables, data centres, customs and other digital clearing houses, e-commerce platforms, tracking systems, cloud computing systems and digital logistics networks. The third is the security-governance layer of cybersecurity measures, data protection, resilience against hybrid attacks, regional coordination mechanisms and trusted political arrangements.

Azerbaijan plays an important part in this process. Azerbaijan is

an essential state within the physical Middle Corridor because of its position between the Caspian and the Black Sea; participation in the implementation of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway project and the construction of Alat Port; energy network infrastructure; ties with Central Asia; and strategic cooperation with Türkiye. However, the potential significance of Azerbaijan could increase through the development of digital corridors within the region, in addition to transport and energy infrastructure. The implementation of fibre-optic connections across the Caspian, and the creation of digital logistics systems and cyber-defence measures, would enable the country to function not only as a bridge for transportation but also as a digital bridge.

The strategic importance of the Middle Corridor has risen considerably in recent years. The World Bank estimates that freight traffic via the Middle Corridor could grow to about 11 million tons by 2030, with travel time decreasing from today's range of 38–53 days to 14–18 days, depending on the implementation of joint reforms by participating nations. New operational statistics show this to be true. According to the Government of Kazakhstan, the volume of goods shipped using the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR, widely known as the Middle Corridor) grew by 62% in 2024 to touch 4.5 million tons.¹ In remarks delivered at the Central Asia–Italy Summit in May 2025, Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev highlighted that the cargo flow along the Middle Corridor had increased by 62% in 2024 and mentioned a target for capacity expansion to 10 million tons per year by 2027. With this goal, Kazakhstan and its allies are seeking to turn the Middle Corridor into a strategic component of Eurasian connectivity.²

The central questions of this study are: **how can the Middle Corridor be transformed from an important transport link into a geoeconomically safe digital corridor? And, what is the place of Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus within this process?**

The article offers three core arguments. First, the strategic importance of the Middle Corridor increasingly depends on the synergy of transport, digital and security infrastructure. Second, the role of Azerbaijan in this

1 World Bank, *The Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030*, November 27, 2023, Available at: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099111723122527465> (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

2 Daly, J.C.K., "Kazakhstan Increases Railway Capacity Along Trans-Caspian International Transport Route", *The Jamestown Foundation*, June 9, 2025, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/kazakhstan-increases-railway-capacity-along-trans-caspian-international-transport-route/> (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

infrastructure cannot be solely considered from the perspective of transit geography. Third, the prospects for the corridor will be determined by its ability to avoid isolated national digital infrastructure and develop reliable means of cooperation in matters of security and institution-building.

The structure of the article is as follows. In the methodology section, the qualitative research and policy analysis approach is described. The theoretical background outlines key terms such as geoeconomic connectivity, digital sovereignty and securitization of infrastructure. The following sections analyse the transformation of the Middle Corridor from a transport initiative into a strategic connectivity infrastructure project; the development of data corridors in the Caspian region; Azerbaijan as a digital-transport node; hybrid threats and cybersecurity concerns; external players; and policy measures to ensure a secure and competitive digital corridor.

Methodology

This article employs qualitative and policy-oriented research methods. It relies on information obtained from official statements, regional policy papers, reports issued by international organizations, expert analyses and the latest media reports on such topics as Middle Corridor initiatives, trans-Caspian transportation projects, digital connectivity solutions, cybersecurity concerns and the geopolitical importance of Azerbaijan for Eurasian connectivity. The research is interdisciplinary, covering areas such as international relations, regional studies, geoeconomics and digital security.

The article takes a fundamentally political approach to digital corridors, rather than treating them solely from a technical perspective. Digital networks, logistics platforms, customs databases, cyber-protection systems and big data flows are treated as elements of sovereignty, regional power and economic resilience. This matters because of the possibility that digitalization of transport corridors will either help to decrease dependence and increase regional autonomy or will create additional vulnerabilities if digital networks are managed by foreign powers, have poor cybersecurity or are vulnerable to cyberattacks.

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology that involves analysing a variety of academic literature and secondary sources. The choice of Azerbaijan as the major case study was made because of

its geographical position, its strategic importance within the Middle Corridor and its increasing involvement in establishing connectivity through digital means from Central Asia to Europe. The article considers Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states as eastern partners of the corridor, while Georgia and Türkiye are seen as the major western connection points. The EU, China, Russia and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) are the other regional players.

The article uses a policy-oriented approach to analyse the importance of the digital aspect of the Middle Corridor in terms of its strategic value, influence on the security context of the South Caucasus region and possible policy options to enhance the resilience of the Middle Corridor.

Theoretical Framework: From Physical Connectivity to Digital Geoeconomics

The Middle Corridor can be analysed through three different but interconnected perspectives: geoeconomics, digital sovereignty and the securitization of connectivity.

The first perspective is geoeconomics. Traditional geopolitical thinking views territory, military strength and control over key transportation routes as the primary sources of power. Geoeconomics sees nations using trade routes, infrastructure development, financial tools, energy transport, technical standards and supply chains to realize their geopolitical aims. Corridors cannot be seen as purely economic ventures, as they create dependencies, shape bargaining power, influence market entry and establish political leverage. The Middle Corridor is geoeconomic because it enables Central Asian and South Caucasian nations to develop alternative access to world markets and avoid over-reliance on one specific route.³

The second lens is digital sovereignty, the ability of states and regions to govern and defend their digital infrastructure, data flows, platforms and dependencies on technologies. In the case of the Middle Corridor, this implies that port facilities, customs procedures, logistics platforms and cargo-tracking technologies should not be regarded purely as commercial instruments. Instead, they are elements of state infrastructure. Consequently, if the digital infrastructure of a corridor

3 Şenol, C. and Erbilin, S.Ü., “Analysis of the Impact of the Middle Corridor on Türkiye in Terms of Geopolitics and Economy in the OBOR Initiative”, *Journal of Geography*, No. 45, 2022, pp. 161-180.

is insecure, external and fragmented, then it becomes strategically vulnerable.⁴

Third, there is the securitization of connectivity. Classical security studies have mainly concentrated on threats to statehood by traditional means.⁵ However, in a connected world, infrastructure itself becomes an object of security. Pipeline networks, ports, cables, railway systems, orbital satellites, logistics databases and financial transactions are vulnerable to cyberwarfare, sabotage, misinformation, economic sanctions and coercion. Connectivity generates opportunities, but it also generates vulnerabilities. Consequently, the more critical the Middle Corridor becomes, the more likely it will generate strategic rivalry and hybrid threats.⁶

Three perspectives, therefore, can help us understand that the future of the Middle Corridor cannot be predicted simply by measuring the volume of cargo transported or the duration of journeys. The importance of the Middle Corridor will depend on its ability to become faster, safer and more reliable, interoperable and politically resilient.⁷

The Middle Corridor as a New Strategic Connectivity Architecture

The Middle Corridor route has gained prominence as a result of the restructuring of Eurasian connectivity. For several years, the northern corridors through Russia had been some of the most developed routes connecting Europe and China over land. The Russia–Ukraine conflict and resultant geopolitical fallout have changed this reality. While it remains physically feasible to use the northern routes, the increased geopolitical risks, potential sanctions exposure, reputational concerns and the uncertain future make alternative routes attractive.⁸

4 Robles-Carrillo, M., “Sovereignty vs. Digital Sovereignty”, *Journal of Digital Technologies and Law*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2023.

5 Abbood, A.A., AL-Shammri, F.K., Alzamili, Z.M. et al., “Investigating Quantum-Resilient Security Mechanisms for Flying Ad-Hoc Networks (FANETs)”, *Journal of Robotics and Control (JRC)*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2025, pp. 456-469.

6 Liu, Z., “The ‘Pan-Securitization’ of the EU’s Connectivity Policy and China–EU Cooperation”, in *The Belt and Road Initiative: Past, Present, Future* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2025), pp. 259-278.

7 Vasa, L. and Barkanyi, P., “Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Importance of the Middle Corridor: A Comprehensive Overview”, *Eurasian Journal of Economic and Business Studies*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 2023, pp. 20-32.

8 *Ibid.*

One alternative for such trade is the Middle Corridor. This route connects China and Central Asia with the Caspian Sea before continuing on to Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye and Europe. It differs from maritime trade by offering a combined land–sea–land route. It differs from northern trade routes by being less reliant on Russia. It is different from the southern trade routes in that it avoids some geopolitical risks posed by Iran and the Persian Gulf. Landlocked Central Asia is provided with an export route into Europe. Azerbaijan and Georgia benefit from enhanced transit significance. Türkiye gains importance as a Eurasian gateway.⁹

The importance of the Middle Corridor in transport operations is also evident from recent statistics. Kazakhstan’s Prime Minister Alikhan Bektanov stated that the volume of cargo shipped using the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route grew 62% in 2024 to stand at 4.5 million tons. This growth is much faster than that experienced by container shipments, which grew 170% to 56,500 TEU. By 2027, the capacity of the Middle Corridor is expected to reach 10 million tons.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the Middle Corridor faces some structural issues. The route crosses several borders, passes through a number of legal regimes and involves multiple customs clearance processes, ports, railway standards, ship and train scheduling processes and national regulatory regimes. A delay in any one part may impact the entire route and, because all parts of the route are interconnected, a weakness in one country’s institutional or digital systems can affect the performance of the entire corridor. Thus, although physical infrastructure is essential, it is not sufficient for a functional corridor. It needs to become predictable in administration and secure in terms of information and data flows.¹¹

This is where digitalization is important. In the age of the Internet, a state-of-the-art transport corridor should have electronic documents for cargoes, integrated customs clearance systems, tracking systems

While corridor building refers to building railway tracks, ports, roads and terminals, corridor governance involves managing all these components through consistent guidelines, safe information exchange and coordination mechanisms.

9 Reisinezhad, A. and Reisinezhad, A., “The Corridor War in the Middle East”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2025, pp. 91-108.

10 Caspia Lab, *Cargo Traffic on the “Middle Corridor” Increased by 62% in 2024*, February 6, 2025, Available at: <https://caspia-lab.az/article/cargo-traffic-on-the-middle-corridor-increased-by-62-in-2024-1284> (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

11 Gafarli, T., “Unlocking the Potential in the South Caucasus: The Zangezur Corridor’s Impact on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor)”, *PERCEPTIONS: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2025, pp. 148-173.

International organizations have identified and recognized the increasing relevance of digitalization. for goods, digital payments, harmonized data standardization protocols, automated risk management systems and data exchanges between ports, railway operators, customs services and private logistics firms.¹²

Thus, the development of the Middle Corridor requires a shift from ‘corridor building’ to ‘corridor governance’. While corridor building refers to building railway tracks, ports, roads and terminals, corridor governance involves managing all these components through consistent guidelines, safe information exchange and coordination mechanisms. This is crucial because many regions can build corridors, but few can successfully govern connectivity.¹³

Data Flows as the New Layer of the Middle Corridor

International organizations have identified and recognized the increasing relevance of digitalization. As indicated in the World Bank’s analysis of the Middle Corridor project, digitalization, along with improvements in customs practices and interoperability, is crucial to realizing expected growth and decrease transit time. The World Bank estimates that transit time can be decreased from 38–53 days to 14–18 days. Therefore, the above results indicate that digitalization, together with other technological advances such as automated customs processing, logistics platforms and border information systems, will be decisive in determining the future success of the corridor.¹⁴

This leads to the development of a novel idea known as the ‘digital corridor’. This is not an alternative to the transport corridor but, rather, a facilitator of it. It is the invisible architecture that makes the visible one function effectively. In the case of the Middle Corridor, the digital corridor has four dimensions.

12 Mammadov, M., Alizada, S., Mammadov, N. et al., “Artificial Intelligence in Transit Corridor Management: Economic Efficiency Prospects of the Zangezur Corridor”, *Luminis Applied Science and Engineering*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2026, pp. 45-52.

13 Rasli, F.N., Juhari, M.L. and Halim, A.H.A., “Green Corridors in Coordinating and Supporting SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities”, *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, Vol. VIII, 2025, pp. 1053-1071.

14 World Bank, *Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030*, November 2023, Available at: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099111723122527465> (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

The first component is related to telecommunications infrastructure. Fibre-optic connections across the Caspian Sea have the potential to connect Azerbaijan with Kazakhstan and even Turkmenistan, thereby establishing a direct digital link between the South Caucasus and Central Asia. This is crucial from a strategic point of view, as it may help reduce reliance on alternative routes that can be both longer and riskier.¹⁵

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly emphasized his country's ambition to become a major transport, logistics and connectivity hub linking Europe and Asia.

Second, logistics digitalization is required. Ports, railway stations, customs administrations and logistics firms should adopt interoperable technologies. The ideal would be to achieve a state in which data flow much faster than the actual physical products. Indeed, completing the digital process of clearance prior to the arrival of goods at customs points or ports of entry will save substantial transit time.¹⁶

Third, there is digitalization of commerce. E-commerce, digital trade services, online payment systems and regional business platforms stand to gain from a more coordinated corridor system. The Middle Corridor is not just a passage for physical cargo but also a digital platform connecting Europe, Türkiye, the South Caucasus and Central Asia.¹⁷

Fourth is cybersecurity. As the Middle Corridor becomes digitized, it requires protection. Hacking of ports, rail networks, customs databases and telecommunications systems can seriously undermine any gains made by the corridor. Without cybersecurity, the digital corridor will become a strategic liability rather than a strategic asset.

Azerbaijan's Role: From Transit State to Digital-Transport Hub

Azerbaijan enjoys the advantages of favourable geography in its efforts

15 Nuriyev, E., "Exploring Future Energy Security in the Black Sea-Caspian Region: Strategic Interests, Political Risks, and Emerging Challenges", in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Risk* (London: Routledge, 2025), pp. 254-276.

16 Zeng, F., Chen, A., Xu, S. et al., "Digitalization in the Maritime Logistics Industry: A Systematic Literature Review of Enablers and Barriers", *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2025, Article 797.

17 Núñez, Y.G., González, G.R., Ávila, L.R. et al., "Effective Commercial Management: Essential Elements for Its Development in the Current Context", in *Advances in Technical Sciences and Architecture: Selected Contributions of CCIA 2024* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026), pp. 927-934.

to participate in the Middle Corridor, although the geography of a country is not, by itself, sufficient to ensure it a strategic advantage. Strategic advantage is achieved when the geographical advantages of a state are paired with infrastructure, institutions, technologies and international collaborations. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly emphasized his country's ambition to become a major transport, logistics and connectivity hub linking Europe and Asia.¹⁸

Azerbaijan has made significant investments in the development of infrastructure for energy and transport in recent decades. Specifically, as stated on the website of Baku International Sea Trade Port, the current capacity of the Port of Baku (Alat Port) is 15 million tons per year and 100,000 TEU in containers. With the planned expansion of the port facilities, this will be increased to 25 million tons and 500,000 TEU. In addition, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway line and the energy facilities of Azerbaijan, along with growing collaboration with Central Asia and Türkiye, add to the country's significance within the Middle Corridor.¹⁹

Azerbaijan's indispensability for the Middle Corridor is apparent from the following angles

First, Azerbaijan is the Caspian entry point for the South Caucasus. With its Alat Port, railways and connections with Georgia and Türkiye, Azerbaijan becomes a window into Europe as well as an important part of the trans-Caspian bridge. Central Asian states find, in Azerbaijan, an entry point to Türkiye and Europe; Europe sees it as an opportunity to get closer to Central Asia.²⁰

Second, Azerbaijan is a connector between transport and energy corridors. The knowledge it has gained from the development and management of large cross-border infrastructure projects, such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) and Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), has helped Azerbaijan become well-versed in handling such infrastructure projects. This knowledge could also be used

18 President.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the SCO Plus format meeting in Tianjin*, China, September 1, 2025, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70040> (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

19 Transit.gov.az, *Maritime Transport and Ports*, Available at: <https://transit.gov.az/en/transportation-systems/maritime-transport-and-ports> (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

20 Gafarli, T., "Unlocking the Potential in the South Caucasus: The Zangezur Corridor's Impact on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor)", *PERCEPTIONS: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2025, pp. 148-173.

for transport and digital corridors. The reasoning behind this assumption is that such infrastructure needs to be safe, politically acceptable, economically feasible and internationally recognized.²¹

Third, Azerbaijan is becoming a critical node in terms of digital connectivity between Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe. Digital aspects of the Middle Corridor have become more than just a theory. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are currently working on the implementation of the Trans-Caspian Fiber Optic Cable project under the Digital Silk Way project. According to information from Azerbaijan's AzerTelecom, the project entails the creation of a 380-km submarine fibre-optic cable, which will connect the cities of Sumgayit (Azerbaijan) and Aktau (Kazakhstan). The planned transmission capacity is up to 400 Tbps. The project is scheduled for completion at the end of 2026 and can be considered one of the most significant digital projects in the Caspian area.²²

According to NEQSOL Holding, the larger framework of the Digital Silk Way involves investments amounting to more than \$250 million with the aim of developing a safe and reliable east–west digital corridor between Europe and Asia. As a result, Azerbaijan is not only seen as a transit country for cargo and natural resources, but may become a transit country for data flows. The project will help in developing telecommunications, cloud computing, digital trade and data-processing services.

As noted by the CEO of AzerTelecom, Emil Masimov, the objective of the Trans-Caspian Fiber-Optic Cable Project is to establish a new east–west information bridge and to make an important contribution to the development of a safer and more diverse system of data exchange between Europe and Asia. In this respect, one can observe how the position of Azerbaijan, in terms of the Middle Corridor, goes beyond transport and energy projects to include the field of digital connectivity and information infrastructure. By opening up new economic prospects for the country, this project also helps to build up digital sovereignty and minimize excessive reliance on the old northern route.²³

21 Khanayev, A. and Al, A., “Azerbaijan’s Renewable Energy Policies and Green Energy Corridors”, *Marmara Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2025, pp. 800-818.

22 AzerTelecom, *Significant Milestone of the Trans-Caspian Cable Line Project*, March 4, 2025, Available at: <https://www.azertelecom.az/en/news/significant-milestone> (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

23 Digital Silk Way, *Euronews Aired a Special Program on the Trans-Caspian Fiber-Optic Cable Line*, December 18, 2025, Available at: <https://www.digitalsilkway.az/news/59/euronews-aired-a-special-program-on-the-trans-caspian-fiber-optic-cable-line> (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

As the corridor develops, it will be important for Azerbaijan to maintain a diversified economic model and avoid excessive reliance on transit-related revenues. However, there are much larger benefits to consider than simply earning revenues through charging fees for moving cargo across its land. Some of the additional services that can be offered in relation to the use of the corridor include logistics, data processing, insurance, trade financing and cybersecurity services, among others.

Cybersecurity and Hybrid Risks along the Middle Corridor

The digitalization of the Middle Corridor will introduce a range of vulnerabilities, which should not be considered only from the point of view of technological security but rather within the context of the security environment of the whole region.

The first type of vulnerability refers to the disruption of critical infrastructure. Digitalized systems are ever more frequently employed by ports, railways, customs and telecommunications services, and the energy sector. Disruption of such systems by means of a cyberattack could lead to cargo traffic disruption, economic costs and reputational loss for the route.²⁴

The second risk is data manipulation. Data accuracy plays a key role in logistics processes. If the data on cargoes, customs declarations, shipments or tracking are manipulated, then delays, fraud, sanctions violations and security events may occur. Therefore, data integrity is equally important as data availability.²⁵

The third risk is related to espionage and the collection of commercial intelligence. Corridors provide a great deal of information on trade volumes, strategic materials, military items, capacity of infrastructure assets and economic partnerships. Third parties may try to gain access to the information and use it, politically and commercially.²⁶

24 Okika, N., Nwatuze, G.A., Odozor, L. et al., “Addressing IoT-Driven Cybersecurity Risks in Critical Infrastructure to Safeguard Public Utilities and Prevent Large-Scale Service Disruptions”, *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2025.

25 Mammadov, M., Alizada, S., Mammadov, N. et al., “Artificial Intelligence in Transit Corridor Management: Economic Efficiency Prospects of the Zangezur Corridor”, *Luminis Applied Science and Engineering*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2026, pp. 45-52.

26 Clark, R.M., “The Changing Nature of Intelligence Collection”, in *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), pp. 258-270.

The fourth potential risk involves dependency on foreign providers of digital services. Without proper safeguards, the corridor could become highly dependent on third-party suppliers of digital platforms, telecommunications, cloud services or cybersecurity infrastructure. Foreign technologies should not be excluded as general policy, but procurement processes and risk assessments should nevertheless be properly conducted.²⁷

The OTS is increasingly important for the Middle Corridor, as several key countries along the route share a Turkic identity or participate in Turkic cooperation structures.

The fifth risk relates to disinformation and reputational challenges. With the increasing importance of the corridor, narratives about its reliability, security, cost efficiency and political legitimacy will also become important. Other transit corridors or competing nations can try to challenge the corridor's image through various information warfare techniques. Therefore, cybersecurity is strongly linked to strategic communications.²⁸

As shown above, cybersecurity must be incorporated into the overall plan for the development of the Middle Corridor from day one. It cannot simply be added to the existing strategy to address a technical issue. The corridor will need proper cybersecurity standards, joint response to incidents involving several countries, regular cyber-exercises, data sharing practices and more.²⁹

The Organization of Turkic States and Digital Connectivity

The OTS is increasingly important for the Middle Corridor, as several key countries along the route share a Turkic identity or participate in Turkic cooperation structures. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other states have a shared stake in ensuring Caspian transit capacity and reducing reliance on conventional transit routes.³⁰ A series of projects and initiatives concerning digitalization, smart logistics and technology cooperation were initiated during the 11th Summit of the OTS in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on November 6, 2024. First, the Bishkek Declaration, adopted by the Heads of State of the OTS

27 Mammadov et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 45-52.

28 Kieffer, E.L. and Carr, K.M., "Disinformation Attacks and Nonprofit Communication Strategies", *Journal of Nonprofit Innovation*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2025, Article 7.

29 Chatterjee, S., "Multilateral Connectivity Projects and Geopolitical Implications Through Transport Corridors in the Middle East", *Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 12, 2025, pp. 565-577.

30 *Ibid.*

at the summit, emphasized the need for the development and connection of national digital transport and logistics systems to ensure better connectivity between the countries of the OTS. Also, the introduction of the Trans-Caspian Customs Transit Portal, the e-permit scheme and the increased application of the e-TIR procedure were considered crucial for enhancing the competitiveness of the Middle Corridor. Moreover, cooperation in emerging technologies was acknowledged as another sphere of cooperation between OTS countries.³¹

There are several ways in which the OTS could help advance the digital Middle Corridor initiative. These include facilitating political coordination within member states; promoting customs harmonization and logistics standardization; fostering cooperation on cybersecurity and capacity-building; developing platforms for dialogue between telecommunications providers, logistics companies, ports and digital networks; as well as positioning the idea of digital connectivity as a component of broader Turkic regionalism, but not an ideological one.³²

Such an approach is crucial. The most productive form of Turkic cooperation is practical, rather than rhetorical. Customs digitalization, cyber-resilience measures, fibre-optic communications, digital marketplaces and unified technical standards will mean more for promoting regional solidarity than would any political declarations. In this way, digital connectivity can lay the groundwork for new forms of regionalism.³³

From this perspective, Azerbaijan has emerged as one of the key drivers of the Middle Corridor. It has consistently promoted the project as a shared venture that benefits Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe alike.

External Actors: The EU, China, Russia, Türkiye and the United States

The digital Middle Corridor will emerge in the context of competition among international actors. Several international players have an interest in the region; however, there are significant differences in their approaches to the topic.

31 Organization of Turkic States, *Bishkek Declaration of the Eleventh Summit of the Organization of Turkic States*, November 6, 2024, Available at: https://turkicstates.org/u/d/temel_belgeler/bishkek-declaration.pdf (Accessed: June 18, 2026).

32 Diriöz, A.O., “The Organization of Turkic States, Contributing to Regional Peace and Cooperation”, in *Adaptivity of Science in Reconciliation Conflict Transformation and Peace Studies* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026), pp. 279-292.

33 Abdullaev, A., “The Turkic States Organization’s Development Agenda in Logistics”, *International Affairs: Politics, Economics, Law*, Vol. 112, No. 2, 2025, pp. 147-156.

