

CICA: HOW TO ADVANCE AZERBAIJAN'S CHAIRMANSHIP



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Executive Summary

Azerbaijan's chairmanship of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) from 2024 to 2026 marks a pivotal opportunity for the country to shape regional diplomacy and security dialogue across Asia. As the only pan-Asian platform focused on confidence-building and cooperation, CICA is undergoing a moment of reflection and strategic redirection. Azerbaijan's leadership comes at a critical juncture, where shifting geopolitical dynamics, institutional challenges, and the demand for inclusive security mechanisms require renewed vision and diplomatic agility.

The report assesses how Azerbaijan can leverage its chairmanship to strengthen CICA's institutional coherence, expand its relevance amid growing regional competition, and enhance its visibility as a convener of multilateral dialogue. Drawing on expert interviews, document analysis, and comparative assessments of similar multilateral bodies, the study identifies key avenues for action, including advancing connectivity through the Middle Corridor, promoting non-traditional security cooperation, and aligning CICA's agenda with broader peacebuilding frameworks.

The report, moreover, highlights both opportunities and constraints. Azerbaijan's active diplomacy, credibility in multilateral platforms such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and its strategic location make it a suitable leader to push for reforms. However, CICA's limited institutional capacity and uneven member engagement remain major obstacles. Azerbaijan's success will depend on its ability to build consensus, drive targeted initiatives, and strategically integrate CICA within Asia's evolving multilateral ecosystem.

To maximize its chairmanship, the report recommends a clear focus on actionable reforms, enhanced digital platforms for coordination, engagement with observer states and think tanks, and targeted public diplomacy. Through pragmatic leadership, Azerbaijan can help CICA evolve from a dialogue forum into a more structured contributor to Asian security and cooperation.

Introduction

In 2024, Azerbaijan assumed the chairmanship of CICA, positioning itself at the forefront of a critical regional forum tasked with advancing cooperative security and multilateral dialogue across a rapidly transforming continent. This leadership role is both a strategic opportunity and a test of Azerbaijan's growing diplomatic ambitions in Asia and beyond.

CICA, comprising 28 member states that span the breadth of Asia, represents the region's only comprehensive platform explicitly focused on confidence-building and cooperative dialogue. Its importance has grown against the backdrop of rising geopolitical competition, regional fragmentation, and the persistent absence of an inclusive Asian security architecture. In this context, Azerbaijan's chairmanship is not only a symbolic advancement of its multilateral credentials but also a practical chance to shape agendas, build trust among historically divided members, and introduce much-needed institutional reforms.

The timing of Azerbaijan's leadership is significant. Asia is undergoing structural shifts marked by economic rebalancing, technological transformation, and intensifying security concerns. In this multipolar environment, there is increased demand for forums that can mediate competing interests and promote functional cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, energy, digital governance, and environmental resilience. Azerbaijan's ability to connect Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the wider Eurasian neighbourhood places it in a unique position to serve as both a geographic and diplomatic bridge among key CICA members.

This report explores the context, opportunities, and institutional challenges shaping Azerbaijan's chairmanship of CICA. It offers a forward-looking assessment of how Azerbaijan can influence the organization's development while advancing its own foreign policy goals in a crowded multilateral landscape. Since the report combines evidence-based analysis, stakeholder insights, and strategic recommendations, it seeks to contribute to policy debates on the future of CICA and the broader role of small and mid-sized states in Asian regional governance.

Methodology

The recommendations and findings of the report are founded upon a qualitative methodology in the way of combining desk research with semi-structured interviews. A targeted literature review of multilateralism, regional cooperation, and institutional reform constituted the analytical framework for identifying Azerbaijan's strategic possibilities under CICA. To

supplement this, five key stakeholder interviews were incorporated, comprising diplomats, regional policy advisors, and international organization representatives, who articulated a diverse range of perspectives on Azerbaijan's chairmanship potential. These included experts from the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) at ADA University, the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR) and independent political analysts affiliated with local media and Eurasian policy platforms.

Additionally, Ambassador Doulnat Kuanyshev, an expert in the Military-Political Dimension of CICA and supervisor of the CICA Think Tank Forum, contributed through written responses to four of the interview questions, enriching the assessment with institutional and security-focused context.

The collective insights provided a grounded, multidimensional understanding of both the strategic value and anticipated challenges of Azerbaijan's leadership within CICA, reflecting perspectives shaped by academic research, media discourse, and government advisory roles.

The interview guide was structured around five core thematic areas aligned with the analytical framework of the report: the development of regional connectivity initiatives, particularly those linked to Azerbaijan's strategic positioning in Asia and the Middle Corridor; institutional reform within CICA, including the organization's structural transformation and governance challenges; public diplomacy and visibility, focusing on Azerbaijan's multilateral identity and leadership image; security dialogue through CBMs in emerging domains such as environmental and cyber security; and engagement with observer states and external partners, explored through comparative insights from other multilateral platforms. These themes directly correspond to the report's key chapters on institutional dynamics, strategic priorities, CBMs, and policy recommendations, providing coherence between field research and narrative analysis.

The theme areas were narrowed down by the interviewees as the key pillars of CICA's significance and potential. The hybrid-mode interviews were coded through thematic methods of analysis and transcribed. Even though the sample size is small, the interviewees were selected due to their direct experience with or acquaintance of multilateral diplomacy in Asia and therefore possess highly relevant observations.

This empirical approach helped to integrate significant narratives around the structural challenges facing by CICA and the constructive contribution Azerbaijan can make as Chair. Stakeholder feedback not only shaped strategic analysis but also helped to inform pragmatic policy suggestions. Although further research might enhance generalizability, current methodology is sufficient to document prevailing expert opinion at the time of CICA's creation and Azerbaijan's leadership trajectory.

1. Historical and Institutional Background

CICA emerged in the post–Cold War era as a visionary initiative aimed at strengthening regional peace and security in Asia. Proposed by Kazakhstan in 1992 and shaped through a gradual process of institutionalization, CICA has evolved into the only truly pan-Asian intergovernmental forum with a wide geographical scope and an expanding strategic agenda. From its foundational documents such as the Declaration on Principles (1999) and the Almaty Act (2002) to its operational structures, CICA has matured into a platform that reflects the complex security landscape of the Asian continent.

As CICA's institutional depth has grown, so has its inclusivity. Member states range from Central and South Asia to the Middle East and even parts of North Africa and Europe, making CICA a unique regional organization marked by diversity and ambition. Often compared to the OSCE in both structure and aspiration, CICA shares similarities, but remains rooted in Asia's distinct geopolitical realities. Unlike rigid Euro-Atlantic models, CICA is shaped by post-colonial sensitivities, sovereignty-first approaches, and flexible multilateralism.

Azerbaijan's active participation in CICA since 1999, and particularly its 2024–2026 chairmanship, represents a strategic convergence of its multilateral diplomacy and regional connectivity vision. Drawing on its inter-nation multilateralism, Azerbaijan uses this role to project soft power, enhance trade and digital connectivity, and assert itself as a bridge between Europe and Asia, especially via initiatives like the Middle Corridor. The following chapters provide a closer examination of CICA's evolution, institutional dynamics, and Azerbaijan's expanding leadership within this regional framework.

1.1 CICA: the Evolution

CICA was inaugurated on 5 October 1992 by the then-President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev during the 47th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Hailed as the child of the post-Cold War era, CICA emerged at a time when geopolitical turbulence in Asia was on the rise. CICA was intended to establish an encompassing and widely based regional platform to promote peace, security, and dialogue across the continent.

From its creation, CICA has matured into an organized multilateral framework based on foundational legal documents. The Declaration on the Principles Guiding Relations between the CICA Member States (1999) and the Almaty Act (2002) formalized the organization's goals, institutional setup, and working methodology. Having these foundations established, CICA has continued to increase its membership and functional scope.

Institutional development accelerated following the second Ministerial Meeting in Almaty in 2004, when Thailand joined as the seventeenth member. This expansion accompanied the approval of basic procedural documents such as the Catalogue of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) and Rules of Procedure. Between 2006 and 2011, the organization extended invitations to Jordan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iraq, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Qatar, and Sri Lanka, reflecting a major geographic expansion from Northeast and Southeast Asia to South Asia and the Middle East.

Currently, CICA has 28 member states and operates through a permanent Secretariat, institutionalized decision-making bodies, and a fixed budget. As President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in his speech during the Sixth Meeting of CICA Ministers of Foreign Affairs in 2021 said, the platform “has all the essential features of an international organization” and is a special and functional mechanism for Asian security management (2021).

1.2 CICA: The Only Pan-Asian Security Forum

Intergovernmental institutions (IGOs) are organizations “formed by treaty, between two or more states, to act in good faith, on matters of common interest” whose main purpose is “to create a vehicle for the people of the world to cooperate more effectively together on issues of peace and security, and also on economic and social issues” (Harvard Law School, n.d.). Unlike international organizations (IOs) with universal membership of sovereign states (USIP, n.d.), IGOs are mostly organized by purpose and membership in a particular region. In IGOs, national states, particularly national governments, remain the prime actors and initiators of integration and cooperation processes. Even though CICA may be described as a regional IGO, the organization does not solely restrict the membership to the “Asian” states. Middle eastern countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Kuwait, Israel and UAE, and a North-African country such as Egypt are members as well. Türkiye also, being a country at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East, is a member state. This diversity is not unexpected since in the process of its formation, CICA created no or minimal entrance threshold and took little notice of bilateral relationships between independent member states (Dongxiao, 2019). Therefore, CICA is now “matchless in terms of inclusiveness and representativeness”, and simultaneously “an epitome of Asia’s complicated security environment” (Dongxiao, 2019). Compared to the western half of the world, Asia has lacked in the sense of not having the collective framework for ensuring peace and security within the continent.

With the fall of the USSR, forming a new geopolitics also necessitated an organized framework for commencing cooperation in Asia. It is natural that political, economic,

geographical, and historical diversity of Asian countries makes easy structural cohesion challenging in comparison to Europe and the Americas. Yet, operationalization of grassroots confidence building measures raises interstate cooperation activities. Furthermore, with the western coalition political agendas, there existed common challenges of the Asian nations which were not properly addressed by the existing international organizations.

Therefore, CICA is a platform that acknowledges the fact that peace, security, and stability in the entire world and Asia go hand-in-hand (Aldemir, 2011). As the world becomes more interconnected and interdependent, regional security cannot be assessed independently because the security situation in one region has the capacity to create a spill-over effect in other regions. Hence, ensuring permanent peace and venting the unheard grievances of the states are at the very roots of CICA. These principles are, but not restricted to, the following:

- Making peace, security, and stability in Asia
- Strengthening cooperation through multilateral means
- Facilitating trade and economic cooperation
- Partnership in terms of environmental protection issues
- Cooperation in the context of confidence-building measures in the humanitarian field
- Fighting illicit drug trafficking
- The struggle against terrorism in all of its manifestations and forms
- Encouraging dialogues between civilizations, cultures, and religions
- Collaboration to foster connectivity through transport modes linkages.

1.3 CICA: An "Asian OSCE"?

CICA has drawn inspiration from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the world's largest regional security organization, comprising fifty-seven member states across North America, Europe, and Asia. CICA was, in fact, explicitly designed to initiate an Asian version of the "Helsinki Agenda," adopting the OSCE model as its theoretical foundation (Dongxiao, 2015). The objectives and activities of both organizations align in several key areas, including the political and economic dimensions of security, counter-terrorism, conflict prevention, economic and environmental cooperation, and engagement in the human dimension. These parallels closely reflect the OSCE's well-known "three baskets" structure (Aldemir, 2011). In addition, there are notable similarities between CICA's confidence-building measures and those set out in the Helsinki Final Act (Aldemir, 2011).

However, CICA should not be regarded as a direct Asian analogue of the OSCE. The security challenges confronting the CICA region differ substantially from those faced by OSCE member states. The OSCE (formerly the CSCE) was established during the Cold War, with its member states grouped into three broad categories: the West (NATO), the East (Warsaw Pact), and the Neutral and Non-Aligned Countries (NNAC). These entities operated in a post–Second World War period of relative stability. In contrast, Asia during the same period experienced some of the most violent and prolonged conflicts, necessitating a different structural and institutional approach (Aldemir, 2011). Furthermore, the OSCE itself is currently undergoing a legitimacy crisis, posing important lessons for CICA as it navigates its own institutional development (Leonard and Dijkstra, 2023).

The emergence of regionalism in the post–Cold War world reflects a broader shift in global political and economic power toward the so-called “rest” as opposed to the West. As Barbieri argues, non-Western regionalism often centers on sovereignty concerns, prioritizes the preservation of boundaries, and is characterized by low levels of institutional formality, limited bureaucracies, and non-binding outcomes (Barbieri, 2019). CICA’s mandate to foster both regional and global cooperation is shaped by this Asian geopolitical context, yet it is not confined to it. Rather than isolating themselves from global dynamics, CICA member states are encouraged to engage constructively with the broader international community.

In this regard, CICA functions not only as a platform for cooperation but also as a venue for states to present themselves on the international stage as they wish to be seen.

14. Azerbaijan's Multilateralism

Azerbaijan pursues what can be categorized as an “inter-nation” multilateral foreign policy. Inter-nation multilateralism is based on protecting sovereignty, as opposed to “supranational multilateralism,” which is based on relinquishing of sovereignty in return for additional benefits (as in the case of the EU).

To start with, Azerbaijan’s energy resources (oil and gas) serve not just as a source for economic power but also as a tool for international influence. The country’s dual focus on energy and diplomacy enhances its role in global energy security, particularly for Europe. Azerbaijan strengthens its international legitimacy and secures alliances that provide a buffer against regional uncertainties through engaging in multilateral frameworks,

While doing so, Azerbaijan also maintains a balanced relationship with major global powers such as the United States (US), Russia, and China, reducing dependency on a single power bloc, and maintaining strategic autonomy. Simultaneously, Azerbaijan actively frames its foreign

policy around its national identity and historical narratives. For example, Azerbaijan actively supports decolonial movements and advocates for the rights of marginalized communities. Consequently, the process deepens its ties with the nations that have faced similar challenges and therefore expanding its influence in non-Western political spheres (Asgarov, 2024).

Finally, Azerbaijan utilizes hybrid strategies, blending conventional diplomacy with strategic use of information and cultural diplomacy (Asgarov, 2024). This allows the country to adapt to the complexities of modern inter-state affairs, where the lines between peace and conflict are getting increasingly blurred.

1.5 Azerbaijan's CICA Chairmanship 2024-2026

Azerbaijan joined CICA on June 4, 1999, and was one of the first countries to support the initiative of Kazakhstan to convene the organization. The Azerbaijani side has played a vital role in coordinating confidence building measures focused on the “Development of Secure and Effective Systems of Transportation corridors.” In this context, Azerbaijan hosted an expert meeting in Baku in April 2011, aimed at the increase of collaboration in transportation. This meeting introduced the importance of digital transformation in improving digital efficiency and connectivity. Azerbaijan has been appointed as the coordinator country for the implementation of CBMs in the field of development of secure and effective systems of transportation corridors (CICA, 2022).

Azerbaijan's influence within CICA introduces new possibilities in the context of soft power through cultural, tourism, and trade benefits for Azerbaijan and the rest of the members. Azerbaijan already has forms of partnerships with some of the Member States. Moreover, there is also a significant number of parties that are relatively alien to Azerbaijan, such as Thailand. Thus, Azerbaijan brings in a unique offer to the table, being a cusp state between Europe and Asia, proposing a case of both worlds. The country carries a unique role, especially when it comes to the transcontinental Middle Corridor, offering other member states a more simplified route towards Europe.

2. Institutional and Regional Dynamics

The evolving architecture of the CICA reflects broader transformations within Asia's security and cooperation landscape. Since its inception, CICA has been envisioned as a pan-Asian platform capable of fostering dialogue, building trust, and coordinating collective responses to regional and transnational challenges. However, the institutional structure of

CICA traditionally centered around voluntary cooperation and soft mechanisms has faced increasing pressure to adapt to the changing political and security environment. This has prompted internal reforms aimed at enhancing its procedural capabilities, thematic scope, and long-term strategic relevance.

Simultaneously, the regional context within which CICA operates has become increasingly complex. Rivalries among major powers such as China, India, and Russia; the persistence of unresolved conflicts; the growing threat of terrorism and cyber insecurity; and environmental vulnerabilities continue to challenge collective action. In this landscape, member states must navigate both shared and divergent interests while maintaining the core principles of consensus and non-interference. At the same time, emerging areas of cooperation such as connectivity, digital innovation, and environmental sustainability, offer entry points for strengthening CICA's institutional framework and enhancing its role as a legitimate regional actor.

This section explores both the institutional developments shaping CICA's transformation and the external geopolitical forces influencing its operational environment. It also provides an analytical backdrop for understanding Azerbaijan's chairmanship strategy and the broader implications for regional integration, security, and cooperation across Asia.

2.1 Institutional Development and Transformation of CICA

CICA is currently undergoing a strategic transformation to become a full-fledged regional international organization dedicated to peace, security, integration, and cooperation in Asia. Traditionally utilized as a forum of dialogue for member states where views were shared, CICA is poised to institutionalize its mandate and expand its regional and international outreach (Velizade, 2025). Centrally aligