

Azerbaijan Deepens Engagement with the SCO at the Samarkand Summit

Ruslan Suleymanov

The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, participated as a guest at the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which took place in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on 15-16 September 2022. In recent years, cooperation with the SCO has become very important for Baku in the context of enhancing trade and transport links between Europe and Asia, where pretty much all relevant actors envision, in one way or another, Azerbaijan playing a key connectivity role. Moreover, the deepening of the country's partnership with the SCO is also understood as being conducive to the expansion of relations between Azerbaijan and the two keystone countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). In addition, security issues remain no less urgent for Azerbaijan. In this regard, engagement through the SCO could be useful in increasing counter-terrorist preparedness and coordination. Finally, a stronger association with the SCO could, conceivably, play some sort of a role in the ongoing post-conflict settlement process between Baku and Yerevan.

All in all, taking part more actively in the SCO underlines Azerbaijan's status as a keystone state in the South Caucasus (and the Silk Road region more broadly) as well as in facilitating heightened interaction between West and East in geopolitically turbulent times. Thus, for Azerbaijan, observer status in the SCO is likely to increase prospects for higher levels of cooperation on issues of shared concern in various areas.

The Era of Azerbaijan as a SCO Dialogue Partner

In July 2015, Azerbaijan was granted the status of a dialogue partner in the SCO. As indicated in the relevant document signed in Beijing in March 2016, Baku and the SCO agreed to cooperate in such areas of mutual interest as combating terrorism, promoting

Ruslan Suleymanov is a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University. An independent political analyst and journalist focusing on Middle East issues, he was formerly a senior correspondent for Russia's state news agency TASS in Cairo. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

regional security and stability, addressing the illegal production and trafficking of narcotic drugs, cooperation in the field of trade and investment, interaction on legal issues and customs matters, the promotion of inter-civilizational dialogue, multiculturalism, and tolerance, and so on.

The status of SCO dialogue partner helped the Azerbaijani side to further enhance relations with this organization and its member states. In March 2016, SCO Secretary General Rashid Alimov pointed out that this status allows Baku “to actively involve [itself] in the multi-faceted and diverse activities of the Organization through participation in existing mechanisms of interaction.” As stated at the time by President Aliyev, Azerbaijan and the SCO together are “implementing many important projects related to transport, energy, and infrastructure projects in a bilateral and sometimes in a trilateral format.”

Nowadays, the SCO is the world’s largest regional security organization. The total area of its member states exceeds 34 million square kilometers. This is more than 60 percent of the territory of the Eurasian continent. The total population of the SCO countries is 3.2 billion people, which is about half of the world’s population.

Besides, it is extremely important for Azerbaijan that among the members of the SCO are three states that are simultaneously members of the Organization of Turkic States: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, Pakistan, which has very warm and friendly ties with Azerbaijan, is also present in the organization. It should be underlined that, unlike, say, NATO, the SCO is not a military-political alliance as far as it puts more emphasis on the fight against terrorism and separatism, to say nothing of drug trafficking.

In this regard, Azerbaijan, being a state affected by the threat of separatism, is interested in exchanging experience with SCO countries in this regard. But for closer coordination, Baku decided that it needed to move to a new stage of participation in the Organization.

Movement to SCO Observer State Status

In recent months, the possibility of Azerbaijan obtaining SCO observer status had been actively discussed. Thus, in February 2022, for example, Ilham Aliyev noted that several years ago Baku had officially applied to the SCO Secretariat in order to upgrade Azerbaijan’s status. He emphasized that in the course of bilateral contacts between Baku and Moscow, Beijing, and other SCO member state capitals, it became clear that there were no impediments to heightening Azerbaijan’s status in the Organization.

Then, in March 2022, SCO Secretary General Zhang Ming stated that the Organization’s member states were actively considering the issue of granting observer status to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. “The SCO member states are unanimous in not

introducing bilateral contradictions into the organization. This is also an obligation which any country that claims to join SCO must fulfil,” he said.

It is noteworthy that Azerbaijan has friendly relations with all SCO member states. As noted above, Baku is especially cooperating with the Turkic countries and Pakistan. For instance, in April 2022, President Sadyr Japarov of Kyrgyzstan pointed out that Bishkek “fully supports raising the status of Baku in the SCO to the level of an observer.” The governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also expressed several times their wish to see Azerbaijan as an SCO observer state. And so on.

In addition, the development of strong economic relations with Central Asia’s two keystone states (i.e., Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) has helped Azerbaijan to integrate into various regional formats more successfully. Previous IDD analytic policy briefs have addressed this in detail (see, in particular, Inara Yagubova, “Historical Momentum for Enhanced Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan,” 14 September 2022 and my “Strengthening Cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is Important for Azerbaijan, 5 September 2022). The arguments made there and elsewhere will not be repeated here.

Also, the personal chemistry between Ilham Aliyev and various SCO leaders, including the Organization’s present chairman, Uzbekistan’s Shavkat Mirziyoyev, will contribute to Baku’s efficient integration into SCO structures. Uzbekistan, which chairs the SCO this year, has shown its willingness to make the Organization more stable and attractive. As indicated in an official statement, Tashkent seeks to invigorate economic cooperation and raise the SCO’s security potential. Being one of Central Asia’s economic leaders, Uzbekistan has every chance to bring the SCO to a new level by the end of its chairmanship year. In this regard, Azerbaijan has indicated that it stands at the ready to do everything to help its brotherly country.

Balance and Connectivity

It is worth mentioning that Baku has already participated in different multilateral activities within the framework of its standing as a SCO dialogue partner. Elevation to observer status will, accordingly, help it to enhance its level of cooperation, both bilaterally with various SCO member states, and multilaterally within the Organization’s institutional framework itself.

At the same time, strengthening ties with the SCO helps Azerbaijan demonstrate more independence and balance in its foreign policy. After EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and President Aliyev signed a ground-breaking Memorandum of Understanding in July 2022 that included provisions for doubling the amount of Azerbaijani gas supplies to the EU, insinuations were made that Baku had begun to follow a disbalanced pro-Western course. Deepening institutional relations with

the SCO ought to put an end to such suspicions. It could also impress upon Western policymakers the risk of neglecting or downplaying the legitimacy of Azerbaijan's national interests in various areas: Baku's grand strategy is predicated on preventing the country from becoming an object of great power competition.

In this regard, it is important to mention Moscow's role, which, as a co-founder of the SCO, has been supportive of Azerbaijan's observer status in the Organization. Russia's longstanding policy of maintaining a high-level of cooperation with other former Soviet republics has gained further salience, especially in light of increased pressure on the Kremlin from the West in the wake of the onset of the present stage of the conflict over Ukraine. Suffice it to say that according to the latest version of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2016, cooperation with the member States of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has a top seniority in the context of all its regional foreign policy priorities. In addition, the Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad, signed by Vladimir Putin in early September 2022, stipulates the expansion of cooperation with the CIS countries as a priority.

Hence the statement by Russia's ambassador to Azerbaijan, Mikhail Bocharnikov, in March 2022: "the participation of both Azerbaijan and Russia in the SCO will make it possible to increase bilateral cooperation in a number of trade, economic, and cultural area. [...] Azerbaijan enjoys big authority on the international arena, the country's authority is growing, and accession to the SCO would comply with this trend."

All in all, Baku has made the judgment that it is in its interest to maintain a balance between Russia and the West—the two sides find themselves in the toughest confrontation since the Cold War—but also between all other significant international players. In this context, deepening economic ties with all relevant actors and enhancing Azerbaijan's participation in regional initiatives like the SCO will help Baku increase its overall geopolitical standing in the time ahead.

SCO observer status could also further enhance Azerbaijan's engagement within the framework of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (China is the other leading co-founder of the SCO). Positioning itself as a key, perhaps even indispensable, transit country along the Middle Corridor route would enable this keystone state to reap higher dividends from existing transport connectivity infrastructure like the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line and the Baku International Sea Trade Port.

Moreover, since February 2022, the North-South transport corridor has taken on additional strategic significance. At the moment, Moscow, Baku, and Tehran are actively working on ways to simplify customs and other issues. And the signing by Iran of a Memorandum of Commitment for full SCO membership during the Samarkand summit

ought to provide additional impetus for the completion of these talks. Azerbaijan's SCO observer status should also serve as an indication that North-South connectivity projects will be easier to bring to successful completion. This, in turn, could also herald additional oil and gas swap arrangements between various countries operating within the framework of the SCO.

Geopolitics and Security

The increase in economic interaction could also lead to the strengthening of political ties. While President Xi Jinping's recent public reaffirmation of support of Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity made headlines, no less significant was his terminologically identical, unequivocal support for Azerbaijan's interests in the context of any territorial disputes made during a meeting with President Aliyev on the sidelines of the Samarkand summit on 15 September. (The Chinese leader also indicated appreciation for the "support Azerbaijan has shown for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of China.") The timing of the statement—coming mere days after deadly clashes at the non-delineated state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan—was quite significant, especially when contrasted with the wording of statements made by other great powers on this issue in the past few days.

And because Armenia has also gained SCO observer status, it is not inconceivable that the Organization might play a role in settling the bilateral dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan—particularly in light of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's remarks in the Armenian parliament in which he stated a readiness to "make a difficult decision and sign a document that will ensure the territorial integrity of Armenia of 29,800 square kilometers"—a figure that clearly indicates a rejection of claims to any sovereign Azerbaijani lands, including the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.

A not altogether unrelated topic, within the SCO context, is the common commitment of all the states operating within the Organization's space (members, observers, and dialogue partners) to combat separatism, extremism, and terrorism. Azerbaijan is already participating in the development of common mechanisms for addressing these issues within the framework of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure.

Traditionally, for Azerbaijan such issues as counterterrorism and anti-drugs trafficking have been very important, especially in the context of instability in Afghanistan. Thus, in October 2021, Masum Rasulov, Chief of the Main Directorate of Operative-Investigative Activities of the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan (SCC), warned that "there are efforts to deliver drugs to the EU along the Afghanistan-Iran-Azerbaijan route." He made clear that Baku was interested in cooperation with its Central Asia partners, including SCO member states and utilizing SCO mechanisms, "in order to prevent completely drug trafficking in the region."

Baku's new observer status is likely to enhance the country's role in this important endeavor. In this context, Azerbaijan's alliance with Türkiye—formalized by the June 2021 Shusha Declaration—could be of benefit to the SCO, since Türkiye itself is seeking to enhance its relationship with the Organization (in Samarkand, the country continued to participate as a dialogue partner, although, as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan noted in the immediate aftermath, Türkiye is now targeting SCO membership: “Our relations with these countries will be moved to a much different position with this step.”)

Takeaways

The following takeaways may be said to summarize the abovementioned considerations:

- Azerbaijan's good relations with the Turkic states and Pakistan helps Baku in furthering its regional integration within the context of the SCO.
- Strengthening ties with the SCO helps Azerbaijan demonstrate more independence and balance in its foreign policy between Europe and Asia.
- As a participant in the Belt and Road Initiative, Azerbaijan could enhance its activity in the global connectivity context by gaining SCO observer status.
- An increase in economic interaction between Azerbaijan and SCO member states will likely lead to the strengthening of political cooperation between them.
- Since Armenia has also gained SCO observer status, it is not inconceivable that the SCO might play a role in helping to settle outstanding bilateral disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- Baku is ready to contribute further to counterterrorism and anti-drugs trafficking efforts in the region within the framework of the SCO.
- Azerbaijan's alliance with Türkiye could be of benefit to the SCO, since Ankara itself is seeking to enhance its relationship with the Organization.