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BULLETIN

HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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I. The Aliyev Doctrine: Peace through strength and strategic independence

President Ilham Aliyev's address to the 8th Congress of the New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) on October 2 outlined Azerbaijan's strategic priorities following the restoration of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. For more than three decades, Azerbaijan's principal national objective had been the liberation of its internationally recognized territories. With this objective achieved following the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the September 2023 military operation, the government is increasingly concentrating on how to consolidate these gains, ensure long-term security, and strengthen Azerbaijan's position in a changing international environment.

The priorities identified by President Ilham Aliyev extend beyond military security. They include maintaining an independent and proactive foreign policy, strengthening economic and financial resilience, expanding energy and transport infrastructure, protecting the country from foreign ideological interference, and accelerating reconstruction and resettlement in Karabakh and East Zangezur. Together, these objectives reflect the government's understanding that sovereignty requires not only territorial control but also sufficient political, economic, and institutional capacity to withstand external pressure.

The address also reflected a broader assessment of the international system. With armed conflicts continuing in regions surrounding Azerbaijan and competition among major powers intensifying, Baku considers military preparedness and strategic independence essential to preserving peace. For Azerbaijan, the experience of the past three decades has reinforced the importance of relying on national capabilities while maintaining constructive relations with different international partners.

President Ilham Aliyev placed the October 2 address within the historical trajectory of Azerbaijan's independence, emphasizing the relationship between state-building, economic development, and the restoration of territorial integrity. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan faced political instability, economic difficulties, armed conflict with Armenia, and the displacement of a substantial part of its population. These conditions shaped the country's subsequent approach to national security and foreign policy.

The return of the National Leader of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev to power in 1993 marked a turning point in the government's account of this process. Economic stabilization, the attraction of foreign investment, the development of the energy sector, and the strengthening of state institutions provided the foundations for Azerbaijan's subsequent development. The signing of the Contract of the Century in September 1994 was particularly significant in attracting international investment and expanding the country's economic capabilities.

In the October 2 speech, President Ilham Aliyev described the restoration of territorial integrity as the culmination of this long-term national strategy. The 44-day war in 2020 restored Azerbaijani control over territories occupied by Armenian forces, while the September 2023 operation established Baku's control over the remaining part of Karabakh. These developments fundamentally changed the political and security environment in the South Caucasus.

The subsequent normalization process with Armenia has opened the possibility of a more stable regional order. On August 8, 2025, the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia initialed the text of the Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations during a meeting in Washington attended by President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and US President Donald Trump. The agreement envisages mutual recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of internationally recognized borders. Its initialing represented an important diplomatic achievement, although the document still required formal signing and ratification.

The restoration of territorial integrity and the progress toward a peace agreement demonstrate the effectiveness of a strategy combining diplomatic engagement, economic development, and military capability. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan had pursued these objectives without depending on the military patronage of major powers, which is an important lesson for states seeking to protect their independence in an increasingly competitive international environment.

At the same time, the government does not regard the end of the conflict as sufficient grounds for reducing military preparedness. The experience of territorial occupation and the prolonged failure of international mediation continue to influence Azerbaijan's assessment of future security risks. Although relations with Armenia have entered a new phase, Baku considers the maintenance of a credible deterrent essential to preventing renewed hostilities.

A central message of the October 2 address concerned the continued importance of military power. President Ilham Aliyev identified strengthening Azerbaijan's defense capabilities as the first among the government's strategic priorities, pointing to the proliferation of armed conflicts and the declining effectiveness of international mechanisms intended to prevent them.

The country's geographical position makes these developments particularly relevant. Russia's war against Ukraine continues to affect the security environment to Azerbaijan's north, while military confrontation involving Iran and other regional powers has increased instability to the south. Conflicts in the Middle East have further exposed the limitations of existing international security arrangements. For a country situated between these regions, the consequences include risks to transport routes, energy markets, border security, and economic stability.

President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that states must maintain sufficient military capabilities to deter potential aggression rather than assume that international institutions will necessarily protect them. The government consequently plans to allocate nearly 9 billion manats, approximately $5.3 billion, to defense and security in the 2027 state budget. This expenditure reflects the priority assigned to maintaining military readiness as an important element of ensuring effective detterence.

This approach is closely connected to the government's understanding of peace. The progress achieved in relations with Armenia has created opportunities for regional cooperation, but the preservation of these gains requires continued military preparedness. In this respect, Azerbaijan's security policy combines support for diplomatic normalization with a determination to retain the capabilities necessary to respond to potential threats.

Military preparedness represents only one component of Azerbaijan's broader strategy. President Ilham Aliyev also emphasized the importance of maintaining an independent foreign policy that allows the country to engage with competing centers of international power without becoming subordinate to any of them.

Azerbaijan's expanding network of international partnerships illustrates this approach. The country has established strategic partnership relations with both China and the United States, maintains strategic partnerships with ten European Union member states, and continues diplomatic and economic cooperation with Russia and other regional actors. These relationships have developed alongside Azerbaijan's participation in organizations representing different geographical and political constituencies.

Azerbaijan chaired the Non-Aligned Movement from 2019 to 2023, has strengthened its role in the Organization of Turkic States, and continues to participate actively in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Its admission to the Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State and membership in the D-8 Organization for Economic

Cooperation further demonstrate the expansion of its diplomatic engagement beyond the South Caucasus.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that this diversification allows Azerbaijan to maintain working relations with states whose interests frequently diverge. Rather than defining its foreign policy through membership in a particular geopolitical bloc, Baku seeks to develop partnerships around concrete political, economic, and security interests.

The success of this policy also depends on economic independence. Azerbaijan's energy resources and the revenues generated from their development have provided the financial means for expanding infrastructure, strengthening military capabilities, and financing large-scale reconstruction projects. In the October 2 address, President Ilham Aliyev underscored that Azerbaijan's external public debt had declined to approximately 5.6 percent of GDP, while the country's foreign exchange reserves had reached roughly $90 billion. These figures are evidence of Azerbaijan's financial resilience and its ability to pursue national priorities without excessive dependence on external creditors.

Financial stability has also strengthened Azerbaijan's capacity to respond to external economic pressures. However, the government recognizes that maintaining economic growth will require further diversification and investment, particularly outside the hydrocarbon sector. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the importance of attracting foreign capital and developing new sources of economic activity while continuing to expand the country's energy industry. Azerbaijan's role as an exporter of oil, natural gas, petroleum products, and electricity has expanded its economic relationships with international partners, while investments in the Middle Corridor and the International North–South Transport Corridor have strengthened its position as a transit country connecting Europe and Asia. President Ilham Aliyev stated that transit cargo volumes through Azerbaijan were expected to reach approximately 16 million tons in 2026, with a medium-term objective of increasing this figure to 30 million tons. Achieving this target would require further infrastructure development, improved coordination with neighboring transit countries, and continued investment in logistics. These economic initiatives also carry strategic significance. Economic diversification and diplomatic diversification reinforce one another, providing Azerbaijan with additional options in an uncertain international environment.

One of the more significant aspects of President Ilham Aliyev's address was the emphasis placed on ideological security. While military capabilities protect the country's physical borders, ideological challenges can emerge through information networks, foreign political organizations, religious movements, and digital platforms operating beyond national jurisdiction.

