

Azerbaijan and Central Asia

From Strategic Partnership to a New Geopolitical Axis in the Silk Road Region

Aybaniz Ismayilova

Cooperation between Azerbaijan and the five Central Asian states has recently been upgraded from a bilateral economic partnership into a consistent and dynamic [geopolitical axis shaped](#) by the shifting strategic landscape of the Silk Road region. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's most recent visit to Uzbekistan to attend the Seventh Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Leaders marked a significant milestone in the country's long-term foreign policy strategy. As a result of this groundbreaking visit, Azerbaijan became [a full member of the C5](#) format, prompting further diversification of Central Asia's policy agenda.

Henceforth, Azerbaijan is not merely a distinguished partner to the five Central Asian republics, but the sixth node that transforms the existing "C5+AZ" arrangement into a six-state platform ("C6") for shared prosperity and strategic resilience. This step represents not only a new political alignment but the culmination of a long process of rapprochement rooted in mutual interests, cultural closeness, and the convergence of Azerbaijan's strategic priorities with those of the Central Asian states.

Forging a New Regional Strategic Axis

Azerbaijan's president first attended the Central Asian leaders' consultative meeting in 2023, highlighting Baku's strategic importance to the landlocked, energy-rich region, which is undergoing [substantial infrastructure](#) modernization to diversify its economy and expand trade routes for sustainable access to markets beyond its boundaries, including those on the European continent. In recent years, [Central Asia has deliberately](#) constructed a platform for internal synergy and strengthened regional autonomy.

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Azerbaijan's inclusion in the C5 widens the region's geographic and economic scope, transforming it from a localized association into a broader Silk Road region cooperation framework. With Azerbaijan's participation, the geographic reach and economic potential of Central Asia's flagship cooperation platform will expand, enhancing transport, transit, and logistics capacity, and increasing trade, economic, and investment opportunities.

For three decades, [Russia's geopolitical primacy](#) over Central Asia had limited the influence of other external actors. However, the status quo shifted rapidly after Moscow's intervention in Ukraine in 2022, which had the unintended consequence of reducing Russia's regional influence. Consequently, states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan [sought to strengthen](#) their partnerships with Azerbaijan and Türkiye to gain greater access to European energy markets. As Uzbek [President Shavkat Mirziyoyev](#) emphasized, "Azerbaijan forms a powerful bridge between Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and with its participation, the region's strategic ties and stability will be further strengthened." Central Asia is increasingly [gravitating toward institutionalized](#) cohesion through regular consultative summits, ministerial dialogues, and trilateral formats—including Trans-Caspian cooperation between the Silk Road region's three keystone states, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

In this context, Azerbaijan's importance for Central Asia extends beyond geography. It is firmly embedded in the European energy system and maintains long-term partnerships with the European Union [as a dependable natural gas](#) supplier. The European continent's growing demand for natural gas and oil following the sanctions and export restrictions regime imposed by the West on Russian fossil-fuel imports has significantly elevated the importance of Caspian basin producers due to their strategic location and energy resources. Azerbaijan is poised to play [a critical role as a transit hub](#) for transporting Central Asian fossil fuels, particularly Kazakh oil, to Türkiye and Europe through its well-established pipeline network. For instance, in 2025, Azerbaijan's Energy Minister [Parviz Shahbazov stated](#) that by 2027 the transit capacity of Kazakh oil via the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is expected to reach 7 million tons annually. Since 2023, approximately [3.4 million tons of Kazakh oil](#) have already been delivered to global markets through the BTC pipeline.

Baku's Middle Corridor Indispensability

Central Asian states also value [Azerbaijan for its indispensable role](#) in the Middle Corridor trade route, which links the Silk Road region to Türkiye and Europe while bypassing Russia (and Iran). Azerbaijan's infrastructure and logistical potential help to reduce dependence on traditional Russian-controlled routes and facilitate faster integration into global value chains. The Middle Corridor has [undergone substantial development](#) in recent years, as key stakeholders—e.g., Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan—have invested heavily in infrastructure upgrades, digitalization, and harmonized customs procedures. For example, in the first ten months of this year, Azerbaijan Railways (ADY)

[handled 317 block trains](#), including 119 transit trains—a 32 percent increase compared with the same period last year. During the same timeframe, [112,608 TEU of containerized cargo](#) were transported, nearly 18 percent higher than the 2024 figure of 95,483 TEU.

As cooperation deepens across trade, energy, and infrastructure, security has emerged as another core dimension of the Azerbaijan-Central Asia multilateral partnership. During the Tashkent meeting that transformed the C5 into the C6, regional leaders discussed advancing trade, investment, and industrial collaboration, aiming to increase intra-regional [trade to \\$20 billion](#) and to develop joint production platforms under a “Made in Central Asia” label. Uzbekistan’s trade with its Central Asian partners rose [from \\$3.2 billion in 2017](#) to \$6.9 billion in 2024, while trade with Azerbaijan increased by 13 percent this year.

With the growing number of joint projects and rising investment flows, safeguarding infrastructure and ensuring uninterrupted connectivity have become increasingly critical. Azerbaijan’s military reforms over the past two decades have transformed it [into the region’s most capable](#) military power, reinforced by its 2020 victory in the Second Karabakh War. From a pragmatic standpoint, Central Asian states look to Azerbaijan’s experience in strengthening defense capacity, developing an indigenous defense industry, acquiring modern weaponry, and managing post-war reconstruction.

Shared Pragmatic Vision

However, this does not imply that the Azerbaijan-Central Asia axis is evolving into a military alliance. Instead, the cooperation is driven by a shared pragmatic vision focused on economic and strategic benefits gained through trade, energy, and logistics, coupled with a common posture toward outside actors that IDD’s Damjan Krnjević Mišković has termed “[strategic transactionalism](#).” This is particularly relevant given [the intersecting interests](#) of China, Russia, the United States, the European Union, Türkiye, and, indirectly, Iran in the region. Interest in this cooperation grew further after the 8 August 2025 Washington summit between American, Armenian, and Azerbaijani leaders, which paves the [way for the establishment](#) of the long-anticipated land corridor between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave through the Zangezur Corridor—an approximately 35-km long sliver of Armenian territory now referred to as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). TRIPP will [directly connect](#) Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave before linking to Türkiye’s railway system.

TRIPP’s initial capacity will support a steady flow of freight, and it can be expanded to meet future demand, potentially rivaling the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway in throughput. More importantly, [TRIPP should enhance](#) resilience and add redundancy to Azerbaijan’s connectivity network, ensuring the country maintains multiple strategic supply routes and underscoring its indispensability in improving the value proposition of the Silk Road region’s connectivity. In this evolving environment, Azerbaijan emerges

as the keystone state of the South Caucasus, acting [as a geopolitical connector](#) between major political systems. Central Asian states see this as an opportunity to deepen cooperation with Azerbaijan, benefiting from a partnership that helps them avoid falling under the exclusive influence of any single geopolitical actor.

Flexible and Gradual Alignment

Azerbaijan's membership in C5 is best described as a *flexible and gradual alignment of interests in which political dialogue is advancing faster than formal institutionalization*. In the coming years, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states are expected to devote significant effort to protecting critical infrastructure from political and security risks, pursuing economic diversification, and maintaining the C6 framework as a platform to push back against major power rivalry and ambitions. Moreover, the expanded format offers new horizons for interregional cooperation, providing Türkiye, the West, and China with a viable, secure route to the energy-rich region while decreasing exposure to geopolitical and geoeconomic risks.