The EU considers the Middle Corridor through the prism of diversifying transport connectivity with Central Asia to ensure that there is no heavy reliance on politically unstable transport routes. The EU's interests go beyond transport and include access to vital resources and energy, digital connectivity, regulatory harmonization and supply chain security. These points are reflected in the EU's Global Gateway strategy, which aims at improving sustainable connectivity and infrastructure connections between Europe and other parts of the world. For the South Caucasus region, the approach described above represents a chance to attract investment and increase integration with Europe. Indeed, as part of its Global Gateway strategy, the European Commission plans to enhance cooperation with Azerbaijan in spheres such as transport, energy and digital connectivity. The decision-making procedure within the EU can, however, take a long time because of the bureaucratic nature of the organization. Hence, it is crucial to merge common values with infrastructure and digital investments when dealing with the European community.³⁴

For China, connectivity is one element of a larger strategy of expanding infrastructure, economic and trade linkages in Eurasia. It is noteworthy that, contrary to other countries' perception, Beijing does not see the Middle Corridor as a competitive project, but rather as a supplementary project that will add to regional connectivity and help increase trade between Asia and Europe. As China becomes increasingly involved in regional initiatives concerning infrastructure and connectivity, this also creates opportunities for investment and technology sharing. In order to capitalize on these chances, regional states must cooperate with China in a pragmatic way while retaining their strategic independence.³⁵

The expansion of other corridors by Russia, including the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Northern Corridor, raises some concerns. However, even if the Middle Corridor is not specifically designed to oppose Russia, it undermines the monopoly of the northward route. As other countries, such as Central Asian and South Caucasus nations, begin diversifying their transportation ways, Russia loses its capacity to exploit geographic advantages for its geopolitical

34 Shahbazov, F., “Azerbaijan’s Pragmatism: Navigating Foreign Policy in a Fragmented World”, in *Emerging Partners of Central Asia: Engagement of Small and Middle Powers* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026), pp. 165-183.

35 Reisinezhad, A. and Reisinezhad, A., “The Corridor War in the Middle East”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2025, pp. 91-108.

ends. The development of the Middle Corridor can raise political issues when the region is associated with Western strategic plans.³⁶

Türkiye is among the key promoters of the Middle Corridor. The route is of great significance in terms of developing the country's status as an intermediary between Asia and Europe, as well as in expanding cooperation with neighbouring countries. Indeed, the significance of this country lies in the fact that it allows the Middle Corridor to stretch towards Europe.³⁷

Resilient supply chains, diversified energy sources, and decreased reliance on Russia and China are strategic interests for the United States. Nevertheless, Washington's involvement has generally not been as infrastructure-driven as that of the EU or China. To sustain its influence in the region, Washington may need to complement political dialogue with greater involvement in cyber-defence, cybersecurity capacity-building and investment initiatives.³⁸

For Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus region, the key issue is to take advantage of all these actors while remaining independent of any one in particular. That is the core concept of multi-vector digital geoeconomics: attracting investment, diversifying partners, retaining sovereignty and developing regional ownership.

Digital Sovereignty and the South Caucasus Security Architecture

For a considerable time, the South Caucasus was characterized by conflict, Great Power competition and energy corridors. The emergence of digital corridors has provided another aspect to this characterization. Should the South Caucasus become an important link between Europe and Asia in terms of data connectivity, digital sovereignty will be included in the region's security paradigm.³⁹ Digital sovereignty does not imply seclusion from international technology players. Rather, it

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Schindler, S., Altun, S. and Bayırbağ, M.K., ““There Cannot Be a Corridor Without Türkiye!”: Türkiye's Polyalignment Strategy in Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy”, *Third World Quarterly*, 2026, pp. 1-19.

³⁸ Arisoy, A. and Gokasar, I., “The Logistics Conjuncture of the Middle Corridor Trade Route and Turkey's Strategic Role”, *Journal of Intelligent Decision Making and Granular Computing*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2025, pp. 143-150.

³⁹ Akıllı, E., “Presence—Sovereign Identity in the Digital Sphere”, in *Cognitive Diplomacy and Digital Autonomy: Statecraft in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), pp. 113-135.

implies the capability to take independent decisions in relation to digital infrastructure development, cybersecurity, vendor diversification, data protection and standard setting. For smaller nations, this might prove challenging but inevitable. Vulnerabilities may arise when countries depend solely on an external technology supplier. Insufficient local capacity could limit a country's technological resilience, and inconsistent regulation could undermine integration efforts.⁴⁰

Should the South Caucasus become an important link between Europe and Asia in terms of data connectivity, digital sovereignty will be included in the region's security paradigm.

For Azerbaijan, digital sovereignty must be tied to the corridor strategy. It should consider a few basic questions: who controls digital infrastructure? Where is data stored? What standards safeguard logistics platforms? How is cyber-event management organized? How do private operators participate in the national security framework? Can Azerbaijan engage with Kazakhstan, Georgia, Türkiye and EU countries to strengthen cybersecurity cooperation along the Middle Corridor?

The same questions are valid for the region. If the Middle Corridor is to be digitally secure, states must operate according to common standards. If a container moves from Kazakhstan to Europe via Azerbaijan and Georgia, it must not encounter various digital systems. A cyberattack in one area should automatically activate mechanisms for joint action. It must be feasible to exchange data without disclosing national security data. This necessitates institutional design.⁴¹

In other words, the South Caucasus could serve as a test bed for safe connectivity. When Azerbaijan, Georgia and their partners establish a reliable digital logistics platform, the strategic importance of the region will increase. Otherwise, the Middle Corridor will look appealing only in theory.

Policy Recommendations

A number of measures could reinforce the digital and cybersecurity aspects of the Middle Corridor.

40 Repetto, E., "Concept 'Stretching' or Concept Innovation? A Review of the Usages of Sovereignty in the Digital Sovereignty Literature", *Policy & Internet*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2025, Article e70011.

41 Santaniello, M., "Attributes of Digital Sovereignty: A Conceptual Framework", *Geopolitics*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2026, pp. 788-809.

First, Azerbaijan and other stakeholders should advocate for the idea of a ‘Digital Middle Corridor’. This approach will encourage policymakers to think beyond physical transit and move towards connectivity. It should encompass transport digitalization, fibre-optic infrastructure, cybersecurity measures, data governance, digital trade and logistics.

Second, governments of participating countries should establish a cybersecurity policy for the whole corridor. Such an initiative may include minimum cybersecurity standards for ports, rail networks, customs authorities and logistics providers, along with joint cyber-drills, alert systems and collaboration among national CERTs.

Third, digital customs and cargo procedures should be coordinated. In the longer term, efforts should be directed at creating a solution in which cargo information is transferred digitally prior to the arrival of the shipment itself.

Fourth, Azerbaijan could develop digital services related to the corridor. For example, such services might encompass logistics analysis, cargo tracking, digital insurance, trade finance, cybersecurity and data centre capacity. In this way, the country would be able to derive additional value from the corridor.

Fifth, the OTS should be used as a tangible platform for digital connectivity. Instead of making abstract declarations on the political level, countries should focus on technical cooperation in cybersecurity, e-commerce, digital customs clearance, data standards and trusted telecoms infrastructure.

Sixth, the EU and other external actors should not limit their support to the development of hard infrastructure. In addition, external partners should provide assistance for improving digital infrastructure and cybersecurity capacity. Construction of new roads and railroads will have little effect without digital security.

Seventh, regional countries should adopt a multi-vendor approach to the procurement of ICT services. They should avoid reliance on a single external technological environment and should analyse any project from the perspective of national security and resilience.

Lastly, efforts should be made to enhance strategic communications. Instead of framing the Middle Corridor merely as an emergency replacement for Russian transit routes, it is necessary to present it as an alternative that is sustainable and reliable.

Conclusion

The Middle Corridor is entering a new phase of development. The first phase of development involved geography, with the determination of a corridor connecting Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe. The second phase was about infrastructure, with improvements to ports, railways, road transportation and logistics capabilities. The third phase of development requires the creation of a digital and secure corridor.

This article proposes an understanding of the Middle Corridor as a physical-digital corridor in which the flow of cargo and the flow of data depend on each other. The future success of the route will be determined not only by the development of infrastructure but also by digital interoperability, cybersecurity, data protection, institutional coordination and strategic trust among the countries participating in the route.

The key country within such a digital-physical corridor is Azerbaijan. Geography, energy know-how, location relative to the Caspian, relations with Central Asia, partnerships with Türkiye and ambitions in digitalization make Azerbaijan a potential digital-transport hub. However, the realization of such an ambition will take more than just being an intermediary state; it requires the delivery of high-value services and the development of the necessary digital platforms.

The South Caucasus is thus not simply located between regions, but is itself becoming a region in which different modes of connectivity intersect. The transport corridor intersects with energy, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity and geopolitical rivalry. This brings opportunities as well as risks. If leveraged properly, the Digital Middle Corridor can be used to increase regional sovereignty, diversify Eurasian connectivity and increase the South Caucasus's importance as a node of geoeconomic initiatives. If left unaddressed, regulatory fragmentation and cybersecurity vulnerabilities could undermine the efficiency and long-term viability of the corridor while increasing the region's exposure to external dependencies.

The most prudent claim, therefore, is not that artificial intelligence, cyberspace and digital infrastructure will replace geopolitics, but that they are increasingly becoming integral parts of geopolitics itself. Hence, in the interconnected world of today, it is not enough for a country to control land routes and seaports; it must also control data, platform governance, digital infrastructure and cross-border cooperation.

Black Sea-Caspian Region Cooperation: Security Challenges and Economic Developments

Yuriy Husyev* & Emir Rustamov**

The Black Sea-Caspian region has reemerged as a central arena of geopolitical contestation and connectivity in the 21st century. Stretching from Eastern Europe through the South Caucasus to Central Asia, it represents a strategic hinge between the Euro-Atlantic area, the post-Soviet region and Asian centres of production. This article examines the evolving security architecture and economic prospects of the Black Sea-Caspian macro-region, with particular emphasis on the prospects for multilateral cooperation among Ukraine and its strategic partners in this region – Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania. Drawing on realist, liberal institutionalist and constructivist perspectives in international relations, the study argues that the region is undergoing structural transformation driven by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, war in the Middle East, the reconfiguration of Eurasian trade routes and intensified energy diversification efforts. Institutional mechanisms such as the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) have contributed to regional stability, while Western engagement has reinforced connectivity strategies. The analysis demonstrates that, although security dilemmas persist, expanding economic interdependence, infrastructure integration and normative convergence offer a pathway towards a more cohesive macro-regional order. The article concludes that the Black Sea-Caspian region is gradually transitioning from a fragmented geopolitical frontier into a dynamic, though still contested, centre of Eurasian connectivity.

Keywords: Black Sea, Caspian region, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Regional Cooperation.



* **Yuriy Husyev** is the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine to the Republic of Azerbaijan, PhD in economics, Professor of the National University of Ostroh Academy

** **Emir Rustamov** is the Counsellor of the Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Azerbaijan

Introduction

The Black Sea–Caspian region occupies a pivotal position in the geopolitical architecture of Eurasia. Historically contested by imperial formations – including the Ottoman, Russian, Safavid and, later, Soviet regimes – the region has long functioned as both a frontier and a bridge. In the contemporary era, it constitutes a strategic intersection linking Europe, the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. Its geopolitical importance derives not only from geography but also from the convergence of security competition, energy transit, infrastructure corridors and competing normative projects.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 profoundly reconfigured the political geography of this region. Then newly independent states – including Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova – began to construct sovereign institutions while navigating the gravitational pull of both Euro-Atlantic engagement and Russian influence. For much of the 1990s and early 2000s, the region remained characterized by ‘frozen conflicts’, fragile state-building processes and incomplete regional institutionalization.

Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine, which started with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, marked a turning point in the Black Sea security environment. The peninsula’s militarization altered maritime balances and reshaped regional deterrence calculations. The full-scale invasion by Russia of Ukraine in 2022 represented an even more profound rupture. Beyond its devastating humanitarian and military consequences, the war has accelerated structural transformations across Eurasia. Supply chains have been redirected, energy systems diversified, sanctions regimes imposed and diplomatic alignments recalibrated.

Within this context, the longstanding Ukraine–Azerbaijan and Ukraine–Türkiye strategic partnerships, as well as the newly established Ukraine–Romania strategic partnership, have gained new significance. Although differing in size, capabilities and geopolitical positioning, these states share common interests in preserving sovereignty, diversifying economic linkages and strengthening connectivity, independent of coercive dominance.

This article addresses three core questions:

1. How has the war in Ukraine reshaped the regional security architecture of the Black Sea–Caspian region?

2. What role do regional institutional frameworks play in fostering cooperation and macro-regional identity?
3. Can expanding connectivity and economic integration mitigate enduring security dilemmas?

By integrating realist and constructivist approaches, the study argues that the region is undergoing a complex transformation driven by power shifts, institutional innovation and evolving identity narratives. The Black Sea–Caspian macro-region is not yet consolidated, but the cumulative effects of infrastructure integration, energy interdependence and normative alignment suggest the gradual emergence of a more cohesive strategic area.

Theoretical Framework: Power, Interdependence and Regionalism

The evolution of the Black Sea–Caspian region can be viewed through multiple theoretical lenses in international relations.

From a neorealist perspective, the region exemplifies a classic security dilemma. States seek to increase their security – through military modernization, alliance formation or strategic infrastructure – yet these measures may be interpreted as threats by others. Russia’s aggressive policies in the Black Sea region have intensified balancing behaviour among neighbouring states. Ukraine’s accelerated cooperation with NATO members, Türkiye’s enhanced naval posture, Romania’s integration into NATO and Azerbaijan’s diversification of security partnerships illustrate such dynamics.

Offensive realism offers a structural interpretation of Russia’s actions as attempts to maintain regional hegemony and prevent perceived encroachment by Western institutions.¹ Moscow’s consolidation of military assets in occupied Crimea, expansion of naval capabilities and use of energy leverage can be interpreted as strategies to secure strategic depth and deter the integration of neighbouring states into security structures perceived by Russia as hostile.

However, realism alone cannot fully capture the region’s evolving connectivity architecture. Liberal institutionalist theory emphasizes the role of complex interdependence and institutions in mitigating conflict.²

1 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 29–54.

2 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (1977), p. 24–37.

Economic linkages, shared infrastructure and multilateral frameworks increase the costs of confrontation. Organizations such as GUAM and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) facilitate dialogue, trade coordination and normative convergence. Infrastructure corridors – especially the Trans-Caspian route – include states in shared networks of economic interest.

Constructivist approaches further emphasize the importance of identity, norms and shared narratives.³ Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania increasingly articulate foreign policies grounded in principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and multipolar engagement. A collective memory of sovereignty challenges has fostered solidarity narratives that reinforce cooperation beyond mere material incentives.

Together, these perspectives suggest that the Black Sea–Caspian transformation reflects not only power competition but also institutional learning and identity formation. The region is shaped by a dynamic interplay between structural constraints and ambitious initiatives.

Geopolitical Significance of the Black Sea–Caspian Region

Geographically, the Black Sea–Caspian region constitutes a vital connective centre linking Europe to Asia and functioning as a bridge maker within the broader Eurasian landmass. Its geopolitical significance derives from a combination of maritime access, abundant energy resources, transit infrastructure and the presence of critical

Geographically, the Black Sea–Caspian region constitutes a vital connective centre linking Europe to Asia and functioning as a bridge maker within the broader Eurasian landmass.

strategic bottlenecks. Control and management of these assets shape regional power dynamics, influence trade flows and affect the security calculations of both regional and global actors. As global supply chains become increasingly sensitive to disruption, the strategic weight of this interlinked maritime and land corridor continues to grow.⁴

The Black Sea occupies a particularly sensitive position at the intersection of NATO territory, the European Union's (EU) interests and Moscow's aggressive ambitions. It is bordered by NATO members Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria, Western partners Ukraine and Georgia, but also Russia. Since 2014, when Russia's

3 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), p. 224–233.

4 Carol Weaver, *The Politics of the Black Sea Region: EU Neighbourhood, Conflict Zone or Future Security Community?*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 13–21.

military aggression against Ukraine began with its illegal annexation of Crimea, Moscow has significantly enhanced its military posture on the peninsula, deploying advanced missile systems and air-defence assets, and reinforcing its naval presence.⁵ The militarization of occupied Crimea altered the regional balance, expanding Russia's anti-access capabilities and projecting aggressive power across much of the sea.⁶ Consequently, the protection of marine lines of communication has become central to both military strategy and the safety of commercial shipping for Black Sea littoral states. Ensuring freedom of navigation, safeguarding grain exports and maintaining open maritime corridors are now integral components of regional stability.

The Caspian Sea basin, meanwhile, holds substantial hydrocarbon reserves that underpin its geopolitical relevance. Offshore energy development, particularly in Azerbaijan's sector of the sea, has enabled the construction of diversified export routes to European markets via Türkiye.⁷ At the same time, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan also contribute significantly to the basin's energy output, reinforcing its role as a major supplier within Eurasian energy networks. The clarification of the Caspian Sea's legal status through the 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea provided greater predictability in maritime governance, resource development and security arrangements.⁸ This legal framework has reduced uncertainty and facilitated more structured cooperation among littoral states, thus enhancing the basin's attractiveness for long-term investment.

Between these two maritime basins lies the South Caucasus – a geopolitical junction that connects northern Eurasia to Anatolia and Central Asia. This narrow corridor concentrates critical infrastructure that underpins East–West connectivity. Major pipelines, including the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor, run

Between these two maritime basins lies the South Caucasus – a geopolitical junction that connects northern Eurasia to Anatolia and Central Asia.

5 Kornely Kakachia, Stephan Malerius, and Stefan Meister, eds., *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region: Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Orders* (Cham: Springer, 2024), p. 5–11.

6 Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Security Building*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe / Routledge, 2004) p. 37–44.

7 Shirin Akiner, ed., *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 119–134.

8 Yunis Gurbanov, *Geopolitics and Energy Diplomacy in the Caspian Region: Developments after the Downfall of the Soviet Union*, (Bielefeld: transcript Publishing, 2025), p. 182–190.

through the region alongside railways, highways and digital fibre-optic networks.⁹ As a result, power in this region increasingly derives from the management of connectivity — the ability to secure, regulate and optimize transit flows — rather than from territorial control alone. Infrastructure governance, resilience against hybrid threats and regulatory harmonization have become as strategically significant as conventional military positioning.

The transformation of trade routes in response to Moscow's war against Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia has further elevated the importance of the Black Sea–Caspian region. As northern corridors passing through Russian territory encounter political and logistical constraints, alternative East–West pathways are gaining prominence.¹⁰ This reconfiguration enhances the strategic value of transit networks linking the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and onward to European markets. In this evolving landscape, the region is no longer a peripheral frontier but a central axis of Eurasian connectivity, where maritime security, energy flows and infrastructure governance converge to shape broader geopolitical outcomes.

Prospects for Strategic Convergence: Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania

The active development of strategic cooperation in Ukraine–Azerbaijan and Ukraine–Türkiye relations, as well as the recent establishment of Ukraine–Romania strategic cooperation, reflects a growing recognition of shared vulnerabilities as well as complementary geopolitical and economic assets. Positioned along the Black Sea–Caspian axis, the four states control critical transit and security corridors that have become increasingly significant amid shifting regional power balances. Their prospective multilateral cooperation has not yet been formalized as an alliance structure; however, positive dynamics in Ukraine's bilateral relations with Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania demonstrate a pragmatic pattern of cooperation shaped by common security concerns, energy interdependence and connectivity ambitions. Such interactions illustrate how middle powers can flexibly coordinate in response to systemic uncertainty.¹¹

9 Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea: A Critical Examination* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 146–156.

10 Dan Dungaciu, ed., *The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopaedia* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), p. 9–12.

11 Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea: A Critical*

Türkiye holds a distinctive geopolitical position as a NATO member with autonomous regional influence and strategic depth across multiple theatres. Its control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles under the Montreux Convention grants Ankara regulatory authority over naval transit between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, providing both leverage and responsibility in times of crisis.¹² Through careful application of this legal framework, Türkiye has managed access to the Black Sea in a manner that underscores its role as a gatekeeper of maritime security. At the same time, Ankara has pursued a calibrated foreign policy: firmly supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity while maintaining open channels of communication with Russia. This balanced approach enhances Türkiye's diplomatic manoeuvrability and reinforces its status as a pivotal regional mediator.

By investing in infrastructure, logistics and defence modernization, Azerbaijan enhances both national resilience and its value as a regional partner within broader connectivity initiatives.

Azerbaijan, for its part, has leveraged both its hydrocarbon potential and strategic geography to cultivate diversified partnerships across Eurasia. As a key energy supplier and transit state connecting the Caspian basin to European markets, it has strengthened ties with Western institutions while also engaging with regional organizations and neighbouring powers. This multifaceted diplomatic approach reflects a strong emphasis on strategic autonomy, allowing Baku to avoid overdependence on any single external actor.¹³ By investing in infrastructure, logistics and defence modernization, Azerbaijan enhances both national resilience and its value as a regional partner within broader connectivity initiatives.¹⁴

Romania, situated at the crossroads of central, eastern and southeastern Europe, has increasingly positioned itself as a strategic anchor on the Black Sea and a vital link between European and transatlantic structures. As a member of the EU and NATO, it contributes to regional security while facilitating energy diversification and transport connectivity in the wider Black Sea basin. Its ports, particularly Constanța, play a growing role in handling trade flows, including the transit of Ukrainian

Examination (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 63–67.

12 Ulusoy, K., “The montreux convention: a key for understanding the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2024, p. 1–18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2433800>.

13 Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 102–108.

14 Shirin Akiner, ed., *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 121–125.

goods, amid Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. At the same time, Romania is a key participant in the emerging Caspian Sea–Black Sea–Europe Green Energy Corridor, centred on a major submarine electricity cable project linking Azerbaijan and Georgia to Europe via the Black Sea. This initiative, agreed in 2022 with regional partners, envisions the transmission of renewable electricity – primarily wind and solar – through Georgia and onward to Romania, where it will be integrated into the European grid and further distributed across the continent. The planned high-voltage cable, stretching over 1,100 kilometres beneath the Black Sea, is expected to significantly enhance energy security, diversify supply sources and strengthen interregional connectivity while supporting Europe's green transition. By investing in infrastructure modernization, energy interconnectivity and defence capabilities, Romania enhances its role as both a logistical hub and an energy gateway, reinforcing regional resilience and deepening integration with broader Euro-Atlantic frameworks.

Ukraine, for its part, remains central to European and global stability due to its ongoing resistance to Moscow's military aggression, agricultural capacity, industrial base and long-term connectivity potential. As one of the world's major grain exporters, Ukraine plays a vital role in global food security, particularly for markets in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.¹⁵ Despite extensive war-related destruction, its agricultural exports continue to influence global supply chains, while its reconstruction process presents opportunities for modernization and integration into diversified transport corridors. Ukraine's infrastructure potential – from railway networks to digital systems – positions it as a critical node in post-war regional integration and East–West connectivity architectures.¹⁶

Ukraine's enhanced defence/industrial cooperation with Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania has the potential to result in tangible multilateral convergence. Ongoing Ukrainian–Turkish collaboration in unmanned aerial systems and related technologies illustrates how shared security needs can be transformed into practical industrial partnerships. Such cooperation strengthens deterrence capabilities, facilitates technological exchange and fosters interoperability among defence sectors.¹⁷ Beyond

15 Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 457–462.

16 Richard Connolly, *Russia's Response to Sanctions: How Western Economic Statecraft is Reshaping Political Economy in Russia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 221–225.

17 Antonio Missiroli et al., eds., *Defence Industrial Cooperation in the European Union: The State of Play*, (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2016), p. 88–92.

the military dimension, these initiatives reinforce political solidarity and signal a commitment to sustained strategic coordination.

Taken together, a potentially strong multilateral alignment among Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania can constitute more than just ad hoc cooperation. It can represent a form of soft balancing within a multipolar regional environment, where coordination enhances resilience without formal bloc formation. Simultaneously, the ongoing expansion of economic ties, infrastructure collaboration and institutional dialogue indicates deepening interdependence. Prospective strategic convergence among Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania will therefore reflect an adaptive response to geopolitical transformation – one that integrates security considerations with economic integration and long-term regional connectivity.

Institutional Foundations: GUAM and BSEC

The GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, established in 1997, brought together Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova as post-Soviet states seeking cooperative alternatives to Russian-led structures.¹⁸

While GUAM's operational capacity has often been limited, its symbolic significance is substantial. It institutionalizes principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and democratic governance. Particularly in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine, GUAM's normative alignment has regained relevance as a platform for articulating shared security concerns and reinforcing political solidarity among its members.¹⁹

Institutions can persist even when their immediate material impact appears modest. They reduce transaction costs, facilitate information exchange and shape expectations of behaviour. GUAM contributes to regional cooperation by providing a framework within which member states can coordinate diplomatic positions and articulate common priorities in international forums. Its institutional logic is therefore primarily normative and political: it affirms a shared orientation towards

While GUAM's operational capacity has often been limited, its symbolic significance is substantial.

18 Carol Weaver, *The Politics of the Black Sea Region*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 57–60.

19 Kornely Kakachia, Stephan Malerius, and Stefan Meister ed., *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region: Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Orders* (Cham: Springer, 2024), p. 142–147.

the Euro-Atlantic community and resistance to external domination.

The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (**BSEC**), launched in 1992 and formalized by its Charter in 1999, represents a broader and more heterogeneous model of regional institutionalization. It encompasses member states from the Black Sea region and beyond, including both EU and NATO members, as well as post-Soviet countries.²⁰

Unlike GUAM, BSEC is not built upon explicit normative alignment or shared geopolitical orientation. Its mandate is primarily functional, emphasizing economic cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, transport, infrastructure and environmental protection. This technocratic focus allows states with divergent political positions to cooperate within a structured, depoliticized framework.²¹

Although BSEC has been criticized for limited enforcement capacity and modest political visibility, its endurance reflects a different form of institutional relevance. By sustaining regular ministerial meetings, working groups and a permanent secretariat, it preserves channels of dialogue even during periods of heightened regional tension. In a region marked by protracted conflicts and geopolitical competition, this continuity is itself significant.²²

From a theoretical perspective, BSEC closely reflects the liberal institutionalist model; institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty, structuring expectations and lowering the costs of repeated interaction. While it does not function as a security alliance or a normative bloc, BSEC institutionalizes economic interdependence and maintains a multilateral platform capable of stabilizing regional interaction.²³

Thus, taken together, GUAM and BSEC illustrate two distinct yet complementary models of regional institutionalization in the Black Sea region. GUAM represents a grouping focused on sovereignty, democratic governance and strategic coordination among like-minded states, whereas BSEC embodies a functionally oriented, inclusive

20 Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivanna KlympushTsintsadze ed., *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Security Building*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 33–37.

21 Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea*, (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 89–92.

22 Dan Dungaciu ed., *The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopedia*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), p. 215–218.

23 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 27–32.

framework centred on economic cooperation and pragmatic engagement across geopolitical lines of division.

Where GUAM reinforces collective identity and shared political positioning, BSEC prioritizes continuity of interaction and economic interdependence. One advances regional cooperation through normative solidarity; the other sustains regional stability through functional cooperation.

Both institutions demonstrate that even organizations with limited coercive power can shape regional order. They reduce uncertainty, provide arenas for coordination and structure expectations – thereby contributing to the broader governance architecture in the Black Sea region.

The Organization of Turkic States and Expanding Integration

The OTS, founded in 2009 as the Turkic Council, represents an evolving framework of cooperation among Turkic countries across Eurasia. Its core members – Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – are joined by observers, including Turkmenistan and Hungary, reflecting both cultural affinity and expanding geopolitical outreach. Since its institutional transformation and renaming, the OTS has deepened its organizational structure, signalling ambitions that extend beyond symbolic cultural solidarity towards structured political and economic coordination.²⁴

The OTS provides a multilateral platform for political dialogue, economic logistics and cultural exchange spanning Anatolia, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Through regular summits, ministerial meetings and sectoral working groups, member states coordinate on trade facilitation, transport connectivity, digital transformation and educational initiatives. This institutionalization reflects a broader pattern of Eurasian regionalism that complements, rather than replaces, global multilateral engagement.²⁵ Instead of positioning itself in opposition to existing international structures, the OTS operates as a reinforcing layer of regional cooperation that enhances connectivity and policy alignment among its members.

24 Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Zhao Huasheng, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 174–178.

25 Alexander Cooley, *Central Asia in International Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 203–208.

Economically, the organization supports efforts to harmonize customs procedures, promote investment flows and strengthen transcontinental transport corridors. Its agenda aligns closely with emerging East–West trade routes, including infrastructure initiatives, such as the Middle Corridor, that link Central Asia to European and Mediterranean markets. In this regard, the OTS contributes to a more integrated Eurasian economic space while preserving the sovereignty and independent foreign policy orientations of its member states.²⁶

For Azerbaijan and Türkiye, the OTS reinforces East–West connectivity and broadens access to expanding Central Asian markets. It enhances diplomatic coordination and creates opportunities for joint infrastructure, energy and logistics projects that strengthen these countries' roles as regional hubs. The institutional framework also amplifies their collective voice in broader Eurasian discussions, increasing strategic visibility and leverage.²⁷

For Ukraine, engagement with OTS member states offers diversification of opportunities in trade, energy cooperation and post-war reconstruction partnerships.

For Ukraine, engagement with OTS member states offers diversification of opportunities in trade, energy cooperation and post-war reconstruction partnerships. Closer interaction with this regional grouping could facilitate integration into broader supply chains that traverse the Caspian and Central Asian regions, thereby reinforcing Ukraine's East–West connectivity options. Even without formal membership, structured dialogue and sectoral cooperation with OTS countries could expand economic resilience and strategic flexibility.²⁸

The institutional consolidation of the OTS signals that Eurasian regionalism is becoming increasingly multidirectional, moving away from dominance by a single hegemonic centre. Power and influence across the region are diffusing among multiple cooperative frameworks, creating overlapping networks of connectivity and dialogue. In this emerging landscape, organizations like the OTS illustrate how regional integration can evolve through pragmatic coordination, shared infrastructure interests and incremental institutional development, thereby contributing to a more plural and interconnected Eurasian order.

26 Shirin Akiner ed., *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 135–140.

27 Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 115–120.

28 Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 468–472.

Western Engagement and Strategic Connectivity

Western engagement in the broader Black Sea–Caspian region has increasingly centred on strategic connectivity, reflecting a recognition that infrastructure, trade corridors and energy networks are inseparable from geopolitical stability. The EU has advanced connectivity initiatives designed to link Europe more closely with Central Asia through the South Caucasus and Türkiye, thereby strengthening transcontinental transport and energy routes, such as TRACECA, Strategy on Black Sea Security, etc. These efforts are embedded in broader frameworks that prioritize sustainable infrastructure, regulatory alignment and secure supply chains. By promoting multimodal transport corridors and digital connectivity, the EU seeks to reduce logistical bottlenecks while reinforcing the region’s role as a bridge maker between Europe and Asia.²⁹ This stance was also reflected in the EU’s Black Sea Strategy, announced in May 2025.

Energy diversification has become a particularly urgent priority following significant reductions in Russian gas supplies to Europe. In this context, Azerbaijan’s exports have assumed greater prominence within Europe’s energy mix, contributing to supply security and price stabilization. Expanded gas deliveries through established corridors have not only enhanced Europe’s resilience but also elevated Azerbaijan’s strategic importance as a reliable energy partner. This shift was confirmed by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy between the EU and Azerbaijan in July 2022. This illustrates how geopolitical shocks can accelerate structural transformations in regional energy relationships, in this case embedding Caspian resources more firmly within European markets.

At the same time, the United States has intensified diplomatic engagement in the South Caucasus, emphasizing the importance of stability, open transit corridors and post-conflict reconciliation. Washington’s approach underscores the view that unresolved conflicts and closed borders in this region hinder economic development and create vulnerabilities exploitable by external actors. By supporting dialogue initiatives, confidence-building measures and economic normalization, the United States seeks to foster in the South Caucasus a predictable regional environment conducive to trade and investment. Diplomatic involvement also signals a broader strategic interest in maintaining

29 Mark Leonard, *Connectivity Wars: Why Migration, Finance and Trade Are the GeoEconomic Battlegrounds of the Future*, (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), p. 54–60.

The convergence of security and economic objectives underscores a fundamental reality: geopolitical stability and economic resilience are mutually reinforcing. balance and preventing the monopolization of influence by any single external power.³⁰

Western engagement thus reflects a dual strategic logic. On the one hand, it embodies realist balancing, aimed at countering or constraining Moscow's influence in a region historically shaped by Russian power projection. On the other hand, it advances a liberal vision centred on market integration, institutional cooperation and rule-based connectivity. Infrastructure financing, regulatory harmonization and renewable energy investments illustrate this integrated approach, combining geostrategic considerations with economic modernization. The convergence of security and economic objectives underscores a fundamental reality: geopolitical stability and economic resilience are mutually reinforcing. Durable connectivity projects require a secure political environment, while sustained stability is more achievable when underpinned by shared prosperity and interdependence.³¹

The Middle Corridor and Trade Reconfiguration

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route – widely known as the Middle Corridor – has gained renewed strategic prominence amid disruptions of traditional northern Eurasian trade routes. Wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, geopolitical tensions, sanctions regimes and security uncertainties have exposed the vulnerabilities of overreliance on single transit corridors, prompting both regional and global actors to reassess trade geography. In this context, the Middle Corridor has emerged not merely as an alternative pathway but as a structurally significant axis of connectivity linking Asia and Europe through a diversified and politically adaptable framework.³²

By connecting China and Central Asia with the European Union via Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye (or the Black Sea), the corridor exemplifies a reorientation of transcontinental

30 Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Zhao Huasheng, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia: Competing Perspectives*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 182–187.

31 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 45–50.

32 Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Zhao Huasheng, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia: Competing Perspectives*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 190–195.

trade flows. It integrates rail, maritime and road transport into a multimodal chain designed to optimize efficiency and reduce transit times. The Caspian Sea functions as a pivotal maritime link, while South Caucasus infrastructure provides the land bridge to European markets. This configuration reflects a broader shift towards flexible, logistical networks capable of adapting to geopolitical and economic disruptions.³³

Significant investment in infrastructure modernization has reinforced the corridor's viability. Upgraded port facilities along the Caspian coast, expanded railway capacity across Kazakhstan and the South Caucasus, and improved intermodal terminals have increased capacity and reduced bottlenecks. Customs digitalization and harmonized transit procedures have further enhanced efficiency by streamlining documentation processes and minimizing border delays. These technical improvements are essential to transforming the Middle Corridor from a geopolitical concept into a commercially competitive and reliable trade artery.

For participating states, the corridor strengthens strategic autonomy by reducing dependence on external transit monopolies and diversifying export routes. It also generates transit revenues, stimulates logistics sectors and encourages foreign direct investment in infrastructure and manufacturing.

For Europe, the Middle Corridor contributes to supply chain diversification, enhancing resilience against political or logistical disruptions along other routes. It aligns with broader European connectivity strategies that prioritize secure, transparent and sustainable infrastructure partnerships.³⁴

For Ukraine, prospective integration into this evolving network carries significant long-term implications. As reconstruction efforts advance, linking Ukrainian infrastructure to the Middle Corridor could accelerate economic recovery, attract investment and make the country an important part of a resilient East–West connectivity architecture. Participation would not only facilitate trade expansion but also symbolically anchor Ukraine within a diversified Eurasian transport ecosystem. In this sense, the Middle Corridor represents more than a logistical pathway; it embodies the strategic reconfiguration of

33 Shirin Akiner ed., *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 128–132.

34 Mark Leonard, *Connectivity Wars: Why Migration, Finance and Trade Are the GeoEconomic Battlegrounds of the Future*, (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), p. 61–65.

trade, sovereignty and regional interdependence in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.³⁵

Energy Security and Diversification

Energy cooperation remains a foundational pillar of macro-regional integration, shaping not only economic interdependence but also broader geopolitical stability. In an environment marked by supply disruptions and shifting global energy dynamics, coordinated energy strategies enhance both resilience and strategic autonomy. The development of cross-border infrastructure and long-term contractual frameworks strengthens trust among partners while anchoring the region within wider European and Eurasian energy networks. In this context, energy security is not solely about supply volumes but also about reliability, diversification and adaptability to changing market and political conditions.³⁶

Energy cooperation remains a foundational pillar of macro-regional integration, shaping not only economic interdependence but also broader geopolitical stability.

A central component of this framework is the Southern Gas Corridor, which transports Azerbaijan's natural gas to European markets and plays a critical role in diversification efforts. By providing an alternative route for and source of natural gas, the corridor reduces overdependence on single suppliers and enhances Europe's energy resilience. Beyond its economic significance, the project represents a strategic linkage between the Caspian region and Europe, reinforcing infrastructure connectivity and long-term cooperation. Its continued expansion and optimization could further stabilize supply flows while supporting competitive energy pricing across participating states.

Ukraine's extensive underground gas storage facilities and well-developed transmission networks present additional opportunities for synergy within a diversified regional system. With one of the largest storage capacities in Europe, Ukraine can function as a strategic regulator, enhancing seasonal flexibility and emergency preparedness. Joint utilization of these facilities, combined with modernization of

³⁵ Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea: A Critical Examination*, (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 112–116.

³⁶ Jan H. Kalicki and David L. Goldwyn ed., *Energy and Security: Strategies for a World in Transition*, (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 78–83.

transmission infrastructure, could increase efficiency, reduce bottlenecks and strengthen cross-border energy integration. Such cooperation would not only bolster national energy security but also contribute to a more interconnected and shock-resistant regional market.³⁷

At the same time, renewable energy initiatives are reshaping the long-term trajectory of regional energy cooperation. Offshore wind power plants in the Caspian Sea and emerging green hydrogen projects demonstrate a forward-looking commitment to sustainable development. These initiatives align the region more closely with European decarbonization objectives and climate policies, thus opening avenues for technological investment, innovation and green financing. The coexistence of hydrocarbons and renewables highlights a hybrid energy identity – one that balances immediate supply needs and export revenues with long-term sustainability goals. By integrating traditional energy resources with the clean energy transition, the region can maintain economic stability today while positioning itself competitively within the evolving global energy landscape.³⁸

Security Cooperation and Hybrid Threats

Security cooperation has become increasingly vital in an era defined by complex and evolving hybrid threats. Hybrid threats – including cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, infrastructure sabotage and other non-conventional tactics – have intensified in both frequency and sophistication. These challenges blur the lines between war and peace by targeting not only military assets but also civilian infrastructure and public trust. As a result, the protection of critical infrastructure such as pipelines, ports, energy corridors, transportation hubs and digital systems has become a shared strategic priority for regional partners seeking to safeguard stability and economic continuity.³⁹

37 Andreas Goldthau ed., *The Politics of Energy Security: Theories and Cases*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 102–107.

38 Indra Overland, *The Geopolitics of the Global Energy Transition* (Cham: Springer, 2019), p. 145–150.

See also: Agreement on Strategic Partnership in the Development and Transmission of Green Energy signed by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Hungary in 2022, Agreement to develop and transmit green energy signed by Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan in 2024.

39 Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor ed., *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 201–205.

In response to these risks, enhanced intelligence sharing and deeper cybersecurity coordination play a central role in strengthening collective resilience. Timely exchange of information on emerging threats allows governments to anticipate vulnerabilities and respond proactively rather than reactively. Joint monitoring systems, coordinated incident response mechanisms and regular consultations among security agencies improve preparedness against cyber intrusions and coordinated disinformation efforts. Maritime patrol cooperation further reinforces this security architecture by ensuring situational awareness and rapid response capabilities in strategically sensitive waters.⁴⁰

The complementary strengths of regional actors contribute significantly to this cooperative framework. Türkiye's advanced defence-industry capabilities provide production capacity, technological expertise and operational experience across multiple domains. Ukraine's technological innovations, particularly in digital systems and unmanned technologies, add adaptive and battle-tested solutions to emerging security challenges. Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's modernization initiatives and investments in defence reform enhance interoperability and regional readiness. Romania's strategic position on the Black Sea and its role as a member of both NATO and the EU contribute to the development of critical infrastructure, logistical connectivity and integration with Euro-Atlantic defence frameworks. Together, these capabilities can form a synergistic foundation that increases deterrence while promoting long-term defence integration.

Maritime security in both the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea remains essential for safeguarding trade flows, energy exports and supply chains that are critical to regional and global markets. These waterways serve not only as economic lifelines but also as strategic corridors whose stability directly affects broader geopolitical dynamics. Coordinated naval exercises, joint training programmes and standardized communication protocols reduce the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation. Confidence-building mechanisms, including transparency measures and regular dialogue among military and civilian authorities, further strengthen predictability and trust. Through sustained cooperation and strategic coordination, regional actors can better mitigate hybrid threats while reinforcing collective security and economic resilience.⁴¹

40 Thomas Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), p. 89–94.

41 Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 98–102.

Towards a Cohesive Macro-Region

Connectivity initiatives, expanding institutionalization and growing strategic convergence collectively point towards the gradual consolidation of a cohesive macro-region across the Black Sea–Caspian region. What was once a fragmented geopolitical landscape marked by competing spheres of influence is increasingly characterized by overlapping networks of infrastructure, trade and policy coordination. The expansion of multimodal transport corridors, energy interconnections and digital platforms reflects a structural shift from isolation towards managed interdependence. Rather than emerging through a single treaty or supranational body, this macro-regional consolidation is unfolding through practical cooperation and shared economic incentives.

Digital customs systems, harmonized technical standards and integrated logistics platforms play a central role in this transformation. The adoption of electronic documentation, interoperable transit regimes and streamlined border procedures reduces transaction costs and shortens delivery times. Such measures enhance predictability for investors and traders, making cross-border commerce more competitive and resilient. As regulatory frameworks converge and supply chains become more tightly interwoven, economic interdependence deepens, creating tangible benefits for participating states. Infrastructure modernization and institutional coordination thus reinforce each other, generating cumulative momentum towards regional integration.

This expanding interdependence carries important security implications. As trade volumes grow and infrastructure networks become mutually beneficial, the economic cost of disruption or conflict rises significantly. States embedded in shared transit corridors, energy systems and digital markets acquire incentives to preserve stability and avoid escalation. In this sense, connectivity can function as a stabilizing force, embedding geopolitical relations within a framework of material interdependence. However, such dynamics do not eliminate power politics altogether. Unresolved territorial disputes, fragile ceasefires and asymmetric military capabilities continue to impose realistic constraints on deeper integration. Wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, strategic mistrust and external rivalries remain structural features of the regional environment.⁴²

42 John R. O Neal and Bruce Russett ed., *Economic Interdependence and War*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 56–61.

The long-term durability of macro-regional consolidation therefore depends on several interlinked variables. Post-war reconstruction and stabilization in Ukraine will be decisive in restoring full East–West connectivity and reinforcing confidence in regional trade corridors. Sustainable peace consolidation in the South Caucasus is equally critical for safeguarding transit routes and ensuring predictable cross-border cooperation. Above all, sustained political commitment to cooperative frameworks – including investment in institutions, transparency mechanisms and dispute-resolution processes – will determine whether incremental connectivity evolves into a resilient macro-regional order.⁴³

In sum, the trajectory towards a cohesive Black Sea–Caspian macro-region is neither automatic nor irreversible. It is shaped by the interplay of economic pragmatism and geopolitical constraints. If reconstruction, reconciliation and institutional deepening proceed in parallel, the region may increasingly function as an integrated strategic area, defined less by fragmentation and rivalry, and more by structured interdependence and shared development.

Conclusion

The Black Sea–Caspian region stands at a historic inflection point. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not merely disrupt an existing order; it catalysed a deeper structural transformation of Eurasian geopolitics. Long-standing assumptions about trade routes, energy dependence and regional hierarchies have been fundamentally reassessed. In response, processes that had previously advanced incrementally – trade reconfiguration, energy diversification and institutional innovation – have accelerated with new urgency. What once appeared as a gradual adaptation has become a strategic imperative, reshaping the geopolitical landscape from Eastern Europe to Central Asia.

At the same time, renewed instability and war in the Middle East have further reinforced the strategic relevance of alternative connectivity routes. Disruptions to traditional maritime corridors, heightened security risks and uncertainty surrounding key choke points have underscored the vulnerability of established global supply chains. In this context, the Middle Corridor has gained additional prominence as a comparatively stable, diversified and geopolitically balanced route linking Asia to Europe. By bypassing conflict-prone areas while integrating the Black

43 Charles King, *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Conflict in the Eurasian Periphery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 215–220.

Sea, the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia into a coherent transit framework, it has emerged not only as a response to regional crises but also as a critical pillar of a more resilient Eurasian connectivity architecture.

Within this evolving environment, potential multilateral cooperation among Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania can demonstrate the importance of regional actors amid systemic turbulence.

Rather than being passive arenas of great-power competition, these states have pursued balancing strategies, diversified partnerships and pragmatic institutional engagement. Connectivity initiatives – spanning transport corridors, energy infrastructure and digital systems – illustrate how material interdependence can serve both economic and strategic objectives. Through coordinated action and complementary capabilities, they can contribute to the emergence of a more networked and multidirectional macro-regional order.

At the same time, this transformation remains contingent and uneven. The durability of new trade corridors depends on infrastructure resilience and sustained political coordination. Energy diversification requires long-term investment, regulatory stability and alignment with global decarbonization trends. Institutional innovation must be reinforced by credible commitments to sovereignty, territorial integrity and peaceful dispute resolution. Without these normative and structural foundations, connectivity gains could remain vulnerable to renewed geopolitical shocks.

The trajectory ahead is, therefore, uncertain, shaped by the resistance of Ukraine to Moscow's aggression and the country's reconstruction efforts, as well as the consolidation of peace in the South Caucasus, the war in the Middle East and the strategic choices of regional and external powers. Nevertheless, the direction of change is increasingly evident. If integration deepens, infrastructure expands and cooperative frameworks solidify, the Black Sea–Caspian region may gradually evolve from a historically contested frontier into a dynamic hub of Eurasian connectivity. Anchored in resilience, interdependence and strategic partnerships, it could become not merely a transit zone between different parts of Eurasia, but a coherent macro-region capable of shaping its own geopolitical and economic destiny.

Within this evolving environment, potential multilateral cooperation among Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania can demonstrate the importance of regional actors amid systemic turbulence.

Structural Transformation in Eurasian Integration: The C6 Platform and the Strategic Geopolitics of the Middle Corridor

Hazel Çağın Elbir*

This article examines, from an academic perspective, a profound structural transformation in Eurasian geopolitics: the evolution of the Central Asia Five (C5) format into the 'C6' platform, with Azerbaijan's fully fledged participation, and the impact of this process on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor, TITR). Global shocks between 2020 and 2022, particularly the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, accelerated the search for alternatives to traditional northern transport routes, thus making trans-Caspian connectivity a strategic necessity. Azerbaijan's admission, as a fully fledged participant, into the Central Asian consultative mechanism at the 7th Summit in Tashkent in November 2025 transformed the region from a mere arena of great power competition into a strategic actor capable of shaping its own destiny. This article analyses the institutionalisation process of the C6 structure, inter-state allied relations in the region, energy security parameters and Türkiye's catalytic role in this integration process. The findings demonstrate that the C6 format is not merely a logistical network but the institutional core of a new security and trade architecture in Eurasia.

Keywords: C6 Platform, Middle Corridor (TITR), Eurasian Integration, Geopolitical Economy, Organization of Turkic States (OTS).



* Hazel Çağın Elbir is an Analyst at the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM, Türkiye).

Introduction

The modern revival of the historical Silk Road in the form of trade and energy corridors is fundamentally shaking the global geo-economic balance of the 21st century. The regions of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, which were seen as a strategic vacuum or passive arena of the ‘New Great Game’¹ after the Cold War, have today become central hubs of global supply chains and energy security. For decades, northern transit routes, primarily traversing Russian territory via the Trans-Siberian Railway and associated branches through Kazakhstan and Belarus,² served as the main overland link between Europe and China. However, the Russia–Ukraine war that began in 2022, and the sanctions imposed, redirected freight traffic between China and

Azerbaijan’s geographical location serves as a bridge connecting the rich hydrocarbon and critical mineral reserves east of the Caspian Sea to European markets.

Europe towards the TITR, which offers a safer, shorter and more sustainable route.³

In this context, Azerbaijan has risen beyond being merely a transit country to become a ‘strategic gateway’ to the European Union for Central Asian countries and a reliable ally.⁴ Azerbaijan’s geographical location serves as a bridge connecting the rich hydrocarbon and critical mineral reserves east of the Caspian Sea to European markets.⁵ This geopolitical convergence, resulting from long-standing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, has transformed the region’s institutional architecture from the C5 (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) to the C6 format with Azerbaijan’s fully fledged participation.⁶

1 Smith, D.L., “Central Asia: A New Great Game?”, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1996, pp. 147-175, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00927678.1996.9933727> (Accessed: May 2, 2026).

2 *GIS Reports*, “Central Asia’s Middle Corridor gains traction at Russia’s expense”, August 29, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/tr/middle-corridor/> (Accessed: June 11, 2026).

3 Çetin, K., “ABD’nin Orta Asya’daki Girişimi: C5+1” – [“The United States’ Initiative in Central Asia: C5+1”], *Avrasya İncelemeleri Merkezi (AVİM)*, October 13, 2016, Available at: <https://avim.org.tr/tr/Yorum/ABD-NIN-ORTA-ASYA-DAKI-GIRISIMI-C5-1> (Accessed: May 2, 2026).

4 *TRT Avaz*, “C6: Birleşik Bir Bölge, Ortak Bir Gelecek Konferansı Bakü’de düzenlendi” – [“C6: A United Region, A Shared Future’ Conference Held in Baku”], February 19, 2026, Available at: <https://www.trtavaz.com.tr/haber/tur/turkistandan/c6-birlesik-bir-bolge-ortak-bir-gelecek-konferansi-bakude-duzenlendi/6997157b6c1f8b55084d6b52> (Accessed: May 3, 2026).