President Ilham Aliyev noted that the development of modern communication technologies has made it increasingly difficult for states to insulate their domestic political environments from external influence. The internet, artificial intelligence, and other digital technologies allow information to circulate rapidly across borders, creating opportunities for communication and exchange but also for disinformation and coordinated interference. In this context, President Ilham Aliyev described ideological security as equally important as physical security. The address identified education, public awareness, patriotism, and the preservation of national values as important means of strengthening society's resilience against external manipulation.

These concerns have particular relevance for Azerbaijan's secular political system. Secularism has been a defining feature of modern Azerbaijani statehood. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, established in 1918, was among the earliest parliamentary republics in the Muslim world and introduced women's suffrage at a time when many European countries had yet to do so. Following the restoration of independence in 1991, Azerbaijan retained the separation of religion and state as a

constitutional principle. This arrangement has particular significance in a predominantly Muslim society with both Shia and Sunni communities, alongside longstanding Christian and Jewish minorities. Azerbaijan's secular constitutional framework is intended to prevent religious affiliation from becoming the determining basis of political authority and to provide a common institutional framework for citizens of different beliefs.

The government's sensitivity to external religious influence is also rooted in historical experience. Since independence, Azerbaijani authorities have repeatedly expressed concerns about religious networks and organizations seeking to promote political interpretations of Islam that challenge the country's secular constitutional order. Among the organizations identified by Azerbaijani security authorities is Husseiniyon, a militant movement established among Azerbaijani Shia religious students in Iran in 2016. The movement has developed connections with Iranian military and religious institutions and has openly opposed Azerbaijan's secular political system. Azerbaijani authorities have also investigated networks involved in espionage, political radicalization, and violent activities. These developments have contributed to Baku's assessment that foreign ideological influence can become a national security challenge when it is associated with political subversion, recruitment into militant organizations, or activities directed by foreign states.

The approach outlined by President Ilham Aliyev places particular emphasis on strengthening society's resistance to manipulation through education and the development of national consciousness. In this understanding, ideological resilience depends not exclusively on security institutions but also on the ability of citizens to assess information critically and maintain confidence in national institutions.

The reconstruction of Karabagh and East Zangezur remains among Azerbaijan's principal national priorities, both because of its significance for former internally displaced persons and because of its implications for regional economic development. President Ilham Aliyev reported that approximately 96,000 people were living, working, or studying in Karabakh and East Zangezur as of early October 2026, while former internally displaced persons had resettled in 48 communities. Azerbaijan has allocated approximately 28 billion manats to the reconstruction and development of these territories, including investments in roads, energy infrastructure, public services, housing, and other essential facilities.

The Great Return program is intended to restore communities displaced during the conflict and support the longer-term economic integration of the reconstructed territories. Its implementation will require sustained investment, employment creation, and the development of functioning local economies capable of supporting permanent populations. These objectives are closely related to the government's broader emphasis on economic and social stability. President Ilham Aliyev also identified improvements in wages, pensions, and social benefits as priorities for 2027, linking the country's financial strength to the improvement of living standards.

President Ilham Aliyev's October 2 address outlined the principles that will shape Azerbaijan's foreign policy moving forward. The first principle rests on the conviction that national security must ultimately depend on a state's own capabilities. Addressing the 8th Congress of the New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) as Supreme Commander-in-Chief, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan had financed the development of its armed forces through its own resources, both by expanding domestic defense production and purchasing military equipment from abroad. Every weapon acquired since 2003, President Ilham Aliyev stated, had been purchased at market prices, “down to the last bullet.” Azerbaijan had received neither preferential prices nor financial assistance from its suppliers. In some cases, it had even been required

to pay considerably more than prevailing market rates.

The significance of this approach extends beyond the financing of military procurement. States that depend heavily on external military assistance may find their strategic choices constrained by the preferences of their suppliers. Arms transfers, concessional financing, and security guarantees can create political obligations, particularly during armed conflicts when continued support becomes essential. Azerbaijan's decision to finance its own military capabilities was therefore closely connected to its determination to retain independent control over national security decisions.

This independence was an important factor in the military victories of 2020 and 2023. Azerbaijan conducted both operations using military capabilities developed and financed primarily through national resources, without depending on a foreign power to sustain its war effort. President Ilham Aliyev contrasted this experience with contemporary conflicts in which belligerents often rely on powerful external sponsors, emphasizing that Azerbaijan had achieved its principal national objectives despite substantial international political pressure.

The same principle continues to guide defense policy following the restoration of territorial integrity. With armed conflicts continuing in regions surrounding Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev identified the further strengthening of military capabilities as the government's foremost security priority. The draft state budget for 2027 envisages nearly 9 billion manats (approximately $5.3 billion) for defense and security. Continued investment in domestic defense production, cooperation with foreign partners, and diversification of military procurement is intended to preserve operational capabilities while limiting dependence on any single supplier. The objective is to maintain sufficient military strength to deter aggression and ensure that Azerbaijan can respond to potential security threats independently.

The second principle establishes economic independence as an essential foundation of political sovereignty. Azerbaijan's approach to financial management has been shaped by the experience of the early post-independence years, when economic instability, limited state revenues, and dependence on external financing restricted the government's ability to pursue its priorities. The subsequent development of the energy sector, accumulation of financial reserves, and reduction of external borrowing gradually expanded the country's economic autonomy.

The figures presented by President Ilham Aliyev at the YAP congress illustrate the extent of this transformation. External public debt has declined to approximately 5.6 percent of GDP, while foreign exchange reserves have reached $90 billion, around 20 times the country's external debt. President Ilham Aliyev stated that Azerbaijan possessed sufficient financial resources to repay its external debt in full within 24 hours if necessary. These reserves have continued to grow despite substantial public expenditure on defense, infrastructure, and the reconstruction of Karabakh and East Zangezur, for which the government has already allocated 28 billion manats.

Financial independence provides Azerbaijan with greater flexibility in determining its economic and political priorities. Low external indebtedness reduces exposure to creditors and the policy conditions that can accompany international financing, while substantial reserves strengthen the government's ability to respond to economic shocks. This does not eliminate Azerbaijan's exposure to international markets, particularly fluctuations in hydrocarbon prices, but it limits the extent to which financial dependence can become a source of external political pressure.

Economic sovereignty also depends on Azerbaijan's position in international energy and transport markets. The country exports crude oil, natural gas, petroleum products, electricity, and fertilizers, while its combined petroleum refining capacity at home and abroad has reached approximately 30 million tons annually. President

Ilham Aliyev also projected that transit cargo volumes through Azerbaijan would reach 16 million tons in 2026, reflecting the expansion of the Middle Corridor and the International North–South Transport Corridor. These capabilities strengthen Azerbaijan's economic relationships with international partners and increase its importance to regional energy security and Eurasian connectivity. At the same time, continued economic diversification remains necessary to reduce dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and sustain the country's financial independence over the longer term.

The third principle distinguishes strategic independence from international isolation. Azerbaijan has sought to develop extensive political, economic, and security partnerships while avoiding exclusive alignment with any major geopolitical bloc. President Ilham Aliyev presented this approach as one of the country's principal foreign policy achievements, emphasizing its ability to maintain relations with competing centers of international power without subordinating its national interests to their rivalries. The breadth of these relationships is reflected in Azerbaijan's strategic partnership agreements and participation in multilateral institutions. These partnerships reflect a foreign policy that prioritizes practical cooperation over membership in competing geopolitical camps. Relations with individual states are developed according to their respective economic, political, and security interests, while Azerbaijan seeks to preserve sufficient flexibility to cooperate with countries whose relationships with one another may be characterized by rivalry. At the YAP congress, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan does not belong to any geopolitical camp and has no intention of joining one. This position enables Baku to maintain strategic partnerships with both Washington and Beijing, sustain relations with European countries and Russia, and engage with political and economic institutions across different regions. Azerbaijan's independent diplomatic position has also contributed to its emergence as a venue for international dialogue. Baku has hosted meetings involving representatives of countries with conflicting interests, reflecting its ability to maintain channels of communication across political divisions. This diplomatic flexibility is particularly important for a country situated at the intersection of several regions and competing security interests.

The fourth principle concerns the relationship between sovereignty and external political influence. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan's independent foreign policy must also protect its domestic political and ideological environment from interference by foreign actors. In the October 2 address, President Ilham Aliyev identified the protection of the country's ideological space as an important national security priority, arguing that contemporary threats increasingly extend beyond military aggression to include political influence campaigns, information manipulation, and other forms of interference.

This understanding of sovereignty encompasses the right of the state to determine its political institutions, constitutional arrangements, and domestic policies without external direction. President Ilham Aliyev argued that foreign governments should refrain from attempting to influence Azerbaijan's internal affairs or prescribe its political choices. The same principle informs Baku's foreign policy, which emphasizes respect for the sovereignty of other states and the avoidance of interference in their domestic political processes. The approach reflects a distinction between international cooperation and political subordination. Azerbaijan maintains extensive diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations with countries that operate under different political systems, but it rejects the proposition that such cooperation should give external actors authority over its domestic decisions. In this respect, reciprocal non-interference is a basis for relations founded on sovereign equality and mutual respect.

President Ilham Aliyev also linked this principle to the changing nature of information and ideological security. Digital communications, foreign-based

media platforms, and increasingly sophisticated information technologies have expanded the means through which external actors can seek to influence domestic political developments. The government's stated objective is to strengthen national resilience against activities it considers intended to undermine Azerbaijan's political independence or constitutional order.

The fifth principle concerns the exercise of state power and the importance of consistency in foreign policy. Azerbaijan's emphasis on military strength and strategic independence is accompanied by a commitment, as articulated by President Ilham Aliyev, to use those capabilities in pursuit of defined national objectives rather than allow political decisions to be driven by emotion or indefinite confrontation. President Ilham Aliyev pointed to the decisions to halt military operations in November 2020 and September 2023 as examples of this approach. Azerbaijan concluded these operations once their principal objectives had been achieved, despite possessing the military capability to continue. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that strategic judgment required recognizing when the use of force had fulfilled its purpose and when diplomatic engagement would better serve the country's long-term interests.vThis approach is reflected in the subsequent peace process with Armenia.

Reliability in international commitments constitutes the second element of this principle. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan seeks to maintain consistency between its stated positions and subsequent actions, regarding credibility as an important source of diplomatic influence. As President Ilham Aliyev stated, Azerbaijan has “never displayed duplicity or hypocrisy toward any country”. This emphasis on consistency is particularly relevant to Azerbaijan's foreign policy, which requires maintaining relationships with states that frequently disagree on major international questions. President Ilham Aliyev identified the transition toward a more proactive foreign policy as one of Azerbaijan's priorities for the coming years. With territorial integrity restored and its international partnerships expanding, Azerbaijan seeks to participate more actively in shaping regional political and economic developments.

Taken together, these five principles provide a framework for understanding what may be described as the Aliyev Doctrine. At the YAP congress, President Ilham Aliyev summarized the country's position in a concise statement: “Our destiny is in our own hands.” The five principles outlined above explain how Azerbaijan intends to preserve that independence and translate it into long-term security, stability, and international influence.

II. The Baku CICA Summit strengthens Azerbaijan’s role in Asian cooperation

The seventh Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), held in Baku on October 15, 2026, strengthened Azerbaijan’s role in shaping cooperation across Asia. The summit adopted the Baku Declaration, admitted Laos as the twenty-ninth member state and extended Azerbaijan’s chairmanship for 2026–2028. These decisions combined institutional development with an agenda focused on connectivity, digitalization and sustainable growth. For Azerbaijan, the renewed mandate provides an opportunity to advance cooperation among countries whose economic interests intersect despite differences in their foreign policy and security priorities.

Azerbaijan’s approach to CICA reflects the growing importance of its relationships with Central, South, East and Southeast Asia. Transport routes, energy infrastructure and investment partnerships increasingly connect these regions with the South Caucasus. CICA provides a setting in which Azerbaijan can discuss these connections with a wider group of states and promote cooperation beyond individual bilateral projects. Its emphasis on consensus and voluntary confidence-building measures allows participants to pursue shared interests while retaining their independent

political positions. This gives the platform particular relevance in an international environment marked by competing priorities and declining trust.

President Ilham Aliyev's address connected Azerbaijan's chairmanship with the principles guiding its foreign policy. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized "sovereign equality, non-interference in internal affairs" alongside respect for territorial integrity. President Ilham Aliyev criticized the prolonged non-implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions adopted in 1993 and argued that ineffective enforcement and selective approaches undermine the credibility of international institutions. President Ilham Aliyev also emphasized Azerbaijan's peace initiative following the restoration of its sovereignty. At the same time, President Ilham Aliyev stressed the continuing need to consolidate the progress achieved: "The peace is still fragile, and it needs to be protected and consolidated."

The Baku Declaration reaffirmed the relationship between peace, security and development. It upheld the central role of the United Nations and emphasized consensus, equal partnership and respect for the diversity of member states. Its transport provisions supported integrated and secure logistics systems, the digitalization of transportation and attention to the needs of landlocked countries. These priorities correspond closely with Azerbaijan's interest in strengthening connections across the Caspian and improving access between Asian and European markets.

Proposals presented during the summit sought to give this connectivity agenda a more coordinated direction. Kazakhstan called for a comprehensive CICA transport connectivity strategy linking the Middle Corridor, the North–South route and the Belt and Road Initiative. China advocated closer coordination between infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative and the national development programs of participating countries. These proposals remained subjects for further cooperation. Their significance for Azerbaijan lies in the possibility of bringing different transport initiatives into a broader discussion about infrastructure compatibility, reliable services and regional market access.

Institutional development was another important component of the summit. The leaders appointed Sultan Hajiyev as CICA Secretary General for a four-year term beginning on November 1, 2026. Alongside the extension of Azerbaijan's chairmanship, the appointment gives Baku a prominent role during the next stage of CICA's development. The broader transformation of CICA into a fully fledged international organization remains an ongoing process. Launched at the Astana summit in 2022, it involves strengthening the institutional and legal foundations of cooperation. Several mechanisms developed during Azerbaijan's chairmanship provide practical foundations for this work. The CICA Women Council and Finance Summit held their inaugural meetings in Baku and Astana respectively in 2026, while the Partnership Network of Leading Universities expanded opportunities for academic cooperation. These mechanisms create channels through which professional institutions and communities can sustain engagement between high-level meetings.

Digitalization received attention as both a development opportunity and a source of new security challenges. The Baku Declaration recognized the contribution of information technologies and artificial intelligence to economic and social progress, while emphasizing the need to address misuse and reduce digital inequalities. It also highlighted the importance of resilient energy infrastructure and cooperation on shared environmental challenges.

The Statement on Cooperation in the Field of Occupational Safety and Health provided a specific example of the summit's practical agenda. It encouraged cooperation in construction, mining, metallurgy, hazardous chemicals, and oil and gas extraction and transportation. The document addressed training, accident prevention, emergency response and the application of digital technologies to risk monitoring. It also encouraged

exploration of a professional exchange mechanism, subject to regulations agreed by member states. Such cooperation offers a way to develop regular institutional contacts around shared industrial challenges, with potential benefits for workers, regulators and businesses.

Laos's accession expanded CICA's Southeast Asian membership and reinforced the platform's geographical reach. More broadly, the diversity of its participants makes sustained dialogue an important outcome in itself. CICA brings together countries that maintain different relationships with one another and participate in other regional institutions. Its contribution lies in preserving opportunities for consultation and practical cooperation where common interests exist. Azerbaijan's chairmanship allows it to support these exchanges while developing its own relationships across Asia.

The summit also complemented Azerbaijan's deepening engagement with Central Asia. The Avaza consultative meeting held a week earlier focused on cooperation among the five Central Asian states and Azerbaijan, while CICA offered a wider Asian platform. These formats can support related objectives at different levels: closer coordination among a smaller group of partners and broader dialogue with major Asian economies.

III. President Ilham Aliyev outlines Azerbaijan's approach to peace and international cooperation

The seventh World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, held in Baku on October 27 under the theme "Dialogue for a Shared Future," provided a platform for Azerbaijan to present its approach to coexistence, sovereignty and international cooperation. Addressing the opening ceremony, President Ilham Aliyev connected Azerbaijan's traditions of multiculturalism with its experience of restoring territorial integrity, advancing peace with Armenia and expanding international partnerships. President Ilham Aliyev's speech placed intercultural dialogue within a broader foreign policy outlook in which domestic solidarity, independent decision-making and respect for international law reinforce one another.

The forum brought together more than 2,000 registered participants, including over 500 foreign guests from more than 100 countries. Since its establishment in 2011, the initiative has developed into a recurring platform for discussing intercultural and interreligious relations alongside wider international concerns. The scale of participation demonstrated Azerbaijan's ability to convene a diverse international audience around issues that connect cultural understanding with peace, security and cooperation.

Domestic coexistence formed the starting point of President Ilham Aliyev's address. President Ilham Aliyev described multiculturalism and religious and ethnic tolerance as traditions preserved across generations and strengthened during independence. Equal constitutional rights operate alongside a shared sense of belonging that encompasses the country's different communities. President Ilham Aliyev noted that Azerbaijanism is a national idea that "embraces all the peoples of Azerbaijan." President Ilham Aliyev linked this common identity with the solidarity demonstrated during the most difficult periods of the country's recent history, including the struggle to restore its territorial integrity.

The speech presented social cohesion as a foundation of national resilience. President Ilham Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan's ability to preserve its language, traditions and identity through different political periods had supported the restoration and consolidation of independent statehood. Marking the thirty-fifth anniversary of the restoration of independence, President Ilham Aliyev stated that Azerbaijanis had become "the masters of our own destiny." The connection between independence and development was central to this idea: sovereignty had enabled the country to determine its priorities, strengthen its institutions and pursue national objectives through its own decisions.

The protection of this independence also informed the President's assessment of contemporary risks. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the need to safeguard Azerbaijan's identity, statehood and way of life, stating that "ideological risks are as dangerous as physical risks." Within the speech, this concern was connected with the preservation of an inclusive national identity and resistance to external pressure. Azerbaijan's openness to international dialogue does exist alongside its determination to retain authority over its domestic affairs and political choices.

President Ilham Aliyev underscored that the negotiations conducted during the years of occupation had failed to produce a settlement and had instead prolonged the conflict. Azerbaijan's actions in 2020 and 2023 were the exercise of its legitimate rights, based on the Article 51 of the UN Charter and the Security Council resolutions adopted in 1993. In outlining Azerbaijan's position, President Ilham Aliyev stated: "We fully restored our territorial integrity and sovereignty, in line with international law norms." President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that Baku had proposed a peace agreement after the military confrontation, seeking to prevent renewed conflict and establish a different path for relations with Armenia. "We were the initiators of the peace agreement with Armenia," President Ilham Aliyev stated. President Ilham Aliyev's explanation focused on the decision to end the cycle of confrontation: "we did not want eternal wars, and we did not want to take revenge." Peace was a deliberate national choice by Azerbaijan following the achievement of its principal territorial objectives.

President Aliyev also referred to the Washington meeting at which the foreign ministers initialed the peace agreement in the presence of US President Donald Trump. President Ilham Aliyev distinguished the initialing of the agreement from its formal signature and recalled the separate trilateral declaration, which the US President signed as a witness. This distinction remains important for understanding the diplomatic process. Azerbaijan's experience of the conflict also shaped the President's discussion of international institutions. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that debates about UN reform should address the implementation of Security Council decisions, drawing attention to the prolonged non-implementation of the resolutions concerning Azerbaijani territories. President Ilham Aliyev's criticism concerned the gap between the adoption of international decisions and the mechanisms available to give them practical effect.

The rejection of double standards is an established element of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. President Ilham Aliyev contrasted the absence of sanctions against Armenia during the occupation with the extensive use of sanctions in other international situations. President Ilham Aliyev also extended this criticism to attempts by external actors to prescribe the domestic choices of independent states. "Our society has zero tolerance for double standards," President Ilham Aliyev stated.

The President supported this emphasis on sovereign decision-making with an account of Azerbaijan's expanding diplomatic relationships. President Ilham Aliyev highlighted strategic partnerships with China and the United States, alongside strategic partnership declarations or agreements with ten EU member states. These relationships is evidence of Azerbaijan's ability to maintain cooperation across different centers of international power. In the logic of the address, an independent foreign policy creates opportunities for diversified engagement and strengthens the country's standing as a reliable partner.

Azerbaijan's growing responsibilities within multilateral institutions reinforced this argument. President Aliyev referred to the country's preparations to host the Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit in 2027 and the European Political Community summit in 2028. President Ilham Aliyev also highlighted the CICA summit held in Baku earlier in October, the extension of Azerbaijan's chairmanship for another two years and its admission as a full participant in the Central Asian consultative format. Together, these examples illustrated the geographical breadth of

Azerbaijan's diplomacy and its capacity to bring different groups of states into dialogue. Hosting major Islamic, European and Asian gatherings is an expression of the country's ability to sustain relationships across cultural and political differences. The World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue forms part of this wider approach by providing a recurring setting for engagement among governments, international organizations and communities. The Baku forum offered an international setting in which Azerbaijan could advance this understanding of peace and cooperation, grounded in respect for sovereignty, reciprocal treatment and sustained dialogue.

IV. Azerbaijan and Central Asia deepen cooperation through the C6 format

The eighth Consultative Meeting of the leaders of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, held in Avaza, Turkmenistan, on October 8, 2026, marked a further step in bringing the two shores of the Caspian Sea into a shared framework of regional cooperation. Following the unanimous decision to admit Azerbaijan in November 2025, Avaza hosted the first formal Consultative Meeting with Baku as a full-fledged participant. The leaders signed a Joint Statement and a Decision on the Regulatory Documents of the Consultative Meeting, while Azerbaijan was designated to chair the format in 2027. These outcomes gave the expanded six-country framework, increasingly referred to as C6, a clearer institutional basis and placed Azerbaijan in a position to help shape its next phase of development.

The summit's economic agenda reflected the growing connection between political dialogue and practical cooperation. Established in 2018, the Consultative Meetings have provided a regular channel for regional engagement. At Avaza, the emphasis on joint production, investment and infrastructure coordination indicated how this dialogue could support more sustained economic ties. Azerbaijan's participation brings its expanding bilateral relationships with Central Asian states into the same consultative framework, allowing projects previously pursued through separate partnerships to be considered within a wider regional agenda.

Joint investment and industrial cooperation occupied a prominent place in President Ilham Aliyev's address. Referring to Azerbaijan's investment funds with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, President Ilham Aliyev called for their greater use to "implement joint projects, establish new manufacturing facilities, and expand industrial cooperation." The economic foundation for these initiatives has strengthened: Azerbaijan's trade with Central Asian countries increased by more than 50 percent in 2025, while more than 400 companies with Central Asian capital were operating in Azerbaijan. Closer coordination could help direct these growing commercial relationships toward manufacturing and joint access to external markets.

President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev's "Six Economies – One Product" proposal expressed a similar ambition. Production chains involving enterprises from several participating states would create continuing relationships among manufacturers, suppliers and investors. Mirziyoyev argued that these links could prove "far stronger and more sustainable than ordinary commodity exchange" and proposed a Central Asia–Azerbaijan Business Forum in Khiva in 2027. His call to strengthen the Consultative Meetings' legal framework was accompanied by an emphasis on preserving flexible cooperation among sovereign states and avoiding cumbersome institutions. The emerging approach therefore combines more systematic coordination with national control over economic priorities.

Transport infrastructure provides a practical basis for this cooperation. The Joint Statement identified integrated regional infrastructure, including the East–West and North–South corridors, as a priority for sustainable growth and stronger interregional ties. For Azerbaijan, the Middle Corridor connects its role in regional diplomacy with the movement of goods between Central Asia and international

markets. President Ilham Aliyev stated that “The Middle Corridor is gaining ever greater importance,” pointing out an increase in transit cargo volumes of almost 20 percent in the first eight months of 2026, following growth of more than 10 percent in 2025. Sustaining this expansion will require coordination across ports, railways, shipping services and border procedures, since the competitiveness of the route depends on the reliability of the entire journey.

The proposals presented at Avaza also connected transport development with wider economic activity. Mirziyoyev called for accelerating the establishment of the Council for Infrastructure Development and offered to host its inaugural meeting in Uzbekistan. He emphasized that “New transport corridors should be accompanied by production facilities, logistics and service centers, and industrial zones.” Such an approach would allow participating countries to capture more of the economic activity associated with international trade through processing, storage, manufacturing and related services. The proposed council could help align infrastructure investments with these objectives and improve coordination among projects developed through different bilateral and multilateral arrangements.

The proposed connection between the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars line illustrates the potential for a more integrated network across Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Its value would depend on coordinating railway capacity with Caspian shipping and the infrastructure serving the route’s western sections. President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov emphasized this practical dimension when discussing the railway’s contribution to international transport and production networks: “Our benchmark should be measurable results: lower delivery costs and reduced travel times.” His emphasis on benefits for every participating country also underlined the importance of broad economic participation in regional infrastructure projects.

President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev proposed examining, initially at the expert level, the integration of the Middle Corridor with the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity, or TRIPP. The proposal connected developments in South Caucasus connectivity with Central Asian transport interests. It remained an invitation to assess possible integration, with the practical arrangements still requiring examination. For Azerbaijan, the discussion nevertheless demonstrated how its connections with neighboring states increasingly form part of a broader regional calculation about market access and transit opportunities.

Energy cooperation gives this trans-Caspian relationship an additional dimension. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are advancing the Central Asia–Azerbaijan Green Energy Corridor, intended to transmit renewable electricity to regional and European markets through Azerbaijan. Developed through a separate trilateral partnership, the project was also recognized in the Avaza Joint Statement as an important opportunity for regional cooperation. Its feasibility work is being undertaken in partnership with the Asian Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In September, the Minister of Energy of Azerbaijan Parviz Shahbazov said that the feasibility study was expected to be completed in May 2027, with commissioning planned for 2032. These remain project targets, with implementation dependent on the subsequent technical, financial and commercial arrangements.

The green energy corridor illustrates how smaller partnerships can contribute to the wider C6 agenda. Projects involving a limited number of countries can advance according to their resources and infrastructure needs, while the consultative framework provides a setting for discussing their broader regional implications. President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon similarly emphasized joint industrial development, proposed identifying priority energy projects and possible financing mechanisms, and highlighted the potential for a

major oil refinery serving regional demand. These initiatives place energy cooperation within a wider effort to expand production, strengthen supply chains and increase the value generated from the region's resources.

Digital cooperation is also becoming more closely connected with the economic agenda. Japarov proposed a unified e-commerce platform for Central Asia and Azerbaijan, supported by delivery, warehousing, customs clearance and shipment-tracking services. Tokayev called for a Central Asian partnership program on artificial intelligence and a joint action plan to raise intraregional trade to at least $20 billion. These proposals address complementary requirements: broader access to regional markets, the infrastructure needed to serve those markets and the technological capabilities required to improve productivity. Their practical significance will depend on participation by businesses and institutions capable of turning political initiatives into usable services and commercial projects.

Implementation will be a central task for Azerbaijan's 2027 chairmanship. Tokayev noted that more than 200 initiatives had been proposed since 2018, while only a small proportion had been implemented, and called for foreign ministries to review their relevance and prospects. His assessment identified a practical requirement for the expanded format: priorities need to be matched with responsible institutions, financing and achievable schedules. Azerbaijan's investment partnerships and transport and energy connections provide a foundation for advancing this work. Its chairmanship offers an opportunity to concentrate cooperation on projects that can demonstrate the economic value of the six-country framework.

The Avaza meeting strengthened Azerbaijan's participation in regional decision-making and established a broader agenda for cooperation across the Caspian. As joint projects develop, external partners may increasingly find it useful to engage the six countries together on investment, transport, energy and technology. The immediate priority is to translate the Avaza agenda into sustained cooperation that gives Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states greater influence over the economic connections linking the region.

V. Azerbaijan's expanding role in Trans-Caspian trade and logistics

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and China are advancing cooperation aimed at linking their ports, railways and logistics facilities into a more integrated transport network along the Middle Corridor. The proposed inclusion of Baku in the Lianyungang–Khorgos–Aktau "Three Nodes" logistics chain would strengthen coordination between China's coastal and inland transport hubs, Kazakhstan's railway and port infrastructure, and Azerbaijan's connections with European markets. For Baku, the initiative creates an opportunity to deepen its participation in the organization of trans-Eurasian freight services and attract additional cargo through the South Caucasus. Its commercial success will depend on the participating countries' ability to coordinate operations across the entire route.

The proposal was presented on September 9, 2026, at the CICA Conference of Port Authorities in Baku. Jiang Wei, Vice President for External Relations of Lianyungang Port, advocated incorporating Baku into the existing logistics chain and developing cross-border information exchange among its participants. The initiative builds on established cooperation between Lianyungang Port, Kazakhstan's transport operators and Azerbaijan Railways. Its significance lies in bringing the management of cargo movements, transport schedules and logistics information into closer alignment across the Caspian.

Meetings held on the sidelines of the conference addressed the operational requirements of this cooperation. Azerbaijan Railways Chairman Rovshan Rustamov met with representatives of Shanghai International Port Group, NIZE Tech and Lianyungang Port to discuss regular container services, the expansion of block-train operations

and the attraction of additional Chinese cargo bound for Europe. The discussions also covered smart-port technologies, terminal management, cargo tracking and the exchange of information on freight forecasts and train schedules. These areas are closely connected: predictable cargo volumes help operators plan services, while better coordination between ports and railways reduces uncertainty at transfer points.

The emerging arrangements concern a route on which freight services already operate. On September 10, Lianyungang launched a Trans-Caspian service connecting its China–Kazakhstan logistics base with Baku through Khorgos and Aktau. According to China News Service, the operation followed adjustments to services and cargo consolidation associated with the development of Aktau's container hub. The participating facilities coordinated cargo consolidation, cross-border transshipment and maritime transfers. The September proposal therefore seeks to deepen the operational integration of an existing connection and establish a more consistent basis for its expansion.

Political engagement provides a broader framework for these commercial initiatives. At their September 8 meeting, New Azerbaijan Party Deputy Chairman Tahir Budagov and Liu Haixing, head of the International Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, discussed trade, transport, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Zangezur Corridor and Azerbaijan's engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This dialogue builds on the strategic partnership established between Azerbaijan and China in July 2024. The declaration adopted at that time expressly supported cooperation on the Middle Corridor, the uninterrupted operation of international transport routes and the development of China–Europe freight-train services.

Investment in Kazakhstan's Caspian infrastructure has been an important part of this process. On July 3, 2024, KTZ Express, Aktau International Commercial Sea Port and Lianyungang Port Group agreed on key terms for a joint venture to develop a container hub at Aktau. The announcement envisaged a project worth US$96 million with a planned annual capacity of 500,000 twenty-foot equivalent units, or TEUs. Implementation agreements followed in September 2024, and the hub began operations on June 9, 2025. The opening formed part of a phased development process; the capacity envisaged in the original announcement should therefore be distinguished from the facilities brought into operation at each stage. The project extends the Chinese–Kazakh logistics partnership from Lianyungang and Khorgos to the Caspian coast.

Parallel initiatives are strengthening Azerbaijan's participation in the same network. During COP29 in November 2024, the Port of Baku, Kazakhstan Railways and Xi'an Free Trade Port Construction and Operation Company signed an agreement to develop an intermodal cargo terminal on an initial 40-hectare site at Alat. The project brings together Azerbaijan's port infrastructure, Kazakhstan's railway services and Xi'an's capacity to organize container trains. Its stated objectives include reducing handling times and transport costs while supporting more stable cargo flows along the Middle Corridor.

The legal and operational basis for cooperation has also expanded. Azerbaijan and China signed an agreement on international multimodal transportation in April 2025. In July that year, Azerbaijan Railways concluded agreements with China State Railway Group and Xi'an Free Trade Port covering railway cooperation, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars route and a container yard in Xi'an with an annual handling capacity of 20,000 TEUs. These arrangements give Azerbaijani operators a closer connection with the points where Chinese cargo is consolidated and dispatched. Coordination at the origin of shipments can help match westbound train services with available capacity at Caspian ports and onward rail connections.

Each hub contributes a distinct function to the proposed network. Lianyungang connects maritime trade with China's inland rail system and

handled 367 million tons of cargo and approximately 7.16 million TEUs in 2025. Khorgos provides the cross-border railway connection between China and Kazakhstan, while Aktau links that railway network with Caspian shipping. Baku provides access to Azerbaijan's railways and onward routes through Georgia and Türkiye. The value of closer integration lies in coordinating these functions so that capacity at one point is supported by dependable services at the next.

Further port expansion could support this process. Azerbaijan's plans envisage increasing the Port of Baku's annual cargo-handling capacity to 25 million tons, while Kazakhstan is pursuing modernization intended to raise the combined capacity of Aktau and Kuryk from 21 million to 30 million tons. Digital cooperation is developing alongside these investments. Electronic data exchange between Baku and Aktau was reported in April 2025, supporting the sharing of information on container movements and the coordination of port operations. Such arrangements can improve the use of existing infrastructure by allowing operators to prepare for incoming cargo, organize storage and align vessel loading with railway arrivals.

The route's potential extends beyond Chinese cargo. Lianyungang's maritime connections with Japan and South Korea could provide exporters from both countries with an additional route into Central Asia and the wider Caspian region. Access through a Chinese coastal hub would connect maritime shipments with the rail and Caspian sections of the Middle Corridor. The resulting diversification could become commercially useful where disruptions or restrictions affect other routes. This remains an opportunity whose realization will depend on demand, freight rates and the availability of regular services suited to Japanese and South Korean businesses.

Operational coordination will determine how much of this potential can be realized. A shipment moving along the corridor passes through several railway systems, border procedures and transfers between land and maritime transport. Differences in timetables, documentation and handling practices can accumulate into substantial delays. Cargo owners consequently need reliable estimates for the complete journey, including the time spent waiting at terminals and ports. Investment in additional capacity will have greater commercial value when operators can provide consistent schedules and clear information about the movement of shipments.

Digital systems are central to that task. Port and railway platforms need to exchange information in formats that other participants can use, while customs administrations require timely and compatible documentation. Shared information on cargo forecasts, train arrivals, vessel availability and terminal capacity can help operators anticipate congestion and adjust services before delays spread along the route. The proposed Lianyungang–Khorgos–Aktau–Baku information chain could support this work, provided that cross-border data exchange complies with national legislation and agreed requirements for data protection.

The Caspian crossing presents additional constraints. Vessel availability, weather conditions and the coordination of loading and unloading affect the regularity of departures. Declining sea levels create a longer-term challenge by reducing navigable depths, potentially restricting vessel access and increasing dredging requirements. These conditions link the corridor's competitiveness with the management of maritime infrastructure and the availability of suitable shipping capacity. Their effects must be reflected in investment planning and service schedules if the participating ports are to accommodate growing cargo volumes reliably.

Azerbaijan's deeper integration with the Lianyungang–Khorgos–Aktau network could strengthen its role in organizing freight movements between East Asia, Central Asia and Europe. The combination of joint terminals, railway agreements and digital cooperation gives Baku a practical basis for expanding that role. Sustained growth will require these arrangements to deliver competitive costs, predictable transit times and dependable

connections across the Caspian. Progress in those areas would allow Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and China to turn their infrastructure investments into a more commercially attractive transport network and give cargo owners stronger reasons to use the Middle Corridor regularly.

VI. Jaishankar's Baku visit signals a thaw in Azerbaijan-India relations

On October 23, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar visited Baku, where he met President Ilham Aliyev and held talks with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov. It was the first bilateral visit by an Indian foreign minister to Azerbaijan since Sushma Swaraj traveled to Baku in April 2018. Jaishankar described his visit as a continuation of the meeting between President Ilham Aliyev and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit on September 1. During his meeting with President Ilham Aliyev, he emphasized that he had traveled to Baku on Modi's instructions, indicating New Delhi's interest in improving relations following more than a year of diplomatic tensions.

The visit marked a significant change from the strained relations that followed the India–Pakistan military confrontation in May 2025. Azerbaijan expressed solidarity with the Pakistani people and condemned attacks that had resulted in civilian casualties. In India, some travel platforms removed Azerbaijan from their listings or discouraged travel to the country. Between May and August 2025, the number of Indian visitors to Azerbaijan declined by 56 percent compared with the corresponding period of the previous year. The disagreements subsequently extended to multilateral diplomacy over Azerbaijan's application for full membership in the SCO. These disagreements reinforced existing tensions over India's defense cooperation with Armenia, which has been a longstanding source of concern for Azerbaijan. Diplomatic contacts nevertheless continued. In April, Indian Secretary (West) in the Ministry of External Affairs Sibi George traveled to Baku for the sixth round of foreign office consultations, co-chaired by Deputy Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan Elnur Mammadov. The subsequent meeting between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on September 1 provided political impetus for further engagement, while the appointment of Abhay Kumar as India's new ambassador to Azerbaijan, who presented his credentials to President Ilham Aliyev on October 16, preceded Jaishankar's visit.

The October 23 discussions addressed the disagreements that had complicated bilateral relations. At their joint press conference, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov acknowledged that differences between the two countries had affected both their bilateral cooperation and interactions within international organizations. "Today, we discussed these issues openly and constructively. We will see the results of this discussion in a short period of time," he stated. Jaishankar similarly described the talks as "very productive" and said that they had helped establish a "pathway forward" for relations. Referring to Azerbaijan and India as "independent-minded nations who make their own call on the important issues of the day," he appeared to acknowledge that disagreements on regional questions need not prevent cooperation in other areas.

Regional security also featured in the discussions. Jaishankar identified terrorism, conflict, and instability as common challenges and welcomed the peace agreement initialed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in August 2025. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov briefed his counterpart on the normalization process with Armenia, including Baku's expectations concerning constitutional changes in Yerevan. Although the talks did not resolve the underlying differences over regional security, both governments signaled their willingness to maintain dialogue despite their divergent positions.

Economic interests provide an important incentive for improving relations. Bilateral trade reached approximately $600 million during the first nine

months of 2026, exceeding the $401 million recorded throughout 2025, although it remained considerably below the 2022 peak of $1.88 billion. Energy accounts for a substantial share of this relationship. Between January and September, Azerbaijan exported 524,338 tons of crude oil to India, almost five times the amount recorded during the corresponding period in 2025.

India also has considerable investments in Azerbaijan's energy industry. ONGC Videsh, the overseas investment subsidiary of India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, has invested more than $1.2 billion in Azerbaijan and holds a 2.925 percent stake in the Azeri–Chirag–Gunashli oil fields and a 3.097 percent stake in the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline. More than 1,000 Indian companies operate in Azerbaijan, providing an existing commercial foundation for expanding economic cooperation.

Both foreign ministers nevertheless acknowledged that bilateral economic relations remain below their potential. Jaishankar emphasized the continued interest of Indian companies in Azerbaijan's oil and gas sector, while the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov identified pharmaceuticals, agriculture, information technology, digital services, manufacturing, and energy as promising areas for further cooperation. The two sides agreed to exchange trade delegations and facilitate contacts between their business communities. These initiatives would help broaden an economic relationship that remains heavily concentrated in energy.

Transport connectivity represents another area in which the two countries have overlapping interests. During the expanded discussions, the Azerbaijani delegation presented opportunities associated with the East–West and North–South transport corridors, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, the Port of Baku, and the Alat Free Economic Zone. Jaishankar emphasized the importance of connectivity for the global economy, and both sides agreed to pursue closer coordination concerning the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

For India, the INSTC offers an alternative route to markets in the Caspian region, Central Asia, and Europe, while Azerbaijan's transport infrastructure provides opportunities to connect these markets through its territory. Azerbaijan, in turn, regards India as an important Asian economic partner as it seeks to diversify trade and strengthen its position within regional transport networks. Both countries have an interest in developing transport routes that could expand commercial exchanges and improve access to markets.

The recovery of people-to-people contacts is also important, particularly given the impact of the 2025 diplomatic tensions on tourism. Indian visitors to Azerbaijan fell from 243,589 in 2024 to 166,944 in 2025, a decline of 31.5 percent, although India remained Azerbaijan's fourth-largest source of tourists. During the Baku talks, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov noted that approximately 500 Indian students had enrolled in Azerbaijani universities during the year and that more than 30 Indian films had been produced in Azerbaijan in recent years.

Jaishankar raised the possibility of expanding direct air connections and restoring Azerbaijan's participation in the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, which provides professional training and capacity-building opportunities to partner countries. Azerbaijan Airlines currently operates 14 weekly flights connecting Baku with Delhi and Mumbai, while IndiGo's suspension of its seven weekly Delhi–Baku services amid the conflict in Iran has reduced available capacity. Improving air connectivity could contribute to a recovery in tourism and facilitate greater business and educational exchanges.

Despite these developments, several issues could complicate further normalization. India's expanding defense cooperation with Armenia remains particularly sensitive for Azerbaijan. New Delhi has emerged as an important supplier of military equipment to Yerevan, prompting repeated criticism from Baku, especially while the Azerbaijan–Armenia peace treaty awaits final signing and ratification. India's position on

Azerbaijan's application for full SCO membership also remains unclear. Asked about the issue following Jaishankar's visit, Indian Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal declined to specify New Delhi's position, stating that membership questions must be considered within the organization. The significance of Jaishankar's visit therefore lies primarily in the decision by both governments to restore political dialogue and pursue cooperation despite unresolved differences.

VII. AIR Center and Egmont Institute hold first Azerbaijan-EU think tanks forum in Brussels

The First Azerbaijan-European Union Think Tanks Forum, held in Brussels on October 27, brought together policy experts from Azerbaijan and across Europe to discuss the future of bilateral relations, regional security, energy cooperation, and connectivity. Organized jointly by Azerbaijan's Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) and Belgium's Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, the forum, entitled "Azerbaijan and the European Union: New Perspectives," took place amid significant changes in the geopolitical environment of Europe and the South Caucasus.

The forum followed a series of high-level exchanges between Azerbaijan and the European Union during 2026. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President António Costa, and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas visited Azerbaijan during the year, reflecting the growing importance of the relationship for both sides. The visits took place as the European Union sought to strengthen its engagement with the South Caucasus, particularly in energy security, regional connectivity, and the normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In his opening remarks, Bernard Siman, Senior Associate Fellow at the Egmont Institute, emphasized the role of think tanks in developing new policy approaches, generating ideas, and anticipating international developments. Dr. Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the AIR Center, similarly highlighted the importance of sustained dialogue between Azerbaijani and European research institutions in identifying practical opportunities for cooperation.

Dr. Shafiyev described the recent diplomatic exchanges as the beginning of a new phase in Azerbaijan–EU relations. He expressed hope that this momentum would produce both new legal agreements reflecting the expanding partnership and concrete projects in areas of mutual interest.

The renewed engagement also reflects changing strategic circumstances. Russia's war against Ukraine, conflicts involving Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, and disruptions to established energy and transport routes have increased the importance of the South Caucasus for European security and economic policy. Azerbaijan's geographical position between Europe and Asia, together with its energy resources and developing transport infrastructure, provides opportunities for cooperation that extend well beyond the traditional energy relationship.

The normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia occupied a prominent place in the forum's discussions. Following the August 8, 2025, Washington summit, attended by President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and US President Donald Trump, the two countries entered a new phase of negotiations aimed at establishing formal interstate relations.

During the summit, the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia initialed the agreed text of the Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations. The Washington declaration also outlined commitments concerning regional connectivity and the development of transport links, including the proposed Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP).

Although the initialing of the peace agreement represented considerable progress, its formal

signing remains subject to outstanding issues. In his remarks, Dr. Shafiyev reiterated Azerbaijan's position that Armenia must remove constitutional references that contain territorial claims against Azerbaijan. These provisions create a potential legal contradiction between Armenia's domestic constitutional framework and the commitments envisaged under the peace agreement.

Dr. Shafiyev drew attention to European precedents in which constitutional changes accompanied the resolution of longstanding territorial disputes. Following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Ireland amended Articles 2 and 3 of its Constitution, replacing provisions concerning the national territory with language recognizing that Irish reunification could occur only through peaceful means and democratic consent. Similarly, North Macedonia introduced constitutional amendments as part of the implementation of the 2018 Prespa Agreement with Greece.

These examples are evidence that constitutional amendments can contribute to the durability of peace agreements by removing inconsistencies between domestic law and international commitments. Constitutional clarity remains an important condition for completing the normalization process.

Dr. Shafiyev also emphasized that direct bilateral negotiations had proved more effective than earlier mediation formats. Azerbaijan's position is that the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia should retain primary responsibility for resolving the remaining disagreements, while external actors can contribute through practical support for post-conflict reconstruction, humanitarian activities, and regional economic integration.

This distinction is particularly relevant to the European Union. Although Azerbaijan does not consider additional third-party mediation necessary, Baku welcomes European engagement in humanitarian demining, reconstruction, transport infrastructure, and confidence-building projects. These activities could provide tangible benefits to communities affected by decades of conflict while helping establish the economic and social conditions necessary for sustainable peace.

Dr. Shafiyev also warned that political groups opposed to normalization, including elements of Armenia's opposition, religious leadership, and diaspora organizations, could complicate the process. He urged European policymakers to distinguish between actors seeking to advance negotiations and those attempting to prevent an agreement.

Regional connectivity emerged as another major area of discussion. The South Caucasus occupies an important position within emerging transport networks linking Europe with Central Asia and the wider Asian market. With geopolitical tensions affecting traditional trade routes, Azerbaijan's infrastructure has gained increasing relevance for European efforts to diversify international transport connections.

Azerbaijan has invested substantially in the development of the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, which connects China and Central Asia with European markets through the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. The Port of Baku, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and associated logistics infrastructure provide the principal components of Azerbaijan's contribution to this network.

For the European Union, the Middle Corridor offers an opportunity to develop transport connections that do not depend on transit through Russia. For Azerbaijan, greater European participation could accelerate infrastructure development, increase cargo volumes, and strengthen the country's role as a transport hub between Europe and Asia. The importance of connectivity has also been reflected in recent European initiatives. During European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's July 2026 visit to Azerbaijan, the European Commission announced a Global Gateway investment package of up to €200 million for connectivity projects across the South Caucasus, alongside an additional

€20 million for initiatives supporting peace and cooperation among local communities.

The proposed TRIPP route constitutes another important component of the regional connectivity agenda. The project envisages transport connections between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenian territory, while providing Armenia with opportunities to participate in regional and international transit networks.cIts implementation could contribute to the reopening of transport links that have remained disrupted for decades. Beyond its immediate economic benefits, the project has the potential to strengthen the normalization process by creating practical areas of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, realizing these benefits will require continued political agreement, financing, infrastructure development, and coordination among the countries involved. For the European Union, supporting such initiatives would provide an opportunity to contribute to regional peace through economic engagement. Investment in transport infrastructure, border facilities, and logistics could help translate diplomatic progress into longer-term economic interdependence.

Energy cooperation remains one of the most established components of Azerbaijan's relationship with the European Union. Following the disruptions to European energy markets caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan acquired greater importance as an alternative supplier of natural gas.

The Southern Gas Corridor, including the Trans Adriatic Pipeline, has enabled Azerbaijan to supply natural gas to European markets and contributed to the diversification of the continent's energy sources. The July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy established a framework for expanding cooperation, including increased natural gas deliveries and the development of renewable energy resources. At the Brussels forum, Dr. Shafiyev emphasized that future cooperation should encompass both conventional energy supplies and emerging renewable energy projects. Although the European Union is pursuing a longer-term transition toward low-carbon energy, natural gas remains an important component of the energy mix in several European countries. This creates opportunities for continued cooperation with Azerbaijan while both sides explore investments in alternative energy technologies.

Azerbaijan has also begun developing its renewable energy potential, including solar and wind projects intended to support domestic energy diversification and future electricity exports. Proposed green electricity corridors connecting the Caspian region with European markets could provide an additional dimension to the partnership. These initiatives offer the possibility of broadening Azerbaijan–EU energy relations beyond natural gas exports. At the same time, their implementation will depend on commercial feasibility, investment commitments, transmission infrastructure, and coordination among participating countries.

Energy cooperation and transport connectivity are therefore becoming increasingly connected elements of the broader relationship. Both provide practical areas in which Azerbaijan and the European Union have overlapping economic and strategic interests, notwithstanding differences on other political questions.

The Brussels forum also demonstrated the potential contribution of research institutions to the development of Azerbaijan–EU relations. Alongside representatives from Azerbaijan and Belgium, the event brought together experts from Italy, Spain, the Czech Republic, Austria, Romania, North Macedonia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, and other European countries. The discussions were organized around three principal themes: the current state and future trajectory of Azerbaijan–EU relations, regional security and the geopolitical environment of the South Caucasus, and geoeconomic cooperation involving energy and Eurasian connectivity.

The First Azerbaijan–EU Think Tanks Forum took place at a time when relations between Baku and Brussels are acquiring greater strategic and economic significance. Recent high-level visits indicate renewed political interest in strengthening the partnership, while developments in the South Caucasus and the wider international environment have created additional opportunities for cooperation.

The participation of experts from different policy backgrounds provided an opportunity to examine these issues beyond the formal diplomatic agenda. Such exchanges are particularly relevant at a time when Azerbaijan and the European Union are exploring new forms of cooperation while continuing to hold different positions on certain political and institutional matters. For Azerbaijan, closer engagement with European think tanks offers an opportunity to communicate its positions on regional security, the peace process, and economic development directly to European policy communities. For European institutions, these exchanges can provide additional perspectives on developments in the South Caucasus and identify areas where practical cooperation is possible.