

Azerbaijan's D-8 Membership

Potential, Implications, and Benefits

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“Out of approximately 60 Muslim countries worldwide, Azerbaijan has been chosen as the newest member. This is both a great honor and a significant responsibility for us. [...] We view the interests of all Muslim countries as our own, which is likely why Azerbaijan was the first choice after the decision to expand D8 was made. Of course, our country's economic potential, political influence, and military strength were also considered. Additionally, our policy of Islamic solidarity, which I mentioned earlier, played a role in this decision. At the same time, this organization is expanding its geographical reach. D8 has already extended to both the Caucasus and the Caspian region, and the broader our geography becomes, the greater our opportunities.”

– Ilham Aliyev, 7 January 2025

Azerbaijan has put forward several initiatives to be a platform for cooperation between the Global South and the Global North by increasing its interaction with developing countries. As President Ilham Aliyev [stated](#) on 20 July 2024 at the Shusha Global Media Forum: “We launch initiatives. We now actively work with developing countries in order to build bridges between the Global South and the Global North. Our advantage is that we’ve been chairing the Non-Aligned Movement for four years.” As an active supporter of multilateralism (in the past few months, Azerbaijan successfully organized COP29, took over the chairmanship of CICA, and completed its chairmanship of GUAM) that pursues an independent foreign policy posture and is located at the crossroads of flagship connectivity projects, Azerbaijan aims to strengthen its standing as a bridge between East and West.

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As part of this strategy, Azerbaijan applied for membership in the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation (the ‘D’ here stands for “Developing”). During the 19 December 2024 D-8 Summit held in Cairo, this application was unanimously approved: Azerbaijan will become the ninth member of the D-8 once it ratifies the D-8 Charter, which is expected to happen soon.

Azerbaijan is the first new member of the D-8 in its nearly 30-year history. This is seen as a significant step for Azerbaijani “independent” or “multivectoral” foreign policy, an important thread of which is deepening and expanding relations with the Global South. At the same time, this unprecedented move serves Azerbaijan’s foreign policy goals and ambitions as a [keystone state](#) of the Silk Road region.

This IDD Analytical Policy Brief will analyze the factors explaining Azerbaijan’s D-8 quest for membership by (1) assessing the Organization and its strategic potential, (2) the foreign and domestic policy implications thereof, and (3) the expected benefits of this membership for Baku.

Organization of Economic Cooperation

Also known as the “Islamic Eight,” the D-8 was established under Türkiye’s leadership in 1997 and also includes Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Pakistan as member states—each of which is a majority-Muslim developing country that is either a middle power or a keystone state as well as a key economic player. Together, they constitute one-seventh of the world’s population (i.e., 1.1 billion), with 60 percent of the world’s Muslims residing in D-8 countries.

The idea behind the D-8’s founding was first put forward by Türkiye’s then-prime minister Necmettin Erbakan in Istanbul in October 1996. From the start, it was conceived as a global arrangement rather than a regional one. Consider the geographic location of D-8 member states: one is located in Sub-Saharan Africa; one at the intersection of North Africa and the Middle East; one at the intersection of Europe, the Silk Road region, and the Middle East; one at the intersection of the Middle East, the Gulf, the Silk Road region, and South Asia; two that bookend South Asia; and two in heart of East Asia.

The Organization was conceived as a forum in which membership would have no adverse impact on member states’ other bilateral, regional, and multilateral commitments. Since member states do not share a common area, the D-8 is founded on common adherence to a set of principles and objectives rather than a shared geography, all of which are in the service of its strategic goal of furthering the socio-economic development of its member states.

Formally, the D-8’s principles are identified as being:

- Peace instead of conflict,
- Dialogue instead of confrontation,

- Cooperation instead of exploitation,
- Justice instead of double standards,
- Equality instead of discrimination,
- Democracy instead of oppression.

Moreover, the D-8's four main objectives are identified as improving member states' position in the global economy, diversifying and creating new opportunities in trade relations between them, enhancing their participation and influence in decisionmaking at the global level, and improving living standards in their respective countries.

Furthermore, each D-8 member state is an economically significant developing country. The total economic size of the Organization is more than \$4 trillion, with their economies representing over 14 percent of global trade. This represents about 60 percent of the economies of Muslim-majority countries.

The fact that the D-8 countries include leading economies in every corner of the Muslim world adds special importance to the Organization. All D-8 members are also leading members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in terms of their technological and economic development levels, commercial potential, and population. Membership of the D-8, which has a global rather than a regional character in terms of its principles and the geographical area it covers, is open to all developing countries. But for right now, think of the D-8 as the geopolitical and geoeconomic vanguard of OIC.

Again, Azerbaijan is the first new member of the D-8 in its nearly 30-year history. Clearly, this is a sign of Azerbaijan's successful diplomacy, which could position Baku as a reliable partner in the field of political, economic, and cultural cooperation. Azerbaijani diplomacy is making serious efforts to have a significant impact on global discourse and is asserting itself as a major player in the world's dynamic geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape. Hence, the strategic vision of Azerbaijani diplomacy, which entails utilizing different international platforms to spread its narrative globally and engage with different audiences in a proactive manner. Surely, this played a major role in the D-8's decision to invite Azerbaijan into its fold.

Why D-8 Membership?

First and foremost, the shift in both the regional balance of power and the South Caucasus's geopolitical dynamics are factors behind Azerbaijan's several initiations in diversifying its partners aiming to balance competing interests, maintaining strategic autonomy in the Silk Road region, and avoiding overdependence on any country. Perhaps, ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region push Azerbaijan to look for alternative trade routes and partners that connects it with other parts of the world. Against the backdrop of great power competition and ongoing shifts in the balance of power in the Silk Road region and beyond, this is an attempt to strengthen its role in the overlapping set of

regions to which Azerbaijan and its neighbors belong. At first, this may appear to be a choice to depart from the West, another move that expresses its ambitions to join BRICS+, and so on.

Another reason Azerbaijan pursued D-8 membership involves the fact that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has heightened the importance of the Silk Road region as a vital connectivity corridor between East and West. In his February 2024 [inauguration address](#), Aliyev alluded several times to the significance of international cooperation in the context of OIC, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and the Non-Aligned Movement as a part of Azerbaijan’s multi-vector foreign policy approach. The hosting of COP29 signaled a significant shift in posture, whereby Azerbaijan has been exploring new horizons in its foreign policy. In this context, it was clear that the country’s new foreign policy direction already reflects some internal paradigm shifts, which is expected to result in a more active and significant position on the international scene.

Moreover, there is an ongoing rivalry that is leading to the politicization and securitization of many aspects of the global economy. Nearly 30 years ago, Türkiye aimed to offer an alternative economic model to the (de-)globalizing capitalist system controlled by the West in launching the D-8. The D-8’s emphasis on leading developing states working together was viewed as a means of upending the current economic structure and strengthening the Global South.

The global balance of power continues to shift from the West to Asia, a result of which is that the West is no longer a hegemonic economic power. Under these geostrategic circumstances, Azerbaijan chooses cooperation, which occurs “when actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination” (as Robert Keohane and other scholars have put it). Under the same circumstances, Azerbaijan also seeks to promote its own interests, which also aims at mutual advantage. Azerbaijan’s official application for membership in BRICS+ is also a part of this broader cooperation strategy—a response to geoeconomic and geopolitical changes.

The D-8 presents Azerbaijan with an additional platform to foster closer cultural and religious ties with leading states in the Muslim world. One of the directions of Azerbaijan’s broader foreign policy approach is to emphasize its unique position as a democratic, secular Muslim-majority country. In that sense, the D-8 can be seen as a platform presenting a model of governance that balanced modernity with traditional Muslim values. To this end, Azerbaijan’s membership once again is the exposure of positioning itself as a secular Muslim nation in front of the world characterized in part by an increase in Islamophobic populism.

In addition to signing on to Türkiye’s determination to advance South-South cooperation, a diplomatic strategy that prioritizes solidarity among developing states

was one of the motivations in the D-8's establishment. This approach coincides with Azerbaijan's longstanding vision, which also aims to be part of deepening intra-developing world economic and political discourse, to enhance its position in the Global South, and to advocate for the interests of emerging economies in various international platforms. Azerbaijan has indicated its willingness to facilitate dialogue within the developing world and to strengthen its role as a facilitator. To that end, the D-8 can serve as a platform to offer an opportunity for Azerbaijan to enhance its diplomatic relations with other developing countries, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—but also to serve as a bridge between East and West.

Four Policy Implications of Azerbaijan's D-8 Membership

As part of a broader strategic plan to deepen its economic ties and establish itself as one of the major actors, Azerbaijan's D-8 membership is in line with Aliyev's vision of turning Azerbaijan into a center for regional collaboration, innovation, and sustainability. This opens up new geopolitical and geoeconomic opportunities in several areas.

First, Azerbaijan's membership in the D-8 could help balance its geopolitical interests, especially in interactions with neighboring countries like Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, given its advantageous location between Europe and Asia. Azerbaijan's diplomatic adaptability and regional impact could be increased by fortifying its relations with other Muslim-majority and developing countries. However, the ability to resolve any political or economic disagreements within the group and the alignment of economic objectives would be necessary for such a partnership to succeed.

Second, Azerbaijan's membership can improve its global standing, particularly in the Global South as a whole. Azerbaijan might take center-stage in international economic debates in the developing world and take part in addressing developmental objectives and challenges. Azerbaijan may be able to advocate for the interests of emerging economies by associating itself with an increasingly vocal voice in international trade discussions and negotiations as a member of the D-8. Relatedly, the D-8's connectivity objectives could be further reinforced by Azerbaijan's uniquely advantageous position in the Silk Road region.

Third, the D-8 platform will help Azerbaijan diversify its economic alliances and lessen its excessive dependence on any foreign country, including Russia. Also, Azerbaijan can increase foreign direct investments by D-8 member states which are eager to invest in infrastructure, renewables, and other sectors. Azerbaijan could also benefit from reduced tariffs and non-tariff barriers in D-8 member states, encouraging exports and economic diversification.

Fourth, Azerbaijan's D-8 membership strengthens its ties with other countries, especially Pakistan and Türkiye. These countries have a long history of cooperation and

support for one another, and the addition of Azerbaijan opens up new opportunities for regional projects and collaboration. The admission of Azerbaijan is seen by Pakistan as a step toward promoting economic cooperation and improving regional connectivity. Both countries share a vision of regional prosperity and have continuously promoted multilateralism. The D-8 platform presents additional opportunities to build on these common objectives, especially in the areas of commerce, technology, and sustainable development. Another important ally, Türkiye, welcomes Azerbaijan's involvement as a continuation of their long-standing alliance. The organization's general cohesiveness is strengthened by this addition, which also increases its collective voice on the international scene.