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

This evolving regional architecture has been further strengthened by the active involvement of Türkiye, a NATO member and one of the founders of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Türkiye plays a pivotal unifying role in the final integration of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) with Europe. Ankara's two-winged connectivity strategy – extending through the Balkans on one side and the South Caucasus on the other – enables regional countries to pursue multi-vector foreign policies while enhancing geo-economic diversification.⁷ Azerbaijan, for its part, also played a crucial role in the establishment of the OTS. Indeed, the Turkic Council was formally established on October 3, 2009, in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement.⁸ The emergence of the C6 platform signifies that the countries of the region have moved from being passive objects in the power competition between Russia, China and actors in the West to actively declaring their regional ownership.⁹ The dynamics outlined in this introduction will be analysed in depth in the following sections of the article through the lenses of institutional evolution, security cooperation and logistical infrastructure.

The Evolution of the C6 Platform: A New Regional Format

The process of the C6 platform is the natural and strategic expansion of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia mechanism initiated by the Central Asian states in 2018.¹⁰ Initially established to address technical issues, such as border problems and water sharing, this mechanism has gradually evolved into a broader integration vision under the influence of global geopolitical changes.¹¹ The regular invitation of Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev to these meetings and, finally, Azerbaijan's fully fledged

7 Nivedita Das Kundu, "Multi-Vector Policy in Central Asia: Formats and Prospects," *Valdai Club*, February 18, 2026, Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/multi-vector-policy-in-central-asia-formats/> (Accessed: May 3, 2026).

8 Organization of Turkic States, *Nakhchivan Agreement on the Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States*, signed in Nakhchivan on 3 October 2009, Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/u/d/basic-documents/nakhchivan-agreement-on-the-establishment-of-the-cooperation-council-of-turkic-speaking-states-1-en.pdf> (Accessed: May 21, 2026).

9 *Ibid.*

10 Cutler, R.M., "Azerbaijan Joins Central Asia to Build a C6 Corridor Core", *The Times of Central Asia*, November 17, 2025, Available at: <https://timesca.com/azerbaijan-joins-central-asia-to-build-a-c6-corridor-core/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

11 Cutler, *op.cit.*

Azerbaijan provides the shortest and most cost-effective route to Türkiye and Europe for Central Asian countries.

participation as a member at the 7th Summit held in Tashkent on November 16, 2025, introduced the concept of ‘Expanded Central Asia’ into the international literature.¹² This evolution is described by the countries of the region as “the birth of a single geopolitical and geo-economic region.” At the institutional level, the C6 is not limited to summits of heads of state; it has gained operational depth through sub-working groups established at the level of transport, energy, economy and foreign ministries.¹³ For example, the activities of the TITR Association and the efforts of member countries to digitalise customs procedures¹⁴ demonstrate that this new format has not remained on paper but has transformed into a concrete governance model that accelerates cargo flows in the field.¹⁵ Azerbaijan’s role in this structure has turned Central Asia’s landlocked disadvantage into a strategic advantage.¹⁶ Azerbaijan provides the shortest and most cost-effective route to Türkiye and Europe for Central Asian countries.¹⁷ Analysis suggests the dialogue between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states has risen from simple cooperation to the level of “highly strategic partner”.¹⁸ In particular, the Treaty on Allied Relations (2024) between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan and the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and

12 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Ilham Aliyev addressed 7th Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia*, 16 November 2025, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70592> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

13 *Caspian Policy Center*, “A New and Expanded Central Asia: C6 Steps for Trans-Caspian Growth,” May 3, 2026, Available at: <https://caspiantpolicy.org/research/category/a-new-and-expanded-central-asia-c6-steps-for-trans-caspian-growth> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

14 Dayar, A., “Digitizing Customs: How eTIR is Transforming the Middle Corridor,” *Caspian Policy Center*, May 2, 2025, Available at: <https://caspiantpolicy.org/research/economy/digitizing-customs-how-etir-is-transforming-the-middle-corridor> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

15 Korkmaz, S.C., “Middle Corridor Makes Progress Toward Operational Reality,” *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 28, 2026, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/middle-corridor-makes-progress-toward-operational-reality/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

16 Cutler, *op.cit.*

17 Mukhigulishvili, G., “The Growing Importance of the Middle Corridor as an Energy Transport Route,” *The Hague Research Institute*, January 2024, Available at: <https://hagueresearch.org/the-growing-importance-of-the-middle-corridor-as-an-energy-transport-route/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

18 Beisenov, A., “C5 switches to C6: views from Central Asia,” *Topchubashov Center*, March 10, 2026, Available at: <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3896/c5-switches-to-c6-views-from-central-asia> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

Alliance Relations (2005) between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan form the political backbone of the C6 structure.¹⁹

This development has also begun to reshape the perspectives of external actors towards the region. The C5+1 format, which the United States has been implementing since 2015, is increasingly being discussed in terms of a potential evolution into a C6+1 structure that would include Azerbaijan's participation. Meanwhile, the European Union has intensified its engagement with the region through its Global Gateway strategy, particularly by announcing significant financing for connectivity projects at the EU–Central Asia Summit. However, its institutional framework continues to operate primarily through the C5+1 format, prompting calls for an update to better reflect the emergence of the C6 platform.²⁰ Think tanks such as the Hudson Institute note that the C6 platform has the potential to become a strong diplomatic bloc capable of taking joint positions on platforms such as the United Nations General Assembly.²¹ Consequently, the C6 offers a new model of multilateralism in Eurasia, one in which regional interests are prioritised independently of external interventions.²²

Political and Security Cooperation

Political and security cooperation under the C6 platform has been built on the strategy of strengthening the national sovereignty of the member states and developing resilience against external pressures.²³ The Treaty on Allied Relations signed between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan in 2024 represents the most advanced stage of political integration between

19 Aslan-Mammadli, A., "Alliance Relations Between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan: A New Stage of Cooperation," *Eurasia Review*, August 24, 2024, Available at: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/24082024-alliance-relations-between-azerbaijan-and-uzbekistan-a-new-stage-of-cooperation-oped/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

20 Huseynov, V., "Opinion: The European Union must recognise that the C5 have now become the C6", *commonsplace.eu*, December 6, 2025, Available at: <https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-european-union-must-recognise-c5-have-now-become-c6> (Accessed: June 11, 2026).

21 Moriyasu, K., "Trump Has Golden Opportunity to Launch C6+1 on Sidelines of UN," *Hudson Institute*, April 7, 2026, Available at: <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/trump-has-golden-opportunity-launch-c61-sidelines-un-ken-moriyasu> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

22 Moriyasu, *op.cit.*

23 Saeedi, T., "C5 is now C6 – What will change?," *News Central Asia*, November 28, 2025, Available at: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2025/11/28/c5-is-now-c6-what-will-change/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

the two regions.²⁴ This spirit of alliance includes mutual and resolute support for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty rights on international platforms. In particular, Azerbaijan's full restoration of sovereignty over its formerly occupied territories has been viewed by Central Asian countries as a prerequisite for peace and connectivity in the region and has received strong support.

In the security dimension, the C5 countries are acting in coordination against common challenges, such as the fragile security environment in Afghanistan, cross-border terrorism, drug trafficking and cyber threats.²⁵ Azerbaijan's inclusion is expected to further strengthen these efforts. Although the US-supported C5+1 process allocated \$15 million in funding to enhance the border security capacities of regional countries,²⁶ the C6 format, in contrast, is not an externally imposed geopolitical blueprint. It is the natural outcome of the region's own reassessment of its geography, interests and long-term trajectory.²⁷ In this context, military training cooperation and defence industry partnerships (particularly among Türkiye, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian countries) have become cornerstones of the new security architecture.

Another important pillar of political cooperation is the principle of 'peace through connectivity'. The C6 countries believe that ensuring

The C6 countries believe that ensuring the security of transport and energy corridors is the greatest guarantee of regional stability.

the security of transport and energy corridors is the greatest guarantee of regional stability.²⁸ In this framework, the Caspian Sea is defined as a security zone, and cooperation among the littoral states functions as a balancing element that prevents the entry of external military forces into the region.²⁹

24 Aslan-Mammadli, *op. cit.*

25 Times of Central Asia, "Central Asia's "C5" Security Bloc Can Become a Reality," May 20, 2024, Available at: <https://timesca.com/central-asias-c5-security-bloc-can-become-a-reality/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

26 Kabar News Agency, "Tajikistan hosts C5+1 meeting between Central Asia states and the US," July 28, 2017, Available at: <https://en.archive.kabar.kg/news/tajikistan-hosts-c5-1-meeting-between-central-asia-states-and-the-us/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

27 Kushkumbayev, S., "C6: Central Asia and Azerbaijan form a new geopolitical core," *News.az*, February 18, 2026, Available at: <https://news.az/news/c6-central-asia-and-azerbaijan-form-a-new-geopolitical-core> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

28 Moriyasu, *op.cit.*

29 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, signed at Aktau on August 12, 2018, Available at: https://tehranconvention.org/system/files/web/convention_on_the_legal_status_of_the_caspian_sea_en.pdf (Accessed: May 6, 2026).

In the diplomatic field, the C6 platform strengthens Azerbaijan's role as an infrastructure and political hub that provides Central Asia with enhanced access to Europe and Türkiye.³⁰ Türkiye's position within NATO, combined with Azerbaijan's broad network of alliances, serves as a strategic channel providing Central Asian countries with direct access to Europe. Political cohesion within the C6 platform is not merely a form of regional unity but also strengthens the collective position of the C6 states vis-à-vis global power centres.³¹

Economic Cooperation and Trade Integration

The economic integration of the C6 format focuses on both the qualitative and quantitative increase of trade volume among member countries. Comparative analyses conducted using the TOPSIS (Technique for Order of Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution) method show that Kazakhstan has maintained its position as Azerbaijan's strongest economic partner in every period, while Uzbekistan has become the fastest-rising second partner following reforms since 2016. These data prove that the economic centre of gravity of the C6 platform is steadily strengthening and that intra-regional trade is diversifying.³² The volume of trade carried out via the Caspian Sea increased by 86% between 2021 and 2023, reaching 2.8 million tonnes. Azerbaijan has become the main transit hub for wheat, fertiliser and energy resources coming from Central Asia to world markets.³³ In particular, the agreement on the transportation of Kazakhstan's oil through the Baku–Tbilisi–

30 Kardaş, S., "The green great game: Crafting an EU-Central Asia energy alliance," *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, January 14, 2026, Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-green-great-game-crafting-an-eu-central-asia-energy-alliance/> (Accessed: May 6, 2026).

31 Seyidli, H., "C6 as a new configuration: Azerbaijan between the Caucasus and Central Asia," *Politicon*, February 19, 2026, Available at: <https://www.politicon.co/en/essays/213/c6-as-a-new-configuration-azerbaijan-between-the-caucasus-and-central-asia> (Accessed: May 6, 2026).

32 Şirinov, F., "Azerbaycan'ın Orta Asya Türk Cumhuriyetleri ile Ekonomik İlişkilerinin TOPSİS Yöntemiyle Karşılaştırmalı Analizi: 1997-2023 Dönemi [Comparative Analysis of Azerbaijan's Economic Relations with Central Asian Turkic Republics Using the TOPSİS Method: 1997-2023 Period]," *Uluslararası Ekonomi Siyaset İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Dergisi*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2026, pp. 165-180, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59445/ijephss.1761539> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

33 Satubaldina, A., "World Bank Presents Key Findings of Latest Study on Middle Corridor in Tbilisi," *The Astana Times*, March 1, 2024, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2024/03/world-bank-presents-key-findings-of-latest-study-on-middle-corridor-in-tbilisi/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and annual shipments exceeding one million tonnes constitute the concrete manifestation of economic integration in the energy dimension.³⁴ At the institutional level, the Turkic Investment Fund (TIF), established under the auspices of the Organization of Turkic States, provides financial support for infrastructure and industrial projects among Central Asian countries, thereby encouraging regional capital flows.³⁵ Furthermore, the simplification of customs procedures and the Simplified Customs Corridor agreement have facilitated intra-regional trade by reducing trade costs.³⁶ In particular, the Joint Intergovernmental Commission (JIC) established between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan aims to expand trade beyond raw materials to include higher value-added sectors, such as food, textiles and technology.³⁷

However, despite this positive momentum, the economies of the C6 countries continue to remain heavily dependent on hydrocarbon exports. According to the World Bank, this structural dependence exposes the region to external price shocks and limits long-term sustainable growth. This heavy reliance can be effectively balanced through fostering deeper partnerships in green energy, digital trade and high-value-added industrial production among the C6 countries.³⁸ Consequently, the C6 economic space can be transformed from a mere transit route into a vast economic basin with a population exceeding 600 million.

Connectivity as the Backbone of C6: The TITR and Beyond

Transport connectivity constitutes the existential backbone of the C6 platform and modern Eurasian integration. The TITR, which extends from China through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus

34 Staff Report, “Kazakhstan to transport 1.5 million tons of oil via Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline,” *The Astana Times*, November 18, 2022, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2022/11/kazakhstan-to-transport-1-5-million-tons-of-oil-via-baku-tbilisi-ceyhan-pipeline/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

35 Yılmaz, E., “Türk Yatırım Fonu üye devletler arasındaki ticareti geliştirecek” – [“The Turkic Investment Fund Will Promote Trade Among Member States,”] *Anadolu Agency*, May 25, 2024, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/turk-yatirim-fonu-uye-devletler-arasindaki-ticareti-gelistirecek/3230024> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

36 Organization of Turkic States, *Customs Cooperation, Areas of Cooperation*, Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/en/areas-of-cooperation-detail/3-customs-cooperation> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

37 Abuova, N., “16 Agreements Consolidate Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan Partnership,” *The Astana Times*, October 22, 2025, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2025/10/16-agreements-consolidate-kazakhstan-azerbaijan-partnership/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

38 World Bank, “Azerbaijan Country Overview”, Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/ext/en/country/azerbaijan> (Accessed: June 11, 2026).

and Türkiye to Europe, is approximately 2,000 km shorter than the Northern Corridor passing through Russia and has the potential to reduce transit time to 15 days.³⁹ Following the Russia–Ukraine war, the increased risk of the northern route has directed cargo operators towards this multimodal route, resulting in a record 90% increase in transport volume through Azerbaijan.⁴⁰ Azerbaijan has implemented multi-billion-dollar projects, such as the Alat International Sea Trade Port and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway, to ensure the functionality of this corridor.⁴¹ While the Alat Port serves as the most modern logistics centre of the Caspian Sea and plays a critical role in the transfer of cargo from Central Asia, the BTK railway has established an uninterrupted linkage for rail connection between Beijing and London.⁴² Kazakhstan has increased trans-Caspian capacity by modernising the ports of Aktau and Kuryk,⁴³ while new railway lines established with Uzbekistan (such as the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan line) have strengthened the feeder arteries of the corridor.

The European Union has committed €10 billion of investment for the development of the TITR under its Global Gateway initiative.⁴⁴ The

Azerbaijan has implemented multi-billion-dollar projects, such as the Alat International Sea Trade Port and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway, to ensure the functionality of this corridor.

39 Nifti, E., “How to Maximize the Middle Corridor: A Guide to Infrastructure Priorities, Barriers, and Investments,” *Caspian Policy Center*, May 21, 2024, Available at: https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor_media/2024/05/29/how-to-maximize-the-middle-corridor.pdf (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

40 Cutler, R.M., “Russia-Azerbaijan thaw reshapes Middle Corridor prospects,” *Asia Times*, October 14, 2025, Available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2025/10/russia-azerbaijan-thaw-reshapes-middle-corridor-prospects/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

41 Shahbazov, F., “Advancing Middle Corridor Integration: Azerbaijan’s Growing Role as Key Trade Gateway,” *The Astana Times*, February 12, 2026, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2026/02/advancing-middle-corridor-integration-azerbajians-growing-role-as-key-trade-gateway/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

42 Bayramli, R., “Middle Corridor Expands with PRC’s Growing Role and TRIPP Agreement,” *AIR Center*, September 25, 2025, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/middle-corridor-expands-with-prcs-growing-role-and-tripp-agreement-1909> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

43 Birbayeva, A., “Transit Along Trans-Caspian Route Triples Over Five Years as Kazakhstan Expands Port Infrastructure,” *The Astana Times*, April 23, 2026, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2026/04/transit-along-trans-caspian-route-triples-over-five-years-as-kazakhstan-expands-port-infrastructure/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

44 European Commission, “Global Gateway: €10 billion commitment to invest in Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor connecting Europe and Central Asia announced at Investors Forum,” January 29, 2024, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_501 (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

EBRD has identified a total infrastructure need of €18.5 billion for the corridor to operate at full capacity,⁴⁵ stating that these funds will be used for the modernisation of railway systems and the elimination of bottlenecks.⁴⁶ The United States, for its part, recognises the TITR as a strategic priority within the framework of critical minerals dialogue and energy security, and has expressed support for the process, with a potential C6+1 format being one possibility for further enhancing coordination between the involved parties.

One of the most-discussed strategic concepts is the Zangezur Corridor. This route, which will connect the main part of Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Türkiye, has the potential to increase the freight capacity of the TITR by 15 million tonnes and to end regional fragmentation.⁴⁷ The United States and some international actors view this corridor as an alternative exit route to the Strait of Hormuz and emphasise its peaceful economic potential through initiatives such as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP).

The success of the corridor depends not only on physical routes but also on ‘soft connectivity’,⁴⁸ specifically customs harmonisation and digitalisation. The C6 countries are accelerating border crossings with applications such as ‘e-Permit’ and ‘e-CMR’, and are working on blockchain-based customs systems.⁴⁹ Türkiye and Uzbekistan have taken a leading role in this field and have minimised bureaucratic

45 Nuttall, C., “\$18.5bn needed for Middle Corridor infrastructure in Central Asia, says EBRD expert,” *IntelliNews*, May 30, 2024, Available at: <https://www.intellinews.com/18-5bn-needed-for-middle-corridor-infrastructure-in-central-asia-says-ebrd-expert-327464/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

46 European Commission and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), “Sustainable Transport Connections between Europe and Central Asia,” June 2023, Available at: https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/Sustainable_transport_connections_between_Europe_and_Central_Asia.pdf (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

47 Caspian Post, “Zangazur Corridor to Increase Middle Corridor Capacity by 15 Million Tons,” August 26, 2025, Available at: <https://caspianpost.com/politics/zangazur-corridor-to-increase-middle-corridor-capacity-by-15-million-tons> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

48 Bondaz, A., “Promoting Soft Connectivity: China’s Standards-Setting Reforms and International Ambitions,” *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS)*, Research Paper No. 2021/12, March 2021, Available at: <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/recherches-et-documents/promoting-soft-connectivity-china-s-standards-setting-reforms-and-international-ambitions-2021> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

49 Organization of Turkic States, “Transport Cooperation, Areas of Cooperation,” Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/en/areas-of-cooperation-detail/4-transport-cooperation> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

obstacles through ‘green corridors’.⁵⁰ Middle Corridor Multimodal Ltd., a joint logistics company established by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia, aims to reduce costs by offering a one-stop-shop service to operators.⁵¹ Ultimately, the TITR is transforming the C6 countries from mere figures in global trade into active founders and managers of the East–West axis.

Challenges, Risks and Future Prospects

Although the C6 platform and the TITR offer great potential, they face certain challenges that must be overcome for sustainability. The first and most concrete challenge is infrastructure deficiencies and the logistical complexities of multimodal transportation. The limited number of ships crossing the Caspian Sea, long loading and unloading times, and technical incompatibilities at ports still lead operators to prefer more expensive sea routes. Additionally, differing customs legislation and tariffs among the countries along the corridor reduce predictability in cargo flows.

Geopolitical challenges constitute the most significant vulnerability. Russia may perceive the region’s efforts to achieve strategic autonomy and the rise of a route competing with the Northern Corridor as a threat to its sphere of influence and may deploy political and economic pressure tools.⁵² In contrast, while China continues to support the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it does not view the Middle Corridor (TITR) as a rival project. Rather, Beijing views the TITR as a complementary route that can diversify its energy supply options and strengthen overland connectivity.⁵³ This perspective is reinforced by deepening cooperation

50 Dunyo Information Agency, “Uzbekistan Strengthening cooperation within the Turkic World and new horizons of development,” *Eurasia Magazine*, May 12, 2026, Available at: <https://eurasiamagazine.com/uzbekistan-strengthening-cooperation-within-the-turkic-world-and-new-horizons-of-development> (Accessed: May 14, 2026).

51 Omirgazy, D., “Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan Create Joint Venture to Develop Middle Corridor’s Multimodal Service,” *The Astana Times*, October 27, 2023, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2023/10/azerbaijan-georgia-kazakhstan-create-joint-venture-to-develop-middle-corridors-multimodal-service/> (Accessed: May 14, 2026).

52 Valansi, K., “Why the Middle Corridor matters amid a geopolitical re-sorting,” *Atlantic Council*, June 2, 2025, Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/why-the-middle-corridor-matters-amid-a-geopolitical-resorting/> (Accessed: May 14, 2026).

53 Guliyev, V., “Hormuz Blockade Pushes China Toward Continental Energy Suppliers and Overland Routes,” *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, May 15 2026, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/hormuz-blockade-pushes-china-toward-continental-energy-suppliers-and-overland-routes-2116> (Accessed: June 1, 2026).

between China and the C6 countries, particularly with Azerbaijan, a strategic partner for official Beijing in the region.

In terms of future prospects, the success of the C6 format depends on ‘institutional deepening’. Cooperation must be expanded, not only in transport and energy, but also in digital economy, education and the green energy transition. Azerbaijan’s hosting of the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) and the planned ‘Green Energy Corridor’ across the Caspian represent a critical opportunity for the region’s integration with sustainable development goals. If the C6 countries can close the \$18.5 billion infrastructure gap and conduct balanced diplomacy with external actors (EU, U.S. and China), it is projected that the cargo volume on the corridor will triple, and transit times will decrease to as low as 13 days by 2030.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, Azerbaijan’s fully fledged participation in the C6 format signifies the breaking of the ‘Caspian barrier’ and the establishment of a strategic ‘Caspian bridge’ on the geopolitical map of Eurasia. This institutional transformation has turned Central Asia and the relevant part of the South Caucasus into a single geo-economic basin and enabled the countries of the region to declare their own strategic subjectivity by moving away from the shadow of great powers such as Russia and China. The institutionalisation of the TITR is not merely a transport project but the operational embodiment of the ‘Turkic world vision’ on the ground.

While Azerbaijan has become the ‘strategic node’ of this new architecture through its massive infrastructure investments and alliance policies, Türkiye has consolidated its role as the ‘catalyst actor’ that provides the corridor’s final connection to Europe and supports regional security at NATO standards. The EU’s Global Gateway strategy and the potential C6+1 format involving the United States increase the international legitimacy and resilience of this new regional reality. However, sustainable success requires the elimination of infrastructure bottlenecks, the full digital harmonisation of customs procedures and the preservation of intra-regional political stability.

54 European Commission and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), *Sustainable Transport Connections between Europe and Central Asia*, June 2023, Available at: https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/Sustainable_transport_connections_between_Europe_and_Central_Asia.pdf (Accessed: May 14, 2026).

Ultimately, the C6 platform offers a model of ‘security through connectivity’ for peace and prosperity in the multipolar world of the 21st century. This model is poised to become one of the most fundamental dynamics shaping the economic and political future of Eurasia in the coming decades by positioning the region as an indispensable island of stability in global trade.

Azerbaijan's Niche Diplomacy in the Western Balkans

Nina Miholjcic Ivkovic*

This article examines how Azerbaijan, as an emerging middle power, uses niche diplomacy to build stronger ties with the states of the Western Balkans and increase regional and international influence. It discusses Azerbaijan's proactive foreign policy in the Western Balkans as a qualitative case study and applies document analysis, media content analysis and process tracing to explain the country's rise as a middle power in the region. The analysis identifies energy security, infrastructure development and soft power diplomacy as the main niche assets of Azerbaijan's diplomatic outreach in the Western Balkans. It concludes that sectoral specialization in regional foreign policy activism facilitates emerging middle powers to gain a competitive advantage and expand their geopolitical influence.

Keywords: Niche diplomacy, Azerbaijan, middle power, Western Balkans, energy diplomacy



* **Nina Miholjcic Ivkovic** is a researcher based in Serbia with a background in international relations and diplomacy.

Introduction

The concept of middle powers, especially the notion of emerging middle powers, remains largely contested in international relations literature. Despite lacking a universally accepted definition, the concept continues to gain relevance, with a large set of diverse countries with diverse foreign policy interests being grouped under this category.¹ Nevertheless, there is general agreement that recognized middle power states use niche diplomacy to expand and strengthen their influence.²

As defined by Gareth Evans, niche diplomacy means “concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover an entire field.”³ The core of niche diplomacy

As defined by Gareth Evans, niche diplomacy means “concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover an entire field.”

lies in identifying specialized areas where a middle power can focus its restricted resources to maximize benefits, thereby avoiding action across the board and risking diluting its influence or draining its efforts.⁴ In essence, niche diplomacy is a form of specialization that allows middle powers to increase their strength and respect in international relations. Middle powers must adjust their foreign policy activism to a niche-

oriented approach, particularly given their lesser capabilities in comparison to those of great powers.

The international landscape has shifted from an old, rigid and predominantly Western-centred world order to an uncertain, new international environment, which has contributed to the rise of middle powers and niche diplomacy.⁵ In the contemporary global order, filled with complexities and unpredictability, many countries, especially middle powers, have more manoeuvring space to approach their foreign policy more flexibly and arrange their relations with numerous other relevant actors and institutions.⁶

In recent years, Azerbaijan has been confidently emerging as a

1 Efstathopoulos, C., “Global IR and the middle power concept: exploring different paths to agency,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 2, 2023, pp. 213–232, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2191925> (Accessed: April 22, 2026).

2 A.F., Cooper, “Niche Diplomacy: A Conceptual Overview”, in Andrew Cooper (ed.), *Niche Diplomacy. Studies in Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), p. 21.

3 Evans, G., “Middle Power Diplomacy”, *gevans.org*, June 29, 2011, Available at: <https://www.gevans.org/speeches/speech441.html> (Accessed: February 24, 2026).

4 *Ibid.*

5 Cooper, *op. cit.*, p.5.

6 *Ibid.*, p.19.

prominent middle power, which became particularly visible following its military victory in the 2020 Second Garabagh War and subsequent consolidation of sovereignty over its territory. The country's recent efforts to shift its foreign policy from a conflict-resolution-oriented one to maximizing its regional and international influence, especially through energy diplomacy, geopolitical leverage and strategically significant connectivity concepts such as the Middle Corridor, confirm its commitment to transitioning into a recognized middle power.⁷

In this study, Azerbaijan's proactive foreign policy in the Western Balkans is understood as an interesting case of niche diplomacy that represents an effective way to increase the country's influence through specific fields in a smaller, often overlooked but strategically relevant region. The study applies a qualitative case study approach, including document analysis through the examination of official government agreements and statements concerning bilateral relations, media content analysis of leading Western Balkan and Azerbaijani news sources, and process tracing of Azerbaijan's rise to the middle power status and its gradual engagement with Western Balkan countries. The main objective of the study is to examine how Azerbaijan uses energy security, infrastructure development and cultural diplomacy as part of its niche diplomatic strategy in the Western Balkans, consequently increasing its power profile with Europe and in global politics. Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards the Western Balkan countries includes energy diplomacy, as a main driver of political leverage; infrastructure investments that create long-term strategic interaction; and cultural diplomacy that simultaneously increases the country's presence and enhances political receptivity in the region. The findings strongly suggest that a resource-rich emerging middle power is capable of effectively using sectoral specialization in a selected region, despite being, in a territorial sense, a small state – which has not prevented it from successfully expanding its geopolitical profile.

Theoretical framework and methodology

The analysis of Azerbaijan's niche strategy in the Western Balkans is grounded in middle power theory, particularly its core element of niche diplomacy, which provides the theoretical framework for the

7 Zahidov, S., "Azerbaijan as a Middle Power", *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, June 4, 2026, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/uploads/RAByx1UmnRZ0.pdf> (Accessed: June 4, 2026).

argument that Azerbaijan has attained emerging middle power status. Methodologically, relying on the middle power theory, the study combines the examination of primary sources, media narratives and the tracing of key developments in Azerbaijan's regional engagement.

Middle power states are vaguely described as neither great nor small regarding their international power capacity, while being interested in contributing to a more stable and cohesive world order.⁸ Although the vagueness of the middle power concept persists, introducing a distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers has brought a certain level of analytical clarity.⁹

The initial, narrow inclusion of only Western, consolidated democracies, such as Australia, Canada and Sweden, in the 'middle power' category became unsuitable in the post-Cold War era as many, especially non-Western, countries started to be recognized as middle powers due to their increasingly influential roles in regional and international affairs.

The need to include a new category of emerging middle powers has become apparent, especially as countries such as Brazil, South Africa and Türkiye have begun exhibiting foreign policy features common in middle power behaviour.¹⁰ These behavioural characteristics include moderate but influential economic, diplomatic and regional capabilities; active involvement in multilateral initiatives, with reliance on international institutions; and strong support for international law as a beacon of a stable and rules-based global order.

Niche diplomacy is also an important part of foreign policy outreach for emerging middle powers.¹¹ These middle powers can make significant contributions and obtain comparative advantages with considerable returns by focusing on specific areas, which consequently can increase their prestige and political impact in the international arena. However,

8 Jordaan, E., "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers," *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*,

Vol. 30, No. 1, 2003, p. 165, Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/394 (Accessed: April 23, 2026).

9 *Ibid.*

10 Xiao, Y., "Emerging Middle Powers' Balancing Diplomacy: Connotations, Motivations, and Implications," *BRIQ Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2025, p. 213.

11 Öniş, Z. and Kutlay, M., "The Dynamics of Emerging Middle Power Influence in Regional and Global Governance: The Paradoxical Case of Turkey," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 2, 2017, p. 10.

the identification of appropriate fields of foreign policy activism, as well as actions, of aspiring middle powers must be in accordance with their capabilities, otherwise they may risk entering into a paradox of power and locking their potential.¹²

From a methodological aspect, the paper uses document analysis that relies on official government strategies, bilateral agreements and policy statements issued by the governments of Azerbaijan and Western Balkan countries, which display recurring themes related to energy cooperation, infrastructure investment and soft power engagement in bilateral relations. Media content analysis focuses on assessments of news articles from major Western Balkan outlets as well as Azerbaijani and international news sources, which identify dominant narratives surrounding Azerbaijan's role in the region.

Moreover, the process tracing method is used, first to reconstruct Azerbaijan's path to becoming an emerging middle power by identifying key historical, economic and diplomatic events that helped in building the country's middle power status. This method further traces important Azerbaijani energy and investment initiatives and soft diplomacy engagement in the Western Balkans to display the gradual expansion of the country's presence in the region.

Azerbaijan as an emerging middle power

Middle powers could generally be defined as states with strong competencies in certain areas but without sufficient capacity to challenge the major powers within the global power structure.¹³ The most common classification of middle powers includes the division between traditional and emerging middle powers. While traditional powers hold an already entrenched position of recognition and considerable influence in international relations, and are likely to defend the international status quo, emerging middle powers aspire to be more reformist-oriented towards the current world order and are more involved in regional affairs.¹⁴

With the changing international system and the strong emergence of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ Xiao, op. cit, p. 212.

¹⁴ Jordaan, E., "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers," *Politikon*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2003, p. 165.

the Global South, the rise of emerging middle powers has become more evident and prominent.¹⁵ Rising middle powers are showcasing more proactive foreign policies, with greater efforts in regional integration and involvement in multilateral constellations, especially through multinational organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which enable them to practise multilateralism and revive international cooperation.¹⁶

What distinguishes emerging middle powers from traditional ones is that the former are more focused on regional leadership, practise bridge diplomacy through norm entrepreneurship and apply a strategically autonomous diplomatic approach. Such common features of emerging middle powers are all present in Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

Having become an influential actor in its geographic vicinity, Azerbaijan has confirmed its emerging middle power status through regional leadership. The country experienced a transition from a small power to a middle power capable of dictating regional realities following the restoration of its territorial sovereignty after the Second Garabagh War.¹⁷

As a rising middle power, Azerbaijan employs bridge diplomacy, promoting itself as a bridge between East and West, North and South.

This South Caucasian country acted as a norm entrepreneur through its leadership of the NAM in the period between October 2019 and January 2024, using it as a platform to advocate for global cooperation, multilateralism and respect of international law.¹⁸

As a rising middle power, Azerbaijan employs bridge diplomacy, promoting itself as a bridge between East and West, North and South.

Azerbaijan pursues a strategic, independent foreign policy, manoeuvring between major powers, such as Russia, the US, China and Iran, and avoiding aligning permanently with one. A balancing approach, common to emerging powers' behaviour, enables the country to practise interest-based foreign policy and to leverage regional influence to increase its agency.¹⁹

15 Xiao, p. 213.

16 Patrick, S., "The Middle Power Moment," *Carnegie Endowment Russia Eurasia Center*, Jan 20, 2026, Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2026/01/the-middle-power-moment>, (Accessed: March 4, 2026).

17 Oztarsu, M. F. and Ibrahimov, R., "No longer small? Azerbaijan's pursuit of middle power status," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 2026, p. 977, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2025.2582694>.

18 "A Praiseworthy Stance on Global Affairs: Azerbaijan's Leadership in NAM," *AZERTAC*, July 5, 2023, Available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/a_praiseworthy_stance_on_global_affairs_azerbaijan_039s_leadership_in_nam-2683372 (Accessed: April 27, 2026).

19 Mammadli, M., "Key Aspects of Azerbaijan's Independent and National Interest-Based Foreign Policy," *Eurasia Review*, April 29, 2025, Available at: <https://www.eurasiareview>.

Although both traditional and emerging middle powers use niche diplomacy to boost their influence through focusing their limited resources on specific areas that provide considerable returns worth having, emerging middle powers tend to use it to increase visibility and recognition while advocating for reforms within the existing international system. Such a dynamic approach makes them generally more assertive and flexible in their diplomatic outreach compared to traditional middle powers.²⁰

Azerbaijan's step into the status of an emerging middle power began with the signing of the "Contract of Century" in 1994, which established a new oil strategy and doctrine for an independent Azerbaijan by inviting in major international oil companies and opening the country to Western investment. The contract remains an essential step in strengthening Azerbaijan's sovereignty, as it enabled the country to assume control of its resources and build a strong global reputation as a reliable partner in the energy sphere.²¹

Over the following three decades, Azerbaijan has built a considerable network through 'pipeline diplomacy' and expanded its energy influence beyond the Caspian region to European markets. In 2006, with the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipelines becoming operational, Azerbaijan made a huge leap into the energy market, offering alternatives to traditional Russian energy routes.²² The country continued expanding its gas deliveries by extending the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline and creating the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) megaproject, which became operational in 2020.²³

Within the SGC project, Azerbaijan managed to solidify its relations with Türkiye and expand its gas network to the Balkans and further to Europe through the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and the

com/29042025-key-aspects-of-azerbajians-independent-and-national-interest-based-foreign-policy-oped/ (Accessed: April 27, 2026).

20 Cooper, p. 5.

21 Heybatov, T., "Contract of the Century turns 30: A milestone for Azerbaijan and the region," *News.az*, October 4, 2024, Available at: <https://news.az/news/-contract-of-the-century-turns-30-a-milestone-for-azerbaijan-and-the-region> (Accessed: March 15, 2026).

22 Mikail, E. H., Çora, H. and Çora, A. N., "Azerbaijan's energy resources and BTC (Bakü Tbilisi Ceyhan is the name given to the pipeline project being built for crude oil transfer) project," *Open Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 10, No. 02, 2020. p. 165.

23 Jafarova, E., "Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?" *Center of Analysis of International Relations*, May 2020, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/uploads/files/Is%20Azerbaijan.pdf> (Accessed: March 15, 2026).

Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) extensions.²⁴ The SGC project possesses immense strategic opportunities, as it enables Azerbaijan to further expand the network with interconnectors, such as the Bulgaria–Serbia interconnector, and a new, planned initiative, the Ionian Adriatic Pipeline (IAP) that can deliver Azerbaijani gas to other Western Balkans countries and on to Europe.²⁵

In addition to strong energy assets, Azerbaijan’s middle power status was reinforced with its decisive military victory in the 2020 Second Garabagh War, which opened the country to a more forward-leaning foreign policy that goes beyond conflict-burdened diplomacy. Especially after the full restoration of its state sovereignty in 2023, Azerbaijan has not only entrenched its leading position in the South Caucasus but also started more actively investing in its reliable-partner image abroad, reaching out to other regions outside its immediate neighbourhood.²⁶

Through the use of energy diplomacy, regional security engagement, economic and political initiatives, as well as participation in multilateral and plurilateral frameworks, the country leverages its soft power in relations with different regions and major powers.²⁷ Plurilateralism is a form of cooperation among a smaller group of countries that share similar interests and focus on specific issues. This enables Azerbaijani foreign policy to focus better on selected issue areas and motivate more effective joint action.²⁸

Niche diplomacy is at the centre of Azerbaijan’s diplomatic engagement, particularly in plurilateral initiatives where energy cooperation, investment and cultural ties play an important role in extending the

24 “TANAP Project,” *TANAP*, n.d. Available at: <https://www.tanap.com/en/tanap-project> (Accessed: March 6, 2026).

25 Shahbazov, F., “Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline: A Priority Gas Transit Project for Azerbaijan and the Western Balkans,” *Jamestown*, August 8, 2018, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/ionian-adriatic-pipeline-a-priority-gas-transit-project-for-azerbaijan-and-the-western-balkans/> (Accessed: March 6, 2026).

26 Shukurlu, F. and Shumunov, J., “Azerbaijan’s Active Non-Alignment: How Baku is Pivoting to Greater Power,” *Baku Dialogues*, Vol. 9, No.1, December 2025, pp. 62-81, Available at: <https://bakudialogues.idd.az/articles/azerbaijans-active-non-alignment-09-12-2025> (Accessed: March 6, 2026).

27 Cutler, R., “Azerbaijan: Middle Power, Multilateral Diplomacy,” *Open Canada*, September 11, 2024, Available at: <https://opencanada.org/azerbaijan-middle-power-multilateral-diplomacy> (Accessed: March 6, 2026).

28 Cutler, R., “Plurilateralism and the rise of Azerbaijani diplomacy,” *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, May 22, 2020, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/post/plurilateralism-and-the-rise-of-azerbaijani-diplomacy-346> (Accessed: April 28, 2026).

country's influence. Azerbaijan's niche strategy has been crafted by the country's two leading advantages, location and hydrocarbon abundance, which have been additionally buttressed by major geopolitical events, including the Russia–Ukraine war and subsequent European energy crisis.²⁹

While Azerbaijan uses its niche assets in bilateral relations and multilateral forums, namely the UN and OSCE, the country also fosters regional and plurilateral integration by building stronger ties with a limited group of states and through more institutionalized frameworks, such as the Organization of Turkic States and NAM, and several 'minilateral' formats, including Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Georgia, Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Pakistan.^{30,31} The country also strategically selects smaller, usually overlooked regions with significant potential for the expansion of its cooperation profile. The Western Balkans represents a region that often holds a peripheral position but offers a gateway to European markets and transit routes, as well as a platform for emerging middle powers, such as Azerbaijan, to strengthen their regional influence through niche strategies.

Niche strategy in the Western Balkans and energy diplomacy

Azerbaijan's niche diplomacy interaction with the Western Balkans states can be understood as a form of flexible, less institutionalized plurilateralism. In addition to developing strong bilateral ties, Azerbaijan simultaneously cooperates with several countries in the region, including Serbia, Albania and Montenegro, through issue-specific initiatives centred on energy, investment and infrastructure development.

The country also combines cultural diplomacy, humanitarianism and common similar historic experiences that act as a catalyst for the diffusion of its soft power. Azerbaijan effectively utilizes shared

*Azerbaijan's niche
diplomacy interaction
with the Western Balkans
states can be understood
as a form of flexible,
less institutionalized
plurilateralism.*

29 Hedlund, S., "Azerbaijan extends its influence beyond the South Caucasus," *GIS*, May 29, 2024, Available at: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/azerbaijan-influence/> (Accessed: March 7, 2026).

30 Cutler, *op. cit.*

31 Ahmadov, N., "First Trilateral Meeting of the Ministers of Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan," *Jamestown*, July 18, 2022, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/first-trilateral-meeting-of-the-ministers-of-turkiye-azerbaijan-and-kazakhstan/> (Accessed: April 29, 2026).

post-conflict experience and a political philosophy approach that emphasizes territorial integrity and national sovereignty to form closer, bonding relations with the Western Balkan states. Azerbaijan and other countries in the Western Balkans, specifically Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, have experienced protracted territorial conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction processes, shaping their mutual emphasis on sovereignty, stability and territorial integrity. These binding elements make Azerbaijan's niche diplomacy more successful in a region that seeks alternative and reliable energy partners with greater understanding and appreciation for its complex historic and current political environment.

The ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict, which has seriously disrupted energy security in the EU, has also affected the Western Balkans' energy sector through rising energy prices, prompting a refocus away from Russian dependence and encouraging greater investment in the green energy transition. Although the share of Russian oil and gas is not particularly significant in the overall energy mix of the region, which remains heavily reliant on coal, many Western Balkan states face geopolitical pressure, mainly from the EU, to dilute their relations with Russia. Consequently, the region is being forced to look for alternative energy partners and resources.³²

Before the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Russia supplied all the gas consumed in Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina through the TurkStream and Balkan Stream pipelines. Although the countries remain dependent, they have taken significant steps to reduce their reliance on Russian gas and have introduced Azerbaijani natural gas into their energy mix.

Serbia has decreased its reliance on Russian gas from 100 per cent in 2021 to 82 per cent in 2024, mainly through imports of Azerbaijani gas via the Bulgaria–Serbia interconnector, commissioned in 2023.³³ A preceding memorandum of understanding (MOU) that outlined annual deliveries of up to 400 million cubic meters until 2026, with volumes expected to increase to one billion cubic meters beyond that period, confirms a strong interest from both countries in continuing to

32 Vujanović, N., R. Stubbe and M. Catarina-Louro, "The Western Balkan energy sector: between Russia, the European Union and the green transition," *Working Paper Issue 33/2025, Bruegel*, December 2025, <https://doi.org/10.64153/KTCC2593>.

33 "Western Balkans need to cut Russian energy ties and speed up EU power market integration, Bruegel says," *bne IntelliNews*, January 8, 2026, Available at: <https://www.intellinews.com/western-balkans-need-to-cut-russian-energy-ties-and-speed-up-eu-power-market-integration-bruegel-says-419092/> (Accessed: March 20, 2026).

deepen energy relations.³⁴ Energy cooperation remains the backbone of the Serbia–Azerbaijan strategic partnership and an important part of Azerbaijan’s wider energy strategy in the region.

Since 2023, North Macedonia has started receiving commercial gas from Azerbaijan through Bulgarian traders.³⁵ In 2024, North Macedonia signed an MOU with the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) to secure more reliable natural gas supplies. The country also plans to build an interconnector with Greece to connect to the TAP pipeline.³⁶ Serbia and North Macedonia plan to build an interconnector between themselves to further strengthen energy security in the region and to connect to the SGC, thus obtaining a more effective gas supply network.³⁷

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro are also interested in Azerbaijani natural gas, with both having expressed strong support for the planned IAP. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the IAP is important for reducing its dependence on Russian gas imports and diversifying its energy supply.³⁸ Montenegro, although not dependent on Russian energy supplies, perceives the proposed pipeline as important for developing its national gas network and as a stabilizing factor in a rather volatile energy market.³⁹

34 “Diversification of Energy Sources: North Macedonia Turns to Azerbaijan,” *Energetski Portal*, November 20, 2024, Available at: <https://www.energetskiportal.com/diversification-of-energy-sources-north-macedonia-turns-to-azerbaijan> (Accessed: March 20, 2026).

35 Karimli, I., “North Macedonia Seeks More Natural Gas Imports from Azerbaijan,” *Caspian News*, March 12, 2025, Available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/north-macedonia-seeks-more-natural-gas-imports-from-azerbaijan-2025-3-12-28/> (Accessed: March 20, 2026).

36 “Western Balkans need to cut Russian energy ties and speed up EU power market integration, Bruegel says,” *bne IntelliNews*, *op.cit.*

37 “Serbia Advances Strategic Gas Interconnections with Romania and North Macedonia to Boost Energy Security,” *Serbia Business*, July 4, 2025, Available at: <https://serbia-business.eu/serbia-advances-strategic-gas-interconnections-with-romania-and-north-macedonia-to-boost-energy-security> (Accessed: March 20, 2026).

38 “Bosnia & Herzegovina keen on gaining access to Azerbaijani gas - former president,” *Baku Energy Forum*, November 15, 2022, Available at: <https://bakuenergyforum.az/en/news/bosnia-herzegovina-keen-on-gaining-access-to-azerbaijani-gas---former-president-5681> (Accessed: March 20, 2026).

39 Spasić, V., “IAP pipeline, LNG terminal are strategic projects for Montenegro – minister,” *Balkan Green Energy News*, August 12, 2024, Available at: <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/iap-pipeline-lng-terminal-are-strategic-projects-for-montenegro-minister/> (Accessed: March 20, 2026).

Investment in infrastructure

While energy diplomacy remains the primary channel through which Azerbaijan engages with the Western Balkans, infrastructure investment represents a supplementary tool in the country's niche strategy in the region. Azerbaijan has invested in infrastructure development, mainly in the energy and transportation sectors, across the Western Balkan countries, thereby aiming to sustain a long-term strategic partnership with the region.

Azerbaijan has played a significant role in supporting Serbia's energy and road infrastructure development.

Azerbaijan has played a significant role in supporting Serbia's energy and road infrastructure development. In addition to the already operational Serbia–Bulgaria gas interconnector pipeline, official Baku is actively collaborating with officials in Belgrade on the development of a gas-fired power plant, which is expected to increase gas exports to Serbia and to intensify the energy partnership between the two countries. The agreement between Azerbaijan and Serbia on the construction of a combined-cycle gas-fired power plant, signed in 2026, was followed by six additional cooperation agreements across various sectors, indicating continued strengthening of bilateral relations.⁴⁰

Azerbaijan's investment in energy infrastructure has also been visible in Albania. Although energy relations between Azerbaijan and Albania date back to the early 2010s, when the two countries began establishing the framework for the TAP project, it is important to note that Albania has not imported natural gas from Azerbaijan to date, despite the pipeline crossing its territory. The recently announced Nur initiative, which aims to develop Albania's gas infrastructure, represents a significant step in expanding Azerbaijani energy investments in the country. The Nur project, funded by investment from Azerbaijan and implemented by SOCAR, will have twofold consequences. It will enable Albania to gain access to alternative energy sources, thus helping the country in its decarbonization process, and it will increase Azerbaijan's influence in the Western Balkans.⁴¹

40 Berbatović, V., "Serbia, Azerbaijan sign agreement to build gas-fired power plant," *Balkan Green Energy News*, February 16, 2026, Available at: <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/serbia-azerbaijan-sign-agreement-to-build-gas-fired-power-plant/> (Accessed: March 21, 2026).

41 "Azerbaijan's Energy Minister Launches Nur Gas Project in Albania," *Caucasus Watch*, April 21, 2025, Available at: <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/azerbajjans-energy-minister-launches-nur-gas-project-in-albania.html> (Accessed: March 22, 2026).

Regarding investment in transport connectivity, Azerbaijan is already engaged in transportation and road projects, mainly in Serbia and Montenegro. For instance, the Azerbaijani construction company AzVirt has become a highly active contributor to Serbia's road infrastructure development. It is involved in building segments of the Ruma–Šabac highway and other key routes that will help to strengthen regional transport links and connectivity.⁴² Azerbaijan is also discussing potential investments in Montenegro's infrastructure development, including in the Bar–Boljare highway and the country's other transport network initiatives.⁴³

Energy and transport investments across the Western Balkan countries represent an important aspect of Azerbaijan's niche strategy, as such projects have the potential to underpin the country's already strong energy diplomacy and improve the region's infrastructure. Given that the Western Balkans suffers from underdeveloped infrastructure and seeks foreign investment, Azerbaijan, with its initiative-driven foreign policy, has had great success in strengthening its position as a promising middle power in this region.

Soft power as a tool in niche strategy

Although soft power, defined as the ability to shape preferences through attraction, and niche diplomacy, the strategic focus on specific areas of international engagement, are conceptually distinct, there are instances in which a country employs soft power as a tool within its broader niche strategy to enhance its influence. Soft power outreach is a low-cost and effective tool in Azerbaijan's niche strategy in the region, as it creates symbolic and emotional connections, increases political compassion and augments broader geopolitical influence.

While Azerbaijan has already developed strong energy relations and successful investment projects in the Western Balkans, it also uses soft power resources to strengthen strategic partnerships, to enhance its international image and to secure economic and political support.

42 Velebit, V., Ivić, P. and Jovanović, A., "Serbia–Azerbaijan relations: Strategic depth through energy and connectivity," *Pupin Initiative*, October 30, 2025, Available at: <https://www.pupin.org/analysis/serbia-azerbaijan-relations-strategic-depth-through-energy-and-connectivity> (Accessed: March 22, 2026).

43 Zeynalova, L., "Ervin Ibrahimović Names Promising Areas for Azerbaijani Investments," *Trend News Agency*, January 5, 2026, Available at: <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/business/4138096.html> (Accessed: March 22, 2026).

Through investment in cultural and humanitarian projects, as well as the promotion of the historic and political narrative concerning the shared post-conflict experience across the Western Balkans, Baku aims to expand its influence beyond the South Caucasus and to create a bridge between the region and Europe.

The Western Balkan region still carries post-conflict legacies and struggles over territorial integrity, which have influenced its political landscape, making it receptive to foreign states that respect and understand these burdens.

Azerbaijan has shown significant political sensibility and willingness to invest in the Western Balkans. The country has managed to accomplish simultaneous and balanced cooperation with each country in the region, despite its continuing internal quarrels.⁴⁴ For instance, Azerbaijan has managed to foster close diplomatic ties with both Serbia and Albania,

Azerbaijan has shown significant political sensibility and willingness to invest in the Western Balkans.

despite their fundamentally opposing positions on the recognition of the Kosovo region's independence.

Shared historical and political struggles over territorial integrity and sovereignty have played a prominent role, especially in bringing Azerbaijan and Serbia closer together. This has added another layer to their already substantial and productive energy cooperation. In addition to strong political support regarding the Kosovo issue, Azerbaijan has fostered closer cultural ties with Serbia through the symbolic restoration of cultural sites and the development of monument projects.⁴⁵ These initiatives have helped Azerbaijan promote its culture and enhance its soft power in Serbia.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Azerbaijan continue to foster special cultural relations that are founded on similar legacies of their recent history that revolve around the tragic armed conflicts of the 1990s, which left both nations scarred with the victims of war and forced displacement.⁴⁶ Humanitarianism has been an important aspect of Azerbaijan's diplomatic outreach in Bosnia. Through the Heydar Aliyev

44 Alekberli-Museyibova, N., "Azerbaijan Bolsters Cooperation With Balkan Countries," *Jamestown*, August 8, 2023, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/azerbaijan-bolsters-cooperation-with-balkan-countries> (Accessed: March 22, 2026).

45 Aliyev, H., "Azerbaijani-Serbian Relations Booming Thanks to Mutual Interests," *Jamestown*, December 15, 2021, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/azerbaijani-serbian-relations-booming-thanks-to-mutual-interests/> (Accessed: March 24, 2026).

46 Lisica, A., "Diplomatic Relations Between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Bosnia and Herzegovina: Could it be Better?" *Bosnian Studies Journal for research of Bosnian thought and culture*, Vol. 8, 2024, p. 98.

Foundation, Azerbaijan constructed a centre for blind and visually impaired children and young people in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo.⁴⁷ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Azerbaijan provided humanitarian aid in the form of 40,000 doses of vaccine to Bosnia and Herzegovina for the fight against the coronavirus.⁴⁸

Azerbaijani cultural diplomacy outreach is also present in other Western Balkan states. For instance, through the Azerbaijan–Montenegro Cultural and Economic Center, Azerbaijan promotes active cultural exchange with Montenegro by organizing cultural and traditional events, such as concerts of Azerbaijani folk music and dances.⁴⁹ In November 2025, the National Library of Albania in Tirana opened an Azerbaijani literature section to foster bilateral intellectual ties and showcase Azerbaijani culture.⁵⁰

Building stronger cultural ties legitimizes Azerbaijan's presence and reduces political resistance in the Western Balkans. While energy and infrastructure projects remain a leading force in Azerbaijan's niche strategy, soft power serves as an additional instrument for further deepening collaborative and productive relations with the region. In the Western Balkan countries, Azerbaijan has effectively turned soft power into a niche strength of its foreign policy engagement to build influence, reputation and partnerships.

Conclusion

As an emerging middle power, Azerbaijan has employed niche diplomacy effectively in its regional foreign policy activism, aiming to enlarge its geopolitical influence and position. Azerbaijan's niche strategy in the Western Balkans represents a logical geopolitical choice,

47 "Work starts on Health Center to be built in Bosnia and Herzegovina with support of Heydar Aliyev Foundation," *Report*, March 8, 2017, Available at: <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/work-starts-on-health-center-to-be-built-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-with-support-of-heydar-aliyev-fou> (Accessed: March 22, 2026).

48 Lmahamad, A., "Bosnia thanks Azerbaijan for support to fight COVID-19," *AzerNews*, October 12, 2021, Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/184285.html> (Accessed: March 22, 2026).

49 Azerbaijan-Montenegro Cultural and Economic Center, official website, Available at: <https://azcec.me/about-us>.

50 "Azerbaijani Literature Section Inaugurated at National Library of Albania," *The Caspian Post*, November 11, 2025, Available at: <https://caspianpost.com/culture/azerbaijani-literature-section-inaugurated-at-national-library-of-albania> (Accessed: March 24, 2026).

Azerbaijan's niche assets, particularly in energy diplomacy and transport infrastructure development, align closely with the current needs of the Western Balkans.

focusing on a cluster of small states in a peripheral but strategically significant region that provides an entry to broader European markets and increases the country's presence as an influential energy and investment partner in Europe.

Azerbaijan's niche assets, particularly in energy diplomacy and transport infrastructure development, align closely with the current needs of the Western Balkans. In particular, the onset of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which triggered a severe energy crisis in Europe, has prompted Western Balkan states to pursue greater energy security and diversify supplies while also welcoming foreign investment to modernize their underdeveloped infrastructure.

Although more a supplementary niche tool than a primary one, soft power diplomacy helps Azerbaijan to entrench its already relevant presence in the Western Balkans. Through soft power outreach, including different cultural projects and activities, Azerbaijan can exercise greater influence and increase its political impact in the region.

Through strategically tailored niche diplomacy, Azerbaijan has gained significant influence among Western Balkan countries, which perceive this emerging Caucasian power as a reliable and powerful partner, able to deliver much-needed energy and transport investment without political interference or pressure on the region's internal affairs. Principles including a high degree of respect, political understanding and non-interference in regional issues, as demonstrated in Azerbaijan's engagement in the Western Balkans, are decisive factors in the country's successful niche strategy in the region. Azerbaijan's engagement with the Western Balkans is more than smart diplomacy; it represents evidence of emerging middle power behaviour in practice, with reliance on niche diplomacy, a non-interference stance and partnership-oriented influence, all aimed at enhancing the country's regional standing.

From Cultural Cooperation to Military Integration: The Significance of the OTS's Planned 2026 Joint Military Exercise

Alper Volkan Ertem^{*}

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has transformed, since its establishment, from a cultural and language-based cooperation platform into a multidimensional international intergovernmental organization encompassing politics, economy, transportation, energy and security. One of the most concrete indicators of this transformation is the proposal for a joint military exercise to be held in Azerbaijan in 2026, as voiced by Azerbaijan's President İlham Aliyev at the 12th OTS Summit held in Gabala, Azerbaijan, on October 7, 2025. Although it has not yet been implemented, this proposal reflects the organization's strategic will to enhance its collective security capacity. This study aims to analyse the potential benefits that this military exercise would provide to the OTS member states from a multidimensional perspective. In this context, the study examines, in addition to the military gains from the exercise, such as interoperability, joint command structure and the development of a joint operational doctrine, its potential to evolve into areas such as intelligence sharing. Furthermore, the study focuses on the positive effects that would result from extending the successful military alliance model between Türkiye and Azerbaijan to the other OTS members. It evaluates the advantages to be gained from the joint use of strategic technologies, such as armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and the relevance of deterrence factors in relation to the security of energy lines and the Middle Corridor in the context of rising Iran-US tensions. The proposal to hold the exercise in Azerbaijan also reflects an effort to reinforce regional stability and long-term peacebuilding in the South Caucasus through enhanced cooperation among Turkic states. In conclusion, it is anticipated that, if the 2026 exercise is successfully carried out, the OTS will significantly increase its international weight as a regional security actor.

Keywords: Organization of Turkic States, joint military exercise, energy security, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), Azerbaijan.



^{*} **Alper Volkan ERTEM**, PhD in Asian Studies, Türkiye. E-mail: ertem.alper@icloud.com; ORCID: 0000-0001-7802-7375

Introduction

The Organization of Turkic States has undergone several transformations in the nature of its institutional existence. Initially functioning as an entity based on language and culture, the organization has today become an institution in which multidimensional cooperation is a regular feature. Within the organization, cooperation occurs in more than 30 fields, ranging from politics to economy, customs to transportation, education to tourism, energy to health, and agriculture to space cooperation.¹ The areas of cooperation established by member states within the organization are increasing daily. Arguably, the most important of these is in the military sphere. Although bilateral military cooperation already exists between countries within the organization – namely Azerbaijan and Türkiye – engaging in a comprehensive programme of cooperation is also of great importance. In this context, the military exercise planned for Azerbaijan in 2026, resulting from President Ilham Aliyev's proposal, is valuable in terms of the organization attaining a more institutional structure and demonstrating that it has reached a level at which it is capable of serving as a centre of influence in its region.

It is clear that the joint military exercise proposal put forward by President Ilham Aliyev is not merely a symbolic message of unity. It points to the institutionalization, under the OTS framework, of

It is clear that the joint military exercise proposal put forward by President Ilham Aliyev is not merely a symbolic message of unity.

Azerbaijan's military deterrence capacity gained following the Second Garabagh War and the *de facto* alliance model it has established with Türkiye. Furthermore, the joint utilization of unmanned aerial vehicles and other military technologies developed by Türkiye over the past decade within the framework of a military exercise with OTS member states carries the potential to qualitatively enhance the organization's collective defence capability. In this respect, the exercise is the most concrete manifestation of the OTS's effort to move beyond the classical cultural cooperation platform and become a source of regional security. Based on the strategic framework outlined above, this study aims to systematically analyse the multidimensional benefits that the joint military exercise in 2026, proposed by President Ilham Aliyev at the 12th OTS Summit, would provide to OTS member states. Within the scope of the study, the value that the exercise will add in areas such as interoperability, deterrence, defence industry standardization, security of energy and transportation

¹ Turkicstates.org, *Areas of Cooperation*, Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/en/areas-of-cooperation> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

corridors, and intelligence coordination will be addressed. In this context, the article argues that this step that the OTS is taking in the field of military cooperation constitutes a turning point on the path to transforming the organization into a regional power hub.

A Brief History of the OTS

The historical background of the Organization of Turkic States is rooted in the new era that emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the Turkic states in Central Asia, along with Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. The political, cultural and diplomatic interactions that developed among these newly independent states in Central Asia laid the foundation for the establishment of the OTS. The process of communication that began following the declarations of independence by those Turkic states constitutes the foundation of the OTS. During this process, initiatives aimed at developing political, economic and cultural relations among Turkic states accelerated within the framework of shared historical, linguistic and cultural elements. Notably, the Summit of the Heads of State of Turkic Speaking Countries, held in Ankara in 1992, marked the first significant step in the institutionalization process. The summits held throughout the 1990s transformed the pursuit of cooperation among the Turkic states into a more systematic structure. The most significant milestone of this process was the Nakhchivan Agreement, signed on October 3, 2009, by Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This agreement established the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, also known as the Turkic Council. The agreement granted the organization a legal personality and served as a founding document aimed at fostering joint action among the contracting states in the fields of political solidarity, economic cooperation, security, transportation, education, culture and communication. Thus, the summit process gained an institutional structure, and cooperation within the Turkic world began to take shape under the framework of an international organization.

After its establishment, the organization ceased to be merely a platform aimed at cultural rapprochement and evolved into a multidimensional structure operating in the fields of economic integration, transportation networks, digital transformation and regional cooperation. The most significant stage of this transformation took place at the 8th Summit held in Istanbul, Türkiye, on November 12, 2021.

The Istanbul Summit was a historic event in that the leaders decided to officially change the name from the Turkic Council to the Organization of Turkic States. At the same summit, President Ilham Aliyev was awarded the Supreme Order of the Turkic World for Azerbaijan's liberation of its occupied territories as a result of the 44-day war that took place in 2020. The Turkic World Vision document that was also adopted at the Istanbul Summit was regarded as an important step towards institutionalization.²

The name change marked a significant turning point as it demonstrated that relations among the Turkic states were not confined merely to the level of cultural solidarity but were evolving towards a stronger understanding of cooperation aimed at political and economic integration. Today, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are full members of the OTS, while Hungary, Turkmenistan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus hold observer status. The total population of the OTS member states exceeds 150 million. Moreover, they have a GDP of around \$1.2 trillion.³

The Significance of the 12th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States

The 12th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), hosted by Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, was held on October 7, 2025, in Gabala, Azerbaijan, with the theme 'Regional Peace and Security'. In addition to the leaders of the OTS member states, representatives of observer countries, the OTS Secretary General, members of the Council of Elders and heads of Turkic cooperation organizations attended the summit. The summit served as a significant diplomatic platform in terms of strengthening political dialogue within the Turkic world, developing an understanding of regional security and deepening multilateral cooperation mechanisms.

At the summit, particular attention was given to the new political and security environment that emerged in the South Caucasus following the Joint Declaration signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Washington, D.C., on August 8, 2025. The OTS leaders assessed this

2 Guliyev, V. "The Reinvigoration of the Organization of Turkic States amid Ongoing Geopolitical Unrest and Economic Uncertainty", *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2024, pp. 40-41.

3 *Ibid.*

development to be an important step for regional peace, stability and prosperity. They reiterated their collective will to establish a peaceful, secure and prosperous regional order in the Turkic world. Furthermore, the need to enhance cooperation in the fields of politics, foreign policy, security, economy and people-to-people relations was emphasized. Various decisions aimed at strengthening the institutional capacity of the organization were taken at the Gabala Summit. These included the establishment of the 'OTS+' format, paving the way for the organization to develop more flexible and multidimensional cooperation with external partners. Further decisions included strengthening the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY) and welcoming Turkmenistan's participation as an observer in the Turkic Academy and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation. It was stated at the summit that the OTS conducts cooperation in more than forty fields, including economy, security, education, innovation and space; this was regarded as an indicator of the organization's increasingly expanding institutional and international effectiveness. At the conclusion of the summit, the OTS chairmanship was transferred from Kyrgyzstan to Azerbaijan.⁴

The 12th OTS Summit held in Gabala in 2025, hosted by Azerbaijan, adopted the Gabala Declaration. This represented a new stage in the organization's transformation process. The declaration emphasised strategic issues such as regional security, defence industry cooperation, the Middle Corridor, the Zangezur Corridor, digital transformation, energy security and international coordination. This demonstrated that the OTS had evolved from a platform centred on cultural cooperation into a multidimensional international organization with increasing regional geopolitical and geo-economic effectiveness.⁵

In particular, the active role undertaken by Azerbaijan in the fields of regional transportation, energy and peace diplomacy in the aftermath of the Second Garabagh War has significantly contributed to the increase of the OTS's strategic effectiveness in the South Caucasus. In his speech delivered at the 12th OTS Summit held in Gabala, Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev stated:

4 Turkicstates.org, *The 12th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States Convened in Gabala, Azerbaijan*, October 07, 2025, Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/en/news/the-12th-summit-of-the-organization-of-turkic-states-convened-in-gabala-azerbaijan> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

5 Organization of Turkic States, *Gabala Declaration*, Gabala, Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025.

Today, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has evolved from merely a platform for cooperation into one of the significant geopolitical centers. It is gratifying to see our Organization's prestige grow on the international stage... Internal political and economic stability, a strategic geographical location, positive demographics with a young population, vast potential in transport and logistics, rich natural resources, and growing capabilities in the military and defense technology sectors position the OTS as a significant actor on the global stage.... Today, peace and security are essential foundations for the development of any country. The Nakhchivan Agreement, the founding document of our Organization, highlights the safeguarding of peace and security as primary goals. Given the current geopolitical and security challenges worldwide, it is crucial that the Turkic states unite as a single center of power...⁶

Pointing out that development would not be possible without ensuring security, President Ilham Aliyev delivered the following assessment:

It is well understood that development cannot be achieved without ensuring security. In a time when the norms and principles of international law are being gravely violated, cooperation among our countries in military and defense-technical fields becomes one of the crucial factors. In this regard, we maintain strong cooperation with our ally, Türkiye. Just in the past year, over 25 bilateral and multinational military exercises have been carried out jointly with Türkiye. Considering the extensive cooperation between our countries in military, defense, and security areas, we propose holding joint military exercises for the member states of the Organization of Turkic States in Azerbaijan in 2026.⁷

In this speech, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that, in today's world, military strength is a crucial element in safeguarding the independence and territorial integrity of any country, recalling the country's victory achieved in the 44-day Patriotic War of 2020 and counter-terrorism measures in 2023, which restored Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

⁶ President.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the 12th Summit of the Council of Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States held in Gabala*, October 7, 2025, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70315> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

⁷ *Ibid.*

President İlham Aliyev also stated that “One of the key outcomes of the Washington summit was the opening of the Zangezur Corridor. This is significant as a new transport artery and serves as a second route within both the Middle Corridor and the North–South Corridor.”⁸ Touching upon the importance of energy security, President İlham Aliyev thanked the OTS countries that have built schools, mosques and other infrastructure in the provinces of the Garabagh and Eastern Zangezur regions of Azerbaijan liberated from occupation, and emphasized that the country will never forget this brotherly support.

A New Stage in OTS Military Cooperation: The 2026 Military Exercise

In an era when regional security is being redefined, OTS is evolving from a cultural platform into a geopolitical centre of gravity. The joint military exercise planned for Azerbaijan in 2026 is regarded as the most concrete and strategic manifestation of this evolution. This initiative, proposed by Azerbaijan’s President İlham Aliyev at the 12th OTS Summit held in Gabala in October 2025, constitutes one of the most critical steps toward achieving the security cooperation objectives outlined in the organization’s Turkic World Vision 2040 document.

In an era when regional security is being redefined, OTS is evolving from a cultural platform into a geopolitical centre of gravity.

This exercise is not just a symbolic initiative. It is also stated to be a well-considered, practical and strategic step towards the institutionalization of security integration within the OTS.⁹ Türkiye-based newspaper *Yeni Şafak* described the proposal, announced by President İlham Aliyev, to organize a joint military exercise with the participation of OTS member countries as not merely a defence cooperation move, but also a strategic step aimed at achieving a more advanced level of military integration among the Turkic states.¹⁰ Indeed, an initiative aimed at the member states of the OTS conducting joint military exercises stands out as among the most concrete indicators of the organization’s transformation.

8 Trtavaz.com.tr, *Aliyev proposed that TDT countries conduct a joint military exercise in Azerbaijan*, October 07, 2025, Available at: <https://www.trtavaz.com.tr/haber/tur/turkistandan/aliyev-tdt-ulkelerinin-azerbaycanda-ortak-askeri-tatbikat-yapmasini-onerdi/68e4ec1b8a46314d2325c59c> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

9 Modern.az, *Turkic NATO is coming - after 2026...*, October 08, 2025, Available at: <https://modern.az/en/dunya/537450/turkic-nato-is-coming-after-2026/> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

10 Yenısafak.com, *Aliyev’s proposal for the Turan military exercise*, October 07, 2025, Available at: <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/aliyevden-turan-tatbikati-teklifi-4756665> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

President Ilham Aliyev's proposal carries multilayered meanings, such as the institutionalization within the OTS of the strategic weight his country gained through its victory during the Second Garabagh War and the presentation of its de facto military integration with Türkiye as a model for the other members of the organization to follow.

In an interview in January 2026, President Ilham Aliyev provided a comprehensive explanation of the military exercise being planned by the OTS. First, the President noted that he personally proposed the exercise and emphasized that it is a necessity. He based this on the argument that every country must strengthen its own military security and the notion that, ultimately, “might is right.”¹¹ Stressing that the practical implementation of the military exercise is essential, President Ilham Aliyev also noted that joint military exercises carry significant symbolic meaning. He argued that – against a backdrop of weakening international law – power, cooperation, alliances and mutual support have come to the forefront. For this reason, he maintained that overall national capabilities, including military capacity, should be enhanced. Stating that cooperation with Türkiye is conducted within the framework of a formal alliance and mutual military assistance, President Ilham Aliyev expressed the view that it would be appropriate for the other Turkic states, which he described as a “family”, to begin cooperating in the same direction. At the same time, he specifically emphasized that the proposal for a military exercise should by no means be interpreted as a suggestion to establish a military organization and that such interpretations would be unfounded. Pointing out that cooperation has already been established in many areas, including energy, transportation, trade and investment, President Ilham Aliyev declared that there is no obstacle to cooperation in the military sphere as well, and questioned why such cooperation should not be pursued.¹² Moreover, for Azerbaijan, which has increasingly emerged as a regional actor in the fields of defence modernization and strategic coordination, the proposal for a joint military exercise constitutes a significant step towards enhancing the OTS's role as a platform for collective power projection and security cooperation.¹³

11 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev was interviewed by local TV channels*, January 5, 2026, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/71213> (Accessed: May 17, 2026).

12 *Ibid.*

13 Huseynov, V., “Azerbaijan Calls for Deeper Cooperation within the Organization of Turkic States”, *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, October 20, 2025, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-calls-for-deeper-cooperation-within-the-organization-of-turkic-states-1930> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

Assessments indicate that the planned military exercise will enhance security cooperation among OTS member states. Accordingly, this military exercise not only strengthens the institutional foundation of the OTS but also constitutes a tangible indicator of the organization's strategic determination to become a strong regional actor.

Military Cooperation Between Azerbaijan and Türkiye

Among the member states of the OTS, the most significant and advanced example of military cooperation can be identified as that between Azerbaijan and Türkiye.¹⁴ After the Second Garabagh War, the military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye evolved into a new phase. The two countries have oriented themselves towards an understanding that involves a joint military structure capable of acting in coordination in potential crisis and conflict scenarios.¹⁵ The extension of this military cooperation model among the OTS member states is of strategic importance for strengthening the organization's collective security capacity. In this framework, the defence and military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye serves as a model for the security architecture that is targeted for establishment within the OTS.

Among the member states of the OTS, the most significant and advanced example of military cooperation can be identified as that between Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Türkiye has been allocating significant resources to its domestic defence industry in recent years. In this context, it can be stated that drones, in particular, have assumed a strategic role in the modern conflict environment, altering the course of armed conflicts. Armoured vehicles, missile systems, and electronic warfare platforms developed by Türkiye are being widely exported, including to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ The outcome of the Second Garabagh War, in which the armed forces of Azerbaijan achieved a decisive victory, demonstrated the effectiveness of the Azerbaijan–Türkiye military alliance.¹⁷

14 Ertem, A.V., "Reflections on Organization of Turkic States", Göçebe Journal, No. 18, 2023, p. 81.

15 Valiyev, J., "Azerbaijan-Türkiye military cooperation: One nation, one army", *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, December 23, 2022, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-turkiye-military-cooperation-one-nation-one-army-1093> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

16 Avdalani, E., "The Rise of the Organization of Turkic States", Gulf Research Center, March 15, 2026, Available at: <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/359> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

17 Shafiyev, F., "Azerbaijan and the Rise of Turkic Unity: The Journey of the Organization of Turkic States", *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, January

Therefore, Türkiye's sharing of these technological gains, particularly armed drones, with the member states of the OTS will make a significant contribution to the collective military capacity and deterrent power of the organization.

The Benefits of the Military Exercise

With the joint military exercise planned for Azerbaijan in 2026, the OTS is stepping into a new and strategic stage in its institutional transformation. Although the exercise is yet to take place, the proposal by itself demonstrates that the OTS is not merely a platform for cultural rapprochement but also possesses the will to become one of the constitutive elements of regional security. The fact that it was proposed to hold the exercise in Azerbaijan carries a symbolic and strategic message following Azerbaijan's decisive victory in the Second Garabagh War, as a result of which the country restored its territorial integrity.

That said, it is clear that the proposed military exercise should not merely consist of a display of firepower but must be grounded in a multidimensional cooperation framework. It is of great importance that joint activities in the military field evolve over time to encompass not only the operational level, but also areas such as intelligence sharing and joint early warning systems against hybrid threats. Indeed, training the armed forces of different countries under the same command structure, communication protocols and operational doctrine will create the possibility of rapid and coordinated intervention in the event of a potential crisis or regional threat. In this context, it is evident that the military cooperation model established in recent years between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, and embodied by multiple joint exercises, has had positive results. Sharing this model systematically with the other OTS member states will qualitatively enhance both their individual and collective deterrence capacities. In particular, the transfer and joint use of technological systems, such as drones, that are changing the course of war will both reinforce interoperability and reduce OTS countries' external dependency in the defence industry.

Furthermore, the increasingly visible global-scale instability resulting from the war in the Middle East is placing energy shipments passing through the Strait of Hormuz at serious risk. This situation makes it

07, 2024, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-and-the-rise-of-turkic-unity-the-journey-of-the-organization-of-turkic-states-1338> (Accessed: May 8, 2026).

strategically even more critical to deliver the energy resources in the Caspian basin to world markets through the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Oil Pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor. The joint military exercise to be conducted by the OTS, particularly with Azerbaijan as host, is likely to play a supportive role in enhancing deterrence and reinforcing cooperation related to the security of critical energy routes and transportation networks, such as the Middle Corridor and the Zangezur Corridor. In conclusion, the joint military exercise planned to be held in Azerbaijan in 2026 has the potential to transform the OTS from a mere regional cooperation organization into a collective power hub capable of having a major say in global geopolitical processes.

Furthermore, it is assessed that these exercises will encourage the standardization of military equipment used by different countries. This situation reduces costs by ensuring compatibility in spare parts, maintenance and logistics processes, and increases the effectiveness of the Turkish defence industry in the OTS market.

Military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye is multi-dimensional. There are various examples illustrating this cooperation, including the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Strengthening Mutual Military Security between Türkiye and Azerbaijan in 2025. The signing ceremony was held with the participation of Türkiye’s Minister of National Defense Yaşar Güler and Azerbaijan’s Minister of Defense Zakir Hasanov.¹⁸ Meanwhile, military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and between Türkiye and Kazakhstan, is also noteworthy. At the recent informal summit of the OTS held in Kazakhstan, an important agreement was signed to advance Türkiye–Kazakhstan defence industry cooperation to a higher level.¹⁹ In addition, a Kazakhstan military delegation led by Major General Baurzhan Abzhanov visited Azerbaijan, where they held high-level meetings, received briefings on military education reforms and observed key defence education institutions as part of efforts to strengthen

Military cooperation between states in the Turkic world, such as between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, is expected to deepen further through the planned OTS exercise.

18 Aa.com.tr, *Azerbaijan parliament approves MoU to strengthen mutual military security with Türkiye*, December 25, 2025, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbaijan-parliament-approves-mou-to-strengthen-mutual-military-security-with-turkiye/3780948> (Accessed: May 28, 2026).

19 Günyol, A. “Cooperation between Türkiye and Kazakhstan in the defense industry”, May 14, 2026, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/turkiye-ve-kazakistandan-savunma-sanayisinde-ibirligi/3937590> (Accessed: May 28, 2026).

cooperation in military training and experience exchange between the two countries.²⁰

Military cooperation between states in the Turkic world, such as between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, is expected to deepen further through the planned OTS exercise. Joint military exercises enhance the capacity for rapid and coordinated response to crises and regional threats by enabling the armed forces of different countries to train under a unified command structure, communication protocols and operational doctrines. Moreover, these exercises promote the standardization of military equipment, thereby ensuring compatibility in logistics, maintenance and spare parts supply chains. This increases cost efficiency while strengthening the competitiveness of Türkiye's defence industry within the OTS market. At the same time, the collective military visibility of OTS member states enhances deterrence against potential threat actors, functioning as a peaceful stabilizing mechanism that contributes to maintaining regional stability in the South Caucasus, the Caspian Basin and Turkistan.

Conclusion

The joint military exercise planned for Azerbaijan in 2026 is regarded as a significant turning point in the evolutionary process of the OTS. This development demonstrates the transformation of the Organization from a platform primarily based on cultural and linguistic solidarity into an institutional structure encompassing multidimensional areas of cooperation.

This planned exercise provides a suitable framework for establishing advanced interoperability and integrated command structures, and strengthening joint intelligence-sharing mechanisms. In this context, it becomes possible to improve the effectiveness of rapid, coordinated response capabilities against terrorism, border security threats and other asymmetric risks. Furthermore, the sharing of advanced Turkish defence technologies, particularly unmanned aerial vehicles, contributes to the consolidation of the collective security capacity of the OTS.

The extension of the bilateral military cooperation model between Türkiye and Azerbaijan into a broader institutional framework within the OTS will strengthen the organization's capacity for joint action and thereby make a meaningful contribution to regional stability and peace.

20 Poladova, U. "Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan discuss military cooperation", May 23, 2026, Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/258814.html> (Accessed: May 28, 2026).

The South Caucasus, Connectivity and the European Union's Strategic Turn

Jordi Xuclà*

This article examines the South Caucasus as an emerging geoeconomic hub and analyses the European Union's strategic turn towards the region since 2022. This turn was driven by the interaction of three factors. First, Russia's war against Ukraine forced the European Union (EU) to accelerate energy diversification and to give greater value to east-west routes outside Russian control. Second, the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process and the weakening of Russia's regional role made the South Caucasus more available for energy, transport and diplomacy. Finally, Azerbaijan exploited this opening through its energy infrastructure, transit position, relationship with Türkiye and multi-vector foreign policy. This causal sequence creates the article's main puzzle: although the EU has become more dependent on a stable and connected South Caucasus, its institutions have not moved in the same direction. The European Commission, the Council of the EU and several member states of the Union have treated Azerbaijan as a necessary partner for energy security, access to the Caspian and Central Asia, and the development of the Middle Corridor. However, the European Parliament has followed a more hostile line, often returning to conflict-era language and weakening the EU's credibility in the post-conflict regional order. The South Caucasus simultaneously constitutes a corridor of energy diversification, east-west connectivity and geopolitical competition. The EU's influence in the region will depend on its capacity to align strategic language, institutional discipline and investment decisions.

Keywords: South Caucasus, European Union, Azerbaijan, connectivity, Middle Corridor.



* **Dr. Jordi Xuclà** is Professor of International Relations at Abat Oliba CEU University, Barcelona, Spain. He was a member of the Spanish Parliament from 2000 to 2019 and served as a member of both the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Introduction: The South Caucasus and the European Union in a Connected World

Real-time flight tracking platforms provide a striking and immediate illustration of the South Caucasus' renewed geopolitical centrality. The closure of Russian airspace following the war in Ukraine, combined with the successive closures of Iranian airspace during the Israel–Iran confrontation of June 2025 and the renewed strikes of early 2026, has redirected a significant share of air traffic between Europe and Asia through the South Caucasus corridor. What these platforms reveal is a dense and continuous flow of passenger and cargo flights crossing this space. This visible reconfiguration of aerial routes offers a clear expression of the region's evolving role as a necessary junction in the movement of goods and people between Europe and Asia.

This image introduces a wider transformation. The EU now looks at the South Caucasus as a region of more direct political and economic relevance, and seeks more structured relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia through diplomacy and connectivity initiatives.¹

This article argues that the EU's strategic turn towards the South Caucasus was driven by a change in European priorities after 2022. Russia's war against Ukraine made energy diversification and establishing routes outside Russian control more urgent.² Meanwhile, the weakening of Russia's role in the South Caucasus and the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process made deeper regional engagement more politically viable. Azerbaijan exploited this opening through its energy infrastructure, transit position, relationship with Türkiye and multi-vector foreign policy. The article considers the EU's shift as the result of three connected factors: European need, regional change and Azerbaijani agency. It also examines the tension within the EU itself. The European Commission and the Council of the EU have moved towards pragmatic engagement with Baku, while the European Parliament has followed a more hostile and conflict-centred line. This institutional divergence helps explain why the EU's policy has become more strategic but remains uneven.

The division has practical consequences. The EU has become more dependent on a stable and connected South Caucasus, but its

1 European Commission, "Global Gateway: Building Sustainable Links Around the World", December 1, 2021, Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu>.

2 European Commission, "REPowerEU Plan", May 18, 2022, Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu>.

institutions have not moved in the same direction. The Commission and the Council must deal with energy supplies, transport corridors, sanctions against Russia, access to Central Asia and the management of regional escalation. The European Parliament does not carry the same operational burden. It can adopt a more hostile vocabulary without having to manage its consequences for gas flows, corridor development or regional negotiations. This explains why one part of the EU has moved towards a working partnership with Azerbaijan, while another continues to frame the region in terms of conflict-era categories.

The article uses a qualitative causal approach. It distinguishes between three elements: the shock that pushed the EU to adjust its position, the regional conditions that made deeper engagement possible and the institutional factors that kept the European response divided.

The article is structured accordingly. It first examines how the South Caucasus has acquired renewed geopolitical relevance and how this has affected the EU's approach. It then looks more closely at the evolution of EU policy, focusing on the gradual move from a predominantly critical posture to a more pragmatic form of engagement. The following section turns to the legal and political developments that have made this shift possible, particularly in the context of the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process. The final part analyses the material dimension of this transformation, with a focus on energy flows, transport routes and the broader logic of Eurasian connectivity.

Why the South Caucasus Became More Relevant

The renewed centrality of the South Caucasus is rooted in geography, but the current geopolitical context has made that geography significantly more consequential. Situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian basin, and bordering Russia, Türkiye and Iran, the region has long been exposed to competing external pressures. What has changed is not its location, but the intensity and scale of the use made of that location.

Routes that once appeared secondary now carry growing volumes of energy, trade and transit flows, placing Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia more firmly within the core of Eurasian dynamics.

For the EU, this shift became particularly evident after 2022. The disruption of established energy supply patterns, combined with the urgent need to

The renewed centrality of the South Caucasus is rooted in geography, but the current geopolitical context has made that geography significantly more consequential.

reduce dependence on Russian gas, triggered a rapid reassessment of external partnerships. In this context, Azerbaijan's role as a supplier became substantially more relevant. Gas exports to the EU increased from around 8 bcm in 2021 to approximately 12 bcm in 2023 and have continued to grow, reaching levels close to 13 bcm in 2024–2025, with deliveries to Italy, Greece and Bulgaria through the Trans Adriatic Pipeline.³ Additional volumes have been channelled to Southeast Europe through interconnectors, particularly the Greece–Bulgaria link, with further extensions under development.⁴ The Memorandum of Understanding signed in July 2022 between the European Commission and Azerbaijan established a political objective of increasing these flows to at least 20 bcm annually by 2027, a target that continues to shape infrastructure expansion and upstream investment decisions.⁵

Georgia plays an important role in regional connectivity, hosting key segments of the Southern Gas Corridor as well as transport infrastructure linking the Caspian basin to the Black Sea. While transit revenues and infrastructure investments remain central to its economic model, its current foreign policy orientation has made it a less dynamic actor within the evolving regional framework.

Armenia, traditionally marginal to these connectivity dynamics owing to closed borders and the legacy of conflict, may enter a new phase of regional integration. If political continuity is maintained following the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2026, and the current government's approach is sustained, Armenia could become an active component of emerging connectivity initiatives. In this scenario, improved relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye would allow it to benefit from a more constructive neighbourhood policy and from its integration into regional transport and economic networks.

Beyond energy, the importance of the South Caucasus has grown in the transport and logistics spheres. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (also known as the Middle Corridor) has gained increasing attention as trade flows between China and Europe adjust to new geopolitical realities. Rail freight volumes have expanded since

3 Energy Institute, *Statistical Review of World Energy 2024*, London, Energy Institute, 2024.

4 Trans Adriatic Pipeline, "TAP delivers 50 billion cubic metres of natural gas to Europe", September 1, 2025, Available at: <https://www.tap-ag.com/news/news-stories/tap-delivers-50-billion-cubic-metres-of-natural-gas-to-europe>.

5 European Commission, "EU-Azerbaijan Energy Memorandum of Understanding", July 18, 2022.

2022, with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia coordinating transit operations across the Caspian and Black Sea segments. By the end of 2025, cargo volumes are estimated to have reached between 4 and 5 million tonnes annually, with container traffic the fastest-growing segment. Transit times have also decreased, in some cases approaching 15–20 days under optimal conditions, bringing the corridor closer to commercial competitiveness.⁶

This evolution reflects infrastructure investment and better corridor coordination. Ports, railways, customs procedures and tariffs now serve the same purpose: making the Middle Corridor reliable enough to work as a commercial route, not only as a political alternative to Russian routes. The EU has increasingly positioned itself as part of this process. Through the Global Gateway strategy, the EU supports and reinforces connectivity between Europe and Asia, including through transport infrastructure, digital networks and regulatory convergence. The South Caucasus features prominently within this framework as part of a wider system linking European and Asian markets.⁷

This shift has also exposed sharp institutional divisions in Europe. The Commission and the Council have increasingly approached the region in terms of stability, energy diversification and connectivity. The European Parliament⁸ and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe⁹ (PACE) have followed a more confrontational line. PACE's decision, in January 2024, not to ratify the credentials of the delegation of Azerbaijan went beyond political criticism: it excluded Azerbaijani parliamentarians from the Assembly's ordinary work and from a forum that participates in the election of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the Commissioner for Human Rights and judges of the European Court of Human Rights. This created a serious asymmetry.¹⁰

6 World Bank, *Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030*, Washington, DC, World Bank, November 2023.

7 European Commission, "Global Gateway: Building Sustainable Links Around the World", December 1, 2021.

8 European Parliament, "Resolution on the Situation in Nagorno-Karabakh", October 2024.

9 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 2527 (2024), "Challenge, on substantive grounds, of the still unratified credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan", January 2024.

10 Putnam, R.D., "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games", *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1988, pp. 427–460; Xuclà, J., "Reasons Why the New Spanish Coalition Government Had to Adjust Its Foreign Affairs Policy Along Venezuela's Political Position, the Sahara's Conflict, and the Renewal of the U.S. Military Basis", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 66, No. 3, 2022, pp. 339–356.

A member state remained subject to the institutional and judicial architecture of the Council of Europe, while its elected parliamentarians were deprived of participation in one of its central parliamentary bodies. The institutional consequences of this confrontational approach are developed in the following section.

Two European Logics: Strategic Engagement and Parliamentary Confrontation

The evolution of EU policy towards Azerbaijan cannot be understood as a single European line. It is better explained as the coexistence of two institutional logics. The first is executive and pragmatic. It is represented by the Commission, the Council and several member states, which have treated Azerbaijan as a necessary partner for energy diversification, regional connectivity, and access to the Caspian and Central Asia. This logic became stronger after 2022, when Russia's war against Ukraine made dependence on Russian energy and Russian-controlled routes more costly.

The evolution of EU policy towards Azerbaijan cannot be understood as a single European line.

The second logic is parliamentary and confrontational. It has been most visible in the European Parliament, where resolutions on Azerbaijan have often returned to a conflict-centred and anti-Azerbaijani vocabulary and have not followed the direction of the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process. This creates a credibility problem for the EU. While the Commission and the Council seek to build a structured partnership with Baku, the Parliament often acts as if the conflict had not been resolved. The result is a divided European message: engagement through executive channels; pressure and hostility through parliamentary discourse.¹¹

This institutional division also needs to be read together with Azerbaijan's own foreign policy strategy. As noted by Vasif Huseynov, the South Caucasus has long been characterized by a high degree of geopolitical heterogeneity, where external actors tend to project competing normative and strategic agendas onto the region. In this context, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been shaped by a deliberate effort to maintain flexibility by engaging with multiple partners while avoiding overdependence on any single axis.¹² Far from being an

11 Amiraslanova, E., "Two EUs in the South Caucasus: The European Parliament and the European Commission", Analytical Policy Brief, *Institute for Development and Diplomacy*, ADA University, May 21, 2026.

12 Huseynov, V., "The Success of Azerbaijan's Multi-Vectored Foreign Policy", *AIR*

expression of ambiguity, this strategy can be understood as a form of adaptive positioning within a fluid and competitive international system. As Farid Shafiyev has argued, difficulties in EU–Azerbaijan relations have, in part, stemmed from differing interpretations of sovereignty, security and the sequencing of political change, particularly in a region marked by protracted conflict.¹³

The 2022 EU–Azerbaijan Memorandum of Understanding on Energy gave institutional form to this change. The relationship already existed through the Southern Gas Corridor, but the memorandum changed its political meaning. Azerbaijani gas became part of the EU’s wider effort to replace Russian supplies, diversify routes and reduce exposure to a single strategic supplier.¹⁴

Developments within the region itself began to reshape the political landscape. The normalisation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, culminating in the initialling of a peace agreement in August 2025, introduced a new framework for stability. Central to this process has been the reaffirmation of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, anchored in the reference to the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration.¹⁵ By recognizing that the former administrative boundaries of the Soviet republics constitute the basis of international borders, this approach aligns with the logic of *uti possidetis juris*, understood in international practice as a mechanism for stabilizing territorial arrangements in post-federal

The normalisation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, culminating in the initialling of a peace agreement in August 2025, introduced a new framework for stability.

Center, June 14, 2021; Huseynov, V., “Azerbaijan is a Bridge Between Various Power Centers”, *Modern Diplomacy*, May 24, 2024, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-is-a-bridge-between-various-power-centers-1472>; Huseynov, V., “Azerbaijan is not de-coupling from the West”, *commonsplace.eu*, February 20, 2024, Available at: <https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-azerbaijan-not-de-coupling-west>.

13 Shafiyev, F., *Resettling the Borderlands: State Relocations and Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018); Shafiyev, F., “Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Deconstructing Stereotypes and International Imagery”, in Farid Shafiyev (ed.), *Azerbaijan’s Geopolitical Landscape: Contemporary Issues, 1991–2018* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2020), pp. 12–27.

14 European Commission, “EU–Azerbaijan Energy Memorandum of Understanding”, July 18, 2022,

15 The Alma-Ata Declaration, adopted on 21 December 1991 by eleven former Soviet republics, confirmed the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and declared that, as a result, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. The three Baltic republics, already oriented toward full independence outside the post-Soviet framework, did not participate, nor did Georgia, which was undergoing an internal crisis in 1991 and only joined the CIS in 1993. “Alma-Ata Declaration”, Almaty Conference, December 21, 1991.

contexts. As international jurisprudence has suggested, such an approach serves to reduce the risks associated with contested sovereignty by limiting the scope for competing territorial interpretations.¹⁶ The withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the Garabagh region of Azerbaijan in 2024, together with the formal closure of the OSCE Minsk Process in 2025, marked the end of a long-standing model of conflict management based on external mediation and military presence.¹⁷ This combination of external and internal developments has led to a gradual redefinition of the EU's engagement in the South Caucasus. The relationship has moved beyond a predominantly critical and conditional framework towards a more structured form of interaction in which strategic considerations and shared interests play a more prominent role.

At the same time, the changing international environment has reshaped how certain foreign policy strategies are perceived. Azerbaijan's multi-vector approach has gained renewed relevance as middle powers navigate an increasingly multipolar system. Rather than reflecting ambiguity, it can be understood as a form of strategic adaptability, enabling engagement with multiple partners while preserving autonomy. This interpretation aligns with broader debates in international relations, where more flexible patterns of alignment are emerging.¹⁸

From a European policy perspective, this evolution has led to a more pragmatic understanding of engagement in the South Caucasus. The region is no longer approached primarily as a site of normative transformation but as a partner in areas where interests concerning energy, connectivity and regional stability converge. This shift is visible not only in official documents but also in the growing density of political contacts, high-level meetings and joint initiatives developed since

16 International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Frontier Dispute (Burkina Faso/Mali)*, Judgment of 22 December 1986, The Hague: ICJ.

17 Bagirova, N., "Ceasefire Monitoring Centre in Nagorno-Karabakh Shuts as Russian Peacekeepers Withdraw", *Reuters*, April 26, 2024, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/ceasefire-monitoring-centre-nagorno-karabakh-shuts-russian-peacekeepers-withdraw-2024-04-26/>.

18 For further discussion on the concept of multivector foreign policy and its application in the region: Huseynov, V., "Azerbaijan's Multivector Foreign Policy: Between Regional Pressures and Global Opportunities", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol.12, No.2, 2021, pp.145–160; Shafiyev, F., "Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order", AIR Center Policy Paper, 2022; Cornell, S.E., "Azerbaijan Since Independence: Regional Power Dynamics and Strategic Choices", in S.E. Cornell (ed.), *Azerbaijan Since Independence*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2011; Cooley, A. and Nexon, D., *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp.120–135.

2022.¹⁹ This shift has also created the conditions for a more substantive phase of cooperation, increasingly reflected in concrete projects and infrastructure developments across the region.

Peace as a Framework for Regional Cooperation

The evolving approach of the EU toward the South Caucasus is closely linked to a broader transformation in the region itself. For decades, unresolved conflict constrained both regional interaction and external engagement. Today, the gradual consolidation of a post-conflict environment following the initialling of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement in August 2025 has begun to redefine the region not simply as a space of instability, but as one of emerging opportunity. Rather than focusing on legal disputes or competing historical narratives, the current phase is increasingly shaped by forward-looking considerations related to cooperation, connectivity and regional integration.²⁰

This shift has important practical implications. The normalization process is progressively enabling the reopening of transport routes, the re-establishment of cross-border links and the possibility of more predictable economic interaction. What was previously a fragmented regional space is beginning to take the form of a more interconnected system, where political stabilization supports economic exchange. In this context, peace is not only a diplomatic outcome but also a functional condition for regional development.

The broader geopolitical environment reinforced this transformation. The OSCE Minsk Process had become inoperative. It failed to produce a settlement and, after 2020, no longer corresponded to the new balance established on the ground. The Russian military presence established after the 2020 Trilateral Statement also ceased to operate as a stable conflict-management mechanism and ended with the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the Garabagh region in 2024. The so-called ‘Brussels track’, led by former European Council President Charles Michel, then became relevant. His meetings with Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev and Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan helped

19 Council of the European Union, “Statement by the High Representative on the Armenia–Azerbaijan Normalization Process”, August 8, 2025, Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/08/08/armeniaazerbaijan-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-initialling-of-the-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-treaty/>.

20 Xuclà, J., “Legal and Geopolitical Approach to the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Agreement and the Resolution of the Karabakh Conflict”, in E. Casares Landauro (ed.), *Ideas y argumentos: Diálogos en filosofía y ciencias sociales* (Madrid: Dykinson, 2025), pp.79–101.

A more stable South Caucasus enables deeper engagement, but it also requires sustained political commitment and strategic consistency.

advance discussions towards a peace treaty, border delimitation, humanitarian issues and the reopening of regional communications.²¹ These parties remained the central actors. The EU provided a practical channel for normalization when the older mediation formats had exhausted their political usefulness. Its role moved towards facilitation of a post-conflict agenda based on stability, connectivity and cooperation.

This transformation is also dependent on Armenian domestic politics. The results of the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2026, are relevant because they will test whether Armenia can maintain the political line that made the August 2025 peace agreement possible. A government able to sustain normalization with Azerbaijan and enable the opening of regional routes would make the South Caucasus a more coherent space for interaction. A reversal or a weaker mandate would make implementation slower and less certain. Peace also requires domestic capacity to stick to commitments over time.

For the EU, this creates an opportunity and a responsibility. A more stable South Caucasus enables deeper engagement, but it also requires sustained political commitment and strategic consistency. The Union's support for the normalization process, grounded in respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, reflects an understanding that legal clarity and political stability are prerequisites for economic integration and connectivity, and increasingly position the region as a strategic corridor linking Europe and Asia.

The South Caucasus as a Corridor of Eurasian Integration

Connectivity defines the substance of the EU's new relationship with the South Caucasus. Brussels now sees this region as a strategic corridor linking the Black Sea, the Caspian and Central Asia, and is starting to act accordingly. This is the real novelty of the post-2022 period: the EU has become more pragmatic because the region has become more important. The South Caucasus offers Europe energy diversification,

21 European Council, "Statement of European Council President Charles Michel following the Second Trilateral Meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan", April 6, 2022, Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/04/06/statement-of-european-council-president-charles-michel-following-the-second-trilateral-meeting-with-president-ilham-aliyev-and-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan/>.

alternative transport routes and a credible platform for a wider presence across Eurasia. Recent scholarship captures this change well. For example, Smolnik, Fehlings and Darieva describe the region through the tension between hub and periphery; the current political trend points clearly in the direction of hub.²²

The first pillar of this new phase is gas. Beyond current volumes and the 2027 target already noted, what matters at this stage is the structural role that the Southern Gas Corridor now plays within Europe's energy architecture. It is no longer treated as one diversification option among several, but as a fixed reference point for supply planning in Southeast Europe and Italy. Two features explain this consolidation. The first is reliability: deliveries through TAP have continued without interruption during a period of acute volatility in European gas markets, which has given Azerbaijani supplies a political value that exceeds their share of total EU imports. The second is the corridor's expansion logic. The Interconnector Greece–Bulgaria, the planned Vertical Corridor towards Moldova and Ukraine, and the upstream investments in the Shah Deniz and Absheron fields all point to a system designed to grow rather than to plateau. This is the basis on which the EU has built the rest of its energy and connectivity agenda with Baku.²³

At the political level, this was stated without ambiguity in the joint declaration issued in Baku by President of the European Council António Costa and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev in March 2026, which presented Azerbaijan as a strategic partner in security, energy and transport, and placed the country at the centre of a wider Black Sea–South Caucasus–Central Asia connectivity space.²⁴

22 Smolnik, F., Fehlings, S. and Darieva, T., “Hub or Periphery? Changing Connectivity and Disconnectivity in the South Caucasus”, *Mobilities*, Vol. 20, No. 6, 2025, pp. 1023–1037, Available at: <https://ideas.repec.org/a/taf/rmobxx/v20y2025i6p1023-1037.html>.

23 Council of the European Union, “*Strengthening regional energy security: Greece's pivotal role*”, Note 16650/25, December 10, 2025, Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16650-2025-INIT/en/pdf>; Reuters, “*EU, operators agree tariffs to make gas corridor more competitive*”, March 27, 2026, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/eu-operators-agree-tariffs-make-gas-corridor-more-competitive-2026-03-27/>; OilPrice, “*Azerbaijan Promises More Gas to Europe as Production Reality Lags*”, January 23, 2026, Available at: <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Azerbaijan-Promises-More-Gas-to-Europe-as-Production-Reality-Lags.html>.

24 Council of the European Union, “*Joint press statement by President of the European Council, António Costa, and President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev*”, March 11, 2026, Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/03/11/joint-press-statement-by-president-of-the-european-council-antonio-costa-and-president-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-ilham-aliyev/>.

The second pillar is the energy transition. Azerbaijan is not presenting itself only as a gas supplier. It is also seeking a place in Europe's future electricity map. This is part of a wider pattern that deserves more attention: major hydrocarbon-producing states are also trying to lead in renewables, green diplomacy and climate governance. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) did this at the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28), and Azerbaijan repeated it at COP29 in Baku. In both cases, fossil-fuel producers used the climate summit as a platform to project their influence in the transition era while accelerating investment in solar, wind and grid interconnection. In Azerbaijan's case, this strategy is visible in the Black Sea submarine cable project with Georgia and Romania, and in large-scale renewable projects developed with the UAE's Masdar, Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power and other foreign partners. The March 2026 joint statement of António Costa and Ilham Aliyev explicitly linked EU–Azerbaijan cooperation to renewables, wind, solar and the Black Sea Submarine Cable.²⁵

Transport is where the political meaning of this shift becomes even clearer. The Middle Corridor is no longer an aspirational route. It is an operating corridor with measurable growth. According to official Kazakh data, cargo volumes on the Trans-Caspian route rose from 2.764 million tons in 2023 to 4.484 million tons in 2024 and reached 4.119 million tons in 2025; container traffic in 2025 stood at roughly 77,000 TEU. Delivery times, once around 28–32 days, have been reduced to 13–17 days under improved operating conditions. These figures do not place the route on the scale of older Eurasian arteries, but they do show that it has moved beyond the pilot stage. It is now a functioning corridor with political backing and commercial plausibility.²⁶

This progress rests on a dense layer of practical improvements. Baku's Alat port has expanded capacity, Aktau has upgraded handling facilities, customs procedures have become more digital and railway coordination has become more consistent. The EU is no longer observing these changes from a distance. In January 2026, the EU, Azerbaijan and the

25 Xuclà, J. and Pascal, M., “De la COP28 en Dubái a la COP29 en Bakú: cómo las potencias de los combustibles fósiles lideran y comunican la agenda contra el cambio climático”, in Manuel Bermúdez Vázquez and Julio Otero Santamaría (eds.), *La trama del pensamiento: palabra, mente y belleza en la cultura contemporánea* (Madrid: Dykinson, 2024), pp. 362–380.

26 Birbayeva, A., “Trans-Caspian Transport Route Cargo Volumes Increase Fivefold in Seven Years”, *The Astana Times*, March 10, 2026; World Bank, *Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023).

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) launched a feasibility study for the Nakhchivan railway project and described it as a key investment within the broader Trans-Caspian route, with a target transit time of 15 days between Europe and Central Asia. In March 2026, President António Costa and President Ilham Aliyev welcomed support for railway modernization in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and ongoing work on the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) under the Global Gateway framework. This is stronger and more operational language than anything Brussels used regarding the region a few years ago.²⁷

The most consequential development is that regional connectivity is producing material effects. On April 2, 2026, President Ilham Aliyev stated that approximately 90 per cent of the highway and about 70 per cent of the railway associated with the Zangezur Corridor had been completed on Azerbaijan's side and linked this work to the construction of the Kars–Nakhchivan railway in Türkiye.²⁸ This has numerous implications for the actors involved. Azerbaijan moves closer to direct land access to Nakhchivan and Türkiye. Türkiye strengthens its connection with the Caspian and Central Asia. Armenia faces a practical choice: remain outside the new routes or use normalization to gain transit value. Recent developments already point to movement. In May 2026, Armenia announced that the Akhalkalaki–Kars railway through Georgia and Türkiye was open for Armenian exports and imports, although the direct Armenia–Türkiye land border remained closed. Regional normalization is already changing the transport map.

A functioning east–west connection through TRIPP/Zangezur Corridor would reshape the economic logic of the whole region.

If this trajectory continues, the implications will extend beyond Azerbaijan and Türkiye. A functioning east–west connection through TRIPP/Zangezur Corridor would reshape the economic logic of the whole region. It would give Azerbaijan direct land access to Nakhchivan and Türkiye, would strengthen the Middle Corridor and would create a realistic opening for Armenia, provided that political continuity is maintained after the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2026, and the current line of normalization is preserved. In that scenario, improved

27 European Commission, “EU and Azerbaijan Step Up Cooperation to Boost Investment and Connectivity”, *op.cit.*

28 President.az, “Ilham Aliyev received participants of meeting of Heads of Government/ Vice President of member states of Organization of Turkic States”, April 2, 2026, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/72004>.

relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye could allow Armenia to move from relative isolation to active participation in regional connectivity. This is where the peace process acquires its full economic meaning: it opens routes, and routes create incentives for cooperation.

The next issue is corridor governance. New railways, ports and road links will not, by themselves, turn the South Caucasus into a stable hub. The Middle Corridor still depends on customs procedures, tariffs, Caspian Sea crossings, railway interoperability and political trust. Infrastructure opens routes, but weak coordination can keep them slow, expensive or politically fragile. The region's relevance will depend less on the announcement of new corridors and more on the capacity to make them regular, secure and commercially credible.²⁹

Conclusion

The South Caucasus has become more relevant for the EU because energy, transport and political stabilization now converge in the same regional space. The first driver for this was Russia's war against Ukraine, which increased the cost of dependence on Russian energy and Russian-controlled routes. The second was the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process, which made regional connectivity more politically viable. The third was Azerbaijan's capacity to use its gas infrastructure, transit position, relationship with Türkiye and multi-vector diplomacy to build a more structured relationship with Brussels.

This turn does not mean that the South Caucasus has already become an integrated region. The decisive issue now is implementation. Gas flows, railway projects, the Middle Corridor, the TRIPP/Zangezur Corridor and the emerging Armenia-Türkiye connection through Georgia all point in the same direction: the region is acquiring greater corridor value. That value will depend on corridor governance, customs procedures, border management, railway interoperability, investment decisions and political trust. Infrastructure can open routes, but it cannot by itself make cooperation predictable.

The EU also faces an internal test. The Commission and the Council have

29 Guliyev, F., "The South Caucasus: Connectivity Initiatives and Regional Fragmentation", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 47, No. 11, February 8, 2026, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2026.2621911>; Hurrell, A., "Explaining the Resurgence of Regionalism in World Politics", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1995, pp. 331–358, Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/explaining-the-resurgence-of-regionalism-in-world-politics/30F0C03F224387E212491E98EE42FBED>.

moved towards pragmatic engagement with Baku, while the European Parliament and PACE have maintained a more confrontational line. This weakens the EU's credibility in a region where influence depends on coherence and political discipline. The South Caucasus is now a strategic bridge between Europe, the Caspian and Central Asia. The EU's influence there will only be meaningful if its institutions align strategic language with investment and diplomatic practice.

From Turkmenbashy to Baku: The Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan- Uzbekistan Trilateral Format in the Greater Caspian Region

Roza Bayramli*

The interconnectedness of Central Asia and the South Caucasus region is facilitating new regional cooperation opportunities beyond traditional multilateral institutions. This article examines the emerging trilateral format among Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as a practical mechanism for advancing cooperation in transport, energy and trade across the Greater Caspian region. It asserts that the format represents a type of functional minilateralism, emphasizing the implementation of concrete projects rather than the expression of broad political statements. Particular attention is given to recent developments following the 2025 Turkmenbashy summit and the state visit of Turkmenistan's President Serdar Berdimuhamedov to Azerbaijan in June 2026, which have strengthened cooperation in logistics, customs, industrial policy and energy. The article further assesses the trilateral mechanism within the broader process of institutionalizing the C6 framework, suggesting that smaller, project-oriented formats can serve as effective platforms for testing practical solutions before their wider regional application. It concludes that the Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan partnership has the potential to become an important implementation track linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Europe through enhanced trans-Caspian connectivity and sectoral cooperation.

Keywords: Greater Caspian Region, C6, Middle Corridor, regional connectivity, transport cooperation, energy cooperation.



* **Roza Bayramli** is a Senior Advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Introduction

The increasing interconnectedness of Central Asia and the South Caucasus is evidenced by the partnership among Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In recent years, the Caspian Sea has doubled in importance as a strategic bridge for trade, energy and transport connectivity, particularly in light of the growing significance of the Middle Corridor¹ and the demand for alternative transit corridors. In this context, the Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan–Uzbekistan platform can be viewed as an example of minilateralism in the Greater Caspian region,

The increasing interconnectedness of Central Asia and the South Caucasus is evidenced by the partnership among Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

where a smaller group of geographically connected states advances practical cooperation within a broader regional agenda.

In August 2025, the leaders of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan convened in the city of Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan, for a trilateral meeting that significantly advanced this process.² This

signified the emergence of a new, more practical form of cooperation that was dedicated to concrete areas, such as energy, trade, industrial cooperation, logistics and transport, rather than broad political declarations. In this regard, the trilateral format does not replicate the existing regional platforms, such as the Organization of Turkic States or the broader Central Asia+Azerbaijan Format. Rather, it complements them by providing a more operational and adaptable mechanism for the coordination of specific projects.

This trend was further consolidated by the recent state visit of President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov to Azerbaijan in June 2026. The visit illustrated that the relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan is transitioning from a state of general political proximity to a more structured and practical partnership, particularly in the areas of energy and transport logistics. The Turkmenbashi meeting of 2025 and the Baku visit of 2026, when considered in conjunction, demonstrate that the Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan–Uzbekistan trilateral

1 The Middle Corridor, formally known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), is a multimodal trade route. Spanning roughly 8,000 to 10,000 km, it connects China and Central Asia to Europe, passing through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye.

2 President.az, “High-level meeting between Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan held in Turkmenbashi”, August 22, 2025. Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/69935>.

partnership is gradually transitioning into an implementation track within the emerging C6 framework. This process translates the concept of a connected Central Asia and South Caucasus into tangible regional cooperation.

The emergence of this format did not occur in isolation. It came about following Azerbaijan's increasing engagement with Central Asia, which has become even more important in the context of the complicated geopolitical environment in Eurasia and the increasing need for alternative connectivity routes. Azerbaijan's ties with both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan had already entered a more substantive phase at the bilateral level. The 2021 Memorandum of Understanding on joint exploration and development of the Dostlug offshore field along the maritime border between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan was an important step in turning earlier Caspian disagreements into a platform for energy cooperation.³ At the same time, Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan relations gained strategic depth, particularly following the state visit of Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev to Uzbekistan on August 22–23, 2024, which brought bilateral cooperation to the level of an alliance with the signing of a treaty on allied relations and strengthened cooperation in the fields of energy, transport and connectivity.⁴

A Practical Trilateral Mechanism

The establishment of the Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan–Uzbekistan trilateral format reflects the growing demand for more flexible and results-oriented mechanisms within the broader regional architecture. Its practical value stems from the geographic complementarity of the three countries and their shared interest in strengthening connectivity between Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

On August 22, 2025, the Congress Center of the Avaza National Tourist Zone hosted a trilateral high-level meeting in the format of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. The meeting brought together President of

3 Permanent Mission of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva, “*Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan sign MoU on joint exploration and development of “Dostlug” field in Caspian Sea*”, January 22, 2021. Available at: <https://geneva.mfa.gov.az/en/news/azerbaijan-and-turkmenistan-sign-mou-on-joint-exploration-and-development-of-dostlug-field-in-caspian-sea>.

4 President.az, “*Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan signed documents*”, August 23, 2024. Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66727>.

Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, the National Leader of the Turkmen people and Chairman of the Halk Maslahaty of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, and President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and resulted in the adoption of a Joint Statement.⁵

The meeting's results illustrated the format's practical orientation. Following the trilateral meeting, the parties agreed to improve bidirectional multimodal transport along the Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Azerbaijan route, as set out in the Joint Statement. A Joint Working Group was also advocated for in the document, with the objective of streamlining relevant procedures, developing transport and communications infrastructure, and coordinating transport.⁶

A number of subsequent developments have demonstrated that the agenda initiated at the Avaza trilateral meeting has already begun to produce tangible results through sectoral and bilateral channels. Following the meeting of August 22, 2025, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan agreed to reinstate direct air services, as announced by Uzbekistan's Minister of Transport.⁷ Furthermore, the Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan and the State Service of Maritime and River Transport of Turkmenistan continued to advance cooperation in transport and logistics through more specialized arrangements, such as the Memorandum of Understanding signed in Turkmenbashi on August 22, 2025, to facilitate shipbuilding.⁸ The significance of these measures is that they fortify the Central Asian component of the broader trans-Caspian chain.⁹

5 MFA of Turkmenistan, *"Trilateral meeting in the format "Turkmenistan - Azerbaijan - Uzbekistan"*, August 23, 2025. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/en/news/5509>.

6 Interfax.com, *"Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan to boost multimodal transportation on their territories - joint statement"*, August 25, 2025. Available at: <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/113419/>.

7 Uz Daily, *"Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan Agree to Resume Direct Flights"*, August 23, 2025. Available at: <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/uzbekistan-and-turkmenistan-agree-to-resume-direct-flights/>.

8 News Central Asia, *"Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan summit led to signing a package of documents on transport, trade and regional cooperation"*, August 22, 2025. Available at: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2025/08/22/azerbaijan-turkmenistan-uzbekistan-summit-led-to-signing-a-package-of-documents-on-transport-trade-and-regional-cooperation/>.

9 Ibrahimova D. "Transport integration in Central Asia: the contribution of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan Transport integration in Central Asia: the contribution of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan", *News Central Asia*, December 8, 2025. Available at: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2025/12/08/transport-integration-in-central-asia-the-contribution-of-uzbekistan-and-turkmenistan/>.

Since the Turkmenbashy meeting, the bilateral track between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan has also experienced a resurgence in momentum. Mikayil Jabbarov, Minister of Economy of Azerbaijan, convened a meeting with Nokerguly Atagulyyev, Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan and Co-Chair of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Economic and Humanitarian Cooperation, on April 1, 2026.¹⁰ The meeting concentrated on the potential for economic collaboration, which encompassed joint projects, investment and trade. It also emphasized the potential for mutually beneficial collaboration in a variety of sectors that are directly relevant to the broader transport, logistics and energy agenda of the trilateral format.

The state visit of President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov to Azerbaijan in June 2026 further solidified the practical dimension of the broader trilateral agenda and the significance of Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan cooperation. During the visit, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan signed a series of bilateral documents regarding customs information and statistics, industrial cooperation for 2026–2028 and energy cooperation.¹¹ These agreements are particularly relevant because they address the technical and institutional foundations that are indispensable for improved regional connectivity. In this context, the Baku visit of S. Berdimuhamedov should be viewed as a bilateral diplomatic event and a continuation of the practical agenda that was initiated in Avaza on August 22, 2025.

Operational Consolidation of the Caspian Link: Baku 2026

President Serdar Berdimuhamedov’s state visit to Azerbaijan in June 2026 further demonstrated the shift towards the implementation of concrete cooperation mechanisms, particularly in areas directly supporting trans-Caspian connectivity, including energy dialogue, industrial cooperation and customs coordination.¹²

¹⁰ Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Turkmenistan, “*Prospects for the development of economic cooperation with Turkmenistan have been assessed*”, April 1, 2026. Available at: <https://ashgabat.mfa.gov.az/en/news/prospects-for-the-development-of-economic-cooperation-with-turkmenistan-have-been-assessed>.

¹¹ President.az, “*Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan documents exchanged*”, June 22, 2026. Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/72787>.

¹² *Ibid.*

Transport and logistics were among the central themes of the visit, alongside energy, trade and economic cooperation. In his assessment of the transport and transit sector as one of the strategic directions of cooperation, President Serdar Berdimuhamedov underscored the significant opportunities for the development of international transport corridors created by the advantageous geographical locations of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. In this context, he proposed intensifying the work of the Turkmenistan–Azerbaijan Commission on Transport, Transit and Logistics. He also cited the Afghanistan–Turkmenistan–Azerbaijan–Georgia–Türkiye transport corridor as a successful example of cooperation and emphasized that both countries support the initiative to establish the Caspian Sea–Black Sea transport corridor along the Turkmenistan–Azerbaijan–Georgia–Romania route.¹³ These routes have the potential to enhance the role of the Baku–Turkmenbashi connection as one of the critical maritime links of the Middle Corridor by connecting the Caspian and Black Sea regions, thereby expanding economic, trade and investment cooperation.

The *Dostlug* oil tanker, gifted by Azerbaijan to Turkmenistan as a gesture of friendship, also carries both symbolic and practical significance. It can support Caspian maritime cooperation, energy logistics and transport links between the two countries. Together with the existing

The Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan track adds yet another important energy dimension to the trilateral format.

basis for cooperation around the Dostlug field, this reflects the growing combination of political trust, energy pragmatism and transport connectivity in Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan relations.

The Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan track adds yet another important energy dimension to the trilateral format. In July 2025, Azerbaijan’s State Oil Company (SOCAR) and Uzbekistan’s Uzbekneftegaz and Ministry of Energy signed a Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) for exploration and possible hydrocarbon production in the Ustyurt region, with the project valued at approximately US\$2 billion.¹⁴ In the same year, the Green Corridor Alliance was announced by Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to export renewable energy from Central Asia to Europe via high-voltage transmission

13 President.az, “Ilham Aliyev held expanded meeting with President of Turkmenistan”, June 22, 2026. Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/72785>.

14 Kun.uz, “\$2 billion in investments, 100 million tons of oil, and 35 billion cubic meters of gas — details of the agreement with SOCAR”, July 29, 2025. Available at: <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2025/07/29/2-milliarda-dollarov-investitsiy-100-millionov-tonn-nefti-i-35-milliardov-kubometrov-gaza-detali-soglasheniya-s-socar>.

infrastructure and a Black Sea interconnector.¹⁵ These developments attest that energy cooperation between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan is becoming increasingly project-oriented, complementing the Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan energy agenda around the Caspian Sea.

The Trilateral Format as a Complementary Track for C6

The wider significance of the Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan–Uzbekistan trilateral format should be assessed in the context of growing regional cooperation across the Caspian space, particularly in the fields of energy and transport. Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan relations have developed dynamically in recent years and now cover a broader agenda, including energy, transport, logistics and regional integration. In this context, the trilateral format established in 2025 is particularly important, as it aims to develop cooperation in energy, transport and logistics, strengthen regional integration and address practical issues more efficiently. Uzbekistan adds an important economic and energy dimension to this framework, as its growing cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan strengthens the Central Asian side of the wider trans-Caspian connectivity chain.

The energy dimension is especially relevant. Turkmenistan is interested in diversifying its gas exports and needs new routes, while Europe is seeking alternative energy sources. In this regard, Azerbaijan can play an important role as a transit and energy hub. At the same time, Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan energy cooperation, including in hydrocarbon exploration and renewable energy connectivity, is becoming increasingly project-based. Together, these tracks show that the trilateral format is not limited to transport coordination but can also support a broader energy agenda linking Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and Europe.

On November 16, 2025, Azerbaijan became a fully-fledged participant in the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia (C5), which was a significant development in acknowledging the increasing interconnection between the South Caucasus and Central Asia. At the same summit in Tashkent, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev suggested that the consultative meetings be transformed into a more

15 The Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “Joint venture set up for Azerbaijan-Central Asia Green Energy Corridor project”, July 1, 2025. Available at: <https://minenergy.gov.az/en/xeberler-arxivi/00567>.

formal “Community of Central Asia”.¹⁶ He also suggested that the institutional foundations of the format be strengthened through the implementation of regulations, a rotating secretariat and upgraded national coordinators.

In this context, the trilateral format can contribute to the institutionalization of C6 without imposing an excessive degree of rigidity. Smaller mechanisms, such as the cooperation between Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, can be used to test practical solutions, identify bottlenecks and develop models of coordination that can subsequently be expanded to a broader format.

By bringing together three complementary links of the Central Asia–Caspian–South Caucasus chain, the trilateral format can help translate the broader political vision of C6 into practical sectoral coordination.

Conclusion

The trilateral format of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan illustrates the transition from political dialogue to practical implementation in regional cooperation. Its value is derived from its capacity to establish a connection between the economic, transit and energy potential of Central Asia, and Azerbaijan’s position as the

The trilateral format of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan illustrates the transition from political dialogue to practical implementation in regional cooperation.

western Caspian gateway to the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe. Consequently, the format is not a substitute for more extensive platforms; rather, it serves as a mechanism that can enhance their efficacy and accelerate implementation.

In this regard, the significance of the trilateral partnership extends beyond the three countries that are involved. It has the potential to enhance the C6 framework by offering a flexible operational track within the broader regional architecture. Through this cooperation, the idea of Central Asia and Azerbaijan as an interconnected geo-economic space can gradually move from political vision to institutional practice.

16 Raxmonkulova S., “Central Asia and South Caucasus forge stronger ties at Tashkent summit”, *Euronews*, November 18, 2025. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2025/11/18/central-asia-and-south-caucasus-forge-stronger-ties-at-tashkent-summit>.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, Volume 7, Issue 2, Winter 2026

Issue Title: "Connectivity, Partnership and Diplomacy: Pathways to Stability in the South Caucasus"

Deadline: 1 October 2026

Subtopics (non-exhaustive):

- **Peace in the South Caucasus - One Year On**
Azerbaijan's efforts to promote stability, reconciliation, and long-term peace ahead of the first anniversary of the historic Washington Summit.
- **Post-Conflict Regional Connectivity and Its Implications for the Wider Caspian region**
The central role of connectivity as a catalyst for cooperation, economic integration and long-term stability, with a focus on TRIPP and the Middle Corridor.
- **From Transit Hub to Strategic Center: The South Caucasus in a Changing International and Regional Order**
An analysis of the South Caucasus' transformation from a transit region into an emerging center of geopolitical and strategic significance amid shifting global dynamics.
- **Azerbaijan as a Regional Leader: The Consolidation of a New Status**
Azerbaijan's ongoing efforts in promoting multilateral diplomacy, the growing international recognition of the country's emerging status as a middle power, and the implications of this for the region.
- **External Actors: Balanced Engagement in Recognition of Regional Realities**
Assessing how external partners (such as the United States, the European Union, China and others) can contribute to shaping a stable and cooperative regional order in the South Caucasus.
- **Partnership and Diplomacy in the Wider Caspian Region - Lessons from the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and C6**
Assessing the deepening strategic significance of regional frameworks such as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and C6, and existing opportunities for broader cooperation.

The *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives* journal invites submissions for its upcoming Winter 2026 issue. We welcome original and thought-provoking contributions that focus on new regional realities in the South Caucasus, emphasizing the importance of connectivity, partnership and diplomacy as essential pathways to consolidating long-term stability in the region. While the next issue is to focus primarily on these areas, we also welcome high-quality manuscripts on any related and relevant strategic issues concerning the Caucasus and its neighboring regions.

Submission Guidelines:

Articles: 3,000-5,000 words (maximum), including abstract, footnotes, title, and subheadings; **Commentaries:** 2,200-2500 words, including all the above components; All submissions must be in a Microsoft Word-compatible format; Manuscripts must be **original, unpublished, and not under consideration** by another publication at the time of submission; For complete formatting and citation requirements, please refer to the "**Guidelines for Authors**" section on our website: www.cspjournal.az. Submissions should be sent electronically to: cspsubmissions@aircenter.az.

The *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives* journal aims to foster a dynamic exchange of ideas and insights among scholars, researchers, and practitioners from around the world. The views expressed in published articles reflect the perspectives of the authors and are intended to stimulate scholarly debate and intellectual engagement. For reprint or translation permissions, or for additional information about the journal, please contact us at cspsubmissions@aircenter.az.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



ISSN 2788-5178



9 772788 517001