



CENTER OF
ANALYSIS OF
INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS

ANALYSIS

The United Kingdom in the Greater Caspian Region: Evolving Opportunities for Regional Engagement

Roza Bayramli

Huseyn Sultanli

📍 Mirza İbrahimov 8, Baku, AZ1005, Azerbaijan

📞 (+994 12) 596-82-39, (+994 12) 596-82-41

🌐 E-mail: www.aircenter.az, info@aircenter.az

MARCH 2026

The United Kingdom in the Greater Caspian Region: Evolving Opportunities for Regional Engagement

Key takeaways:

- **The United Kingdom is the latest Western actor to renew its approach to the Central Asian region, establishing a C5+1 cooperation platform with the region's countries.**
- **This follows similar steps taken by the European Union and the United States, reflecting the region's growing geopolitical and strategic importance.**
- **The UK's approach in the South Caucasus, particularly in its relationship with Azerbaijan, should serve as a platform for how it approaches its Central Asian partners in this new stage. Through the combination of knowledge and experience sharing but also consistent financial support, the UK can help several ongoing national but also regional processes in the Greater Caspian region.**
- **The development of the Middle Corridor serves as a unique platform for regional countries and external partners to join forces and cooperate on mutually beneficial processes.**
- **Given Azerbaijan's vital role in the Middle Corridor and its recent joining of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, the extension of the current format into C6+1 to include Azerbaijan would be a strategically rational decision.**

Central Asia's Growing Engagement with Global Powers

A broader transformation in Central Asia's international profile is reflected in the region's increasing engagement with global powers, particularly in the West. In recent years, the five Central Asian states have distinguished themselves from the stereotype of a politically secondary and geographically isolated region. In European and transatlantic capitals, they are becoming more widely recognized as strategic partners in their own right, with implications for energy diversification, critical raw materials, transport connectivity, regional stability, and the management of broader Eurasian geopolitical risks. Through new summit formats, ministerial mechanisms, and tangible investment initiatives, this transformation is being institutionalized.

One of the most striking manifestations of this transformation has been the European Union. The inaugural EU–Central Asia Summit in Samarkand in April 2025 marked a significant milestone in the relationship, which was elevated to the status of a strategic partnership. The summit was supplemented by a €12 billion Global Gateway investment package, which prioritized transport, critical raw materials, digital connectivity, water, and energy. Additionally, leaders endorsed a €10 billion

international investment package for sustainable transport infrastructure and logistics networks in Central Asia¹. Brussels recognizes Central Asia as a significant partner in the broader reconfiguration of Eurasian connectivity and economic resilience, as evidenced by the emphasis placed on transport, critical raw materials, digital connectivity, water, and energy.

Individual Western states also exhibit this trend in their policies. Germany has continued to strengthen its regional ties through the Z5+1 format, making Central Asia a more important strategic partner in terms of connectivity, energy security, raw materials, and supply-chain diversification². A similar trajectory has been observed in the United States. Washington's acknowledgment of Central Asia as a region that increasingly requires coordinated, rather than solely bilateral, engagement is demonstrated by the C5+1 platform's transition from a ministerial consultation mechanism to a leader-level format over the past decade³.

The UK's Renewed Central Asian Approach

The most recent example of renewed Western engagement is the United Kingdom, with a meeting between Yvette Cooper, the UK's Foreign Secretary, and the Foreign Secretaries of the five Central Asian states taking place on February 26, 2026 in London. Labelled as the launch of the C5+1 format with the UK, the event represents an important step in enhancing the level of attention dedicated to Central Asia within the UK's foreign policy calculations⁴. Some may argue that this step is actually overdue, especially given the UK's already established and quite comprehensive bilateral ties with some Central Asian states. Partnerships with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for example, already span a whole range of sectors from energy to education, whereas the partnership with Kyrgyzstan is gaining considerable momentum in the business and development sectors.

For the UK, the C5+1 format represents an important opportunity to expand its footprint in a region with emerging global significance. To date, the UK has leaned towards bilateral cooperation with Central Asian states, somewhat mirroring its approach in neighboring regions like the South Caucasus. With both regions gaining more geopolitical relevance, partly because of their own increasing

¹ Joint press release following the first EU-Central Asia summit. (n.d.). EEAS, Available at:

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/turkmenistan/joint-press-release-following-first-eu-central-asia-summit_en

² Amt, A. (n.d.). Meeting with the Foreign Ministers of the Central Asian states in Berlin – Germany strengthens its partnership with Central Asia. *German Federal Foreign Office*, Available at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussepolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/2755764-2755764>

³ Bland, S. M. (2025, November 13). Deals, not declarations: U.S.–Central Asia Cooperation at Summit Crossroads. *The Times Of Central Asia*, Available at: <https://timesca.com/deals-not-declarations-u-s-central-asia-cooperation-at-summit-crossroads/>

⁴ Participation in the Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Central Asia and United Kingdom in the “C5+1” Format. (2026, February 26). *Embassy of the Republic of Tajikistan to the United States of America*, Available at: <https://www.mfa.tj/en/washington/view/18315/participation-in-the-meeting-of-the-foreign-ministers-of-central-asia-and-united-kingdom-in-the-c51-format>

interconnectedness, it is logical for the UK to take concrete steps in modernizing its relationship with local countries. Moreover, this approach is a rational step within the UK's broader foreign policy strategy. Since the Labour government came to power in July 2024, considerable attention has been directed at either renewing existing but stagnating partnerships or pursuing new partnerships that diversify the UK's alliances and maximize new economic opportunities in an increasingly unpredictable world. For example, the UK has, at the official level, expressed interest in supporting the development of the Middle Corridor, which serves as an important layer of its relationship with countries of the Greater Caspian region. John Alderdice, the UK's Trade Envoy to Azerbaijan and Central Asia, has frequently highlighted the readiness of both the UK government and also the British business community to support regional countries through knowledge and experience sharing in fields like renewable energy, advanced manufacturing and financial services⁵.

In light of this, the inaugural ministerial meeting between the United Kingdom and Central Asia in London on 26 February 2026 should not be regarded as a singular diplomatic event, but rather as the most recent example of a more extensive Western trend. Official reports indicate that the meeting aimed to deepen political dialogue and expand cooperation in trade and investment, transport and logistics, finance, digitalization, education, energy, and the climate agenda⁶. The format is noteworthy for both its substance and its timing. The United Kingdom is not merely expressing a general political interest; it is transitioning to a more structured and practicable engagement with Central Asia as a region. Central Asia is being recognized as a significant partner in long-term geo-economic planning, as evidenced by the themes that were discussed in London. These themes include financial and professional services, transit potential, and hydrocarbon modernization.

It is particularly noteworthy that the summit agenda was explicitly geo-economic in nature. Several priority areas were identified by Turkmenistan's official readout, including energy and decarbonization, which includes the modernization of the oil and gas sector and deeper hydrocarbon processing; financial and trade technologies, which capitalize on London's status as a prominent global financial center; professional services, including legal, consulting, and auditing expertise; and transport and logistics cooperation, which is designed to enhance the region's transit abilities⁷. This indicates that the United Kingdom perceives Central Asia as a region

⁵ Mahmudova, G. (2025, December 16). Lord: Azerbaijan's role in shaping Middle Corridor presents exciting possibilities. *Report.az*, Available at: <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/lord-azerbaijan-s-role-in-shaping-middle-corridor-presents-exciting-possibilities>

⁶ GOV.KZ - Единая платформа интернет-ресурсов государственных органов. (2026, February 26), Available at: <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/1170603?lang=en>

⁷ Turkmenistan Golden Age. "Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Central Asian States and the United Kingdom held". (2026, February 19), Available at: <https://turkmenistan.gov.tm/en/post/103755/meeting-foreign-ministers-central-asian-states-and-united-kingdom-held>

that is becoming increasingly relevant to Eurasian connectivity, investment flows, and supply chains, in addition to a political interlocutor.

Simultaneously, it appears that the summit has resulted in the development of a clear policy agenda and a platform, rather than a substantial collective treaty package. The format's launch, the identification of shared priorities, and the stated intention to fill this new mechanism with "practical content" are all emphasized in the official material available from Central Asian governments. Therefore, the London meeting's primary outcome was the establishment of a new diplomatic instrument: a formal ministerial track between the United Kingdom and Central Asia. This track has a sufficiently comprehensive agenda to enable subsequent activities in the areas of energy transition, digital governance, trade, infrastructure, regional security, and digital governance.

Moreover, the bilateral meetings that were conducted on the outskirts of the summit revealed some of the more tangible advancements. The Kazakh side underscored the importance of the 2024 Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, a 2026–2027 roadmap on critical minerals, and cooperation on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, in addition to discussions with the UK on trade and investment, critical minerals, transport and logistics, finance, digitalization, education, and the climate agenda⁸. According to Uzbekistan, the London visit encompassed discussions on trade diversification, industrial cooperation, infrastructure, strategic raw materials, and renewable energy. Additionally, the visit included references to previously signed memorandums of understanding, a Joint Declaration on the Development of Comprehensive Partnership, and a new memorandum with UK Export Finance regarding infrastructure financing⁹. This illustrates that the United Kingdom now considers Central Asia to be a region that merits engagement in a coordinated format and through a practical agenda that is relevant to growth sectors, connectivity, and resilience. The summit's importance is not so much in the single headline agreement as it is in the establishment of a policy framework that will enable London to gradually increase its presence in Central Asia.

Opportunities for cross-regional cooperation

In parallel with Central Asia, the UK has been dedicating considerable attention to its South Caucasus policy. The elevation of its relationship with both Azerbaijan and Armenia to the level of a strategic partnership is also indicative of a desire to play a greater role. In Azerbaijan's case, this has been observed for some time and is part of a long and multi-layered trend, with the UK consistently ranking as the country's largest foreign direct investor and making long-lasting contributions to ongoing

⁸ GOV.KZ - Единая платформа интернет-ресурсов государственных органов. (2026, February 26), Available at: <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/1170603?lang=en>

⁹ The Government Portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan. "Foreign Minister had several meetings in London". (2026, February 27), Available at: <https://gov.uz/en/mfa/news/view/137562>

domestic projects across various spheres. However, given the UK's recently increased attention to Central Asia, there is a unique opportunity for enhanced cross-regional engagement on matters of common interest. For example, ongoing work on the modernization of the Middle Corridor, in light of the increasing volume of transit, presents the UK with a chance to support a regional process with truly global implications. In a recent interview, the UK's trade envoy outlined some of the ways in which the UK can actually enhance and speed up the Corridor's development and help it maximize its potential¹⁰. This includes but is not limited to master planning of multi-modal transport hubs and systems, essential regulatory reform and the implementation of smart systems to smooth trade barriers going forward¹¹. In addition, the UK has the necessary willingness and ambition to provide appropriate levels of financial support to ongoing projects. Here, UKEF (UK Export Finance), which only recently provided Azerbaijan with a £5 billion loan guarantee, can play a transformational role. In Lord Alderdice's words, in addition to mobilizing significant funds and speeding up implementation, support from UKEF can make "large-scale" projects more attractive for foreign investors¹². In the current climate of global uncertainty, this is an invaluable contribution that would expand the capabilities of the wider project but also consolidate the UK as a reliable partner to both Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

The combination of the UK's knowledge and expertise but also its proven track record of being willing to invest in neighboring regions can drive the next stage of its relationship with Central Asia. In addition to projects like the Middle Corridor which bring together several states, individual Central Asian countries are also developing their capabilities in various sectors with support from the United Kingdom. Here, green energy is of particular note, with green hydrogen projects in Uzbekistan, for example, already benefiting from the support of British companies¹³. Mott MacDonald, for example, is known to have contributed to the development of Uzbekistan's power sector masterplan to 2030¹⁴. Critical minerals are another vital sphere and an area which other actors have centered their attention on. In addition to the steps taken by the European Union, outlined earlier, the United States has also been active, with the Trump Administration hosting Central Asian leaders in the White House for renewed talks on critical minerals cooperation in the C5+1 format. With the White House also boosting its engagement with the South Caucasus through

¹⁰ UK expertise supports Azerbaijan's transformation into sustainable economy - Lord Alderdice (Exclusive interview). (2025, December 19), *Trend.Az*, Available at: <https://www.trend.az/business/4130872.html>

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Babayeva, N. (2025, August 27). Azerbaijan, UK complete first deal under UKEF £5B loan guarantee program, *Report.az*, Available at: <https://report.az/en/business/azerbaijan-uk-complete-first-deal-under-ukef-5b-loan-guarantee-program>

¹³ UK expertise supports Azerbaijan's transformation into sustainable economy - Lord Alderdice (Exclusive interview). (2025c, December 19), *Trend.Az*, Available at: <https://www.trend.az/business/4130872.html>

¹⁴ *Ibid*

comprehensive support to regional transport projects, namely the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), it is evident that the wider region is gaining widespread recognition from external actors. This will undoubtedly push actors to ensure their approaches are up to date and appropriately reflect the region's needs. In the UK's case, its most recent Industrial Strategy clearly emphasizes the importance of critical minerals. Most importantly, despite stressing the need for a greater share of critical minerals to be sourced domestically, it recognizes the importance of continuing to meet the demand through external partnerships¹⁵. Although the UK does have cooperation frameworks with individual countries like Kazakhstan which already support its needs, it is evident that greater coordination at the regional level will be required to enable the implementation of projects at a larger-scale and with much broader ramifications.

In addition to continuing the upgrading of its relationship with Central Asia, considering the possibility of establishing an extended dialogue or cooperation mechanism to include Azerbaijan would be a reasonable and farsighted measure for the UK to take. Recently, Azerbaijan formally joined the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, essentially transforming this format from "C5" to "C6". **A logical next step would be commencement of engagement between this newly established group with common external partners.** The United Kingdom, which has a well-established South Caucasus policy, but also having expressed concrete interest in deepening engagement with Central Asia, is a realistic example. With the significance of the Middle Corridor for all the parties concerned now well-documented, it must serve as a long-term catalyst for cooperation which extends across several key areas. **Ensuring this, however, requires the recognition of Azerbaijan's crucial role within this process.** As the agenda between Central Asian states and Western partners like the UK transcends diplomatic outreach and extends to real corridors, supply chains, and market access, the Caspian Sea ceases to act like a border and becomes a strategic link. Azerbaijan is situated on the western shore of this link. Within the Middle Corridor (also known as the Trans-Caspian East-West International Transport Corridor), which links Central Asia to Europe through the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Turkey, Azerbaijan is responsible for the anchoring of the passage through the Port of Baku, rail links across the South Caucasus, and integration with onward routes toward Türkiye and European markets. Practically speaking, Azerbaijani infrastructure is already the conduit for a significant portion of Central Asia's westward connectivity agenda. This reality is becoming increasingly recognized by actors in the region but also in Europe as a whole. Only recently, the Middle Corridor was a focal point of the EU's engagement in Central Asia within its broader connectivity agenda seeking to unify its approach

¹⁵ Banks, M. (2025, December 17). It's time for Britain to wake up to Central Asia, *Comment Central*, Available at: <https://commentcentral.co.uk/its-time-for-britain-to-wake-up-to-central-asia>

to the Black Sea, South Caucasus and Central Asian regions. This was evident in the November 2025 Tashkent Investors Forum, which explicitly united the EU, South Caucasus and Central Asian countries, Türkiye, international financial institutions, and private-sector actors around the same corridor logic¹⁶. This serves as a compelling indication that the corridor is already comprehended by the region's external partners as a cross-regional ecosystem rather than a narrowly C5 space.

The same is true of the United Kingdom's priorities. An exclusive C5+1 mechanism is insufficient for the agenda London is attempting to pursue if it desires a more comprehensive involvement in critical minerals, resilient supply chains, transport diversification, financial services, and strategic connectivity. In addition to secure and efficient transport routes to external markets, critical minerals necessitate extraction and processing partnerships in Central Asia. In addition to agreements with producers, a reliable transit architecture is necessary for trade and investment. The strategic depth of logistics discussions is diminished if the primary South Caucasus transit hub, which is the gateway to Turkey and Europe via the Trans-Caspian route, is overlooked. **In this regard, the inclusion of Azerbaijan to establish a “C6+1” mechanism would not dilute the format; rather, it would ensure that it is consistent with its stated objectives.**

Conclusion

A C6+1 framework would create reciprocal advantages for all sides. For Central Asia, it would connect diplomatic dialogue more directly to the physical infrastructure that enables diversification of export routes and reduces dependence on narrower transit options. For the United Kingdom, it would make the format more policy-relevant by tying investment, critical minerals, and connectivity goals to the corridor architecture required to implement them. For Azerbaijan, inclusion would formalize a role it already plays in practice: that of the region's westward gateway and an increasingly important platform for transport, customs digitalization, and multimodal trade. Therefore, the case for Azerbaijan's involvement in this format, perhaps resulting in a transition from C5+1 to C6+1, is more than just geographic or symbolic. As dialogue between Central Asia and the UK but also other actors become increasingly centered around geo-economics, Azerbaijan's role within the Middle Corridor but also the wider region will become more and more apparent. Moreover, as the Middle Corridor gains strategic relevance and becomes the center of attention for logistics companies and other investors, contributions from all the relevant parties will be essential. It is the effective coordination of this, however, that will prove the degree of its effectiveness. Hence, given the UK's interest in supporting the Middle Corridor

¹⁶ Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor and Connectivity Investors Forum. (2025, November 27). *International Partnerships*, Available at: https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/events/trans-caspian-transport-corridor-and-connectivity-investors-forum-2025-11-27_en

but also its appetite for closer ties with both regions, the facilitation of a new framework which unites all these factors appears to be an entirely rational and timely proposition.

Authors:

Roza Bayramli, Senior Advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations

Huseyn Sultanli, Advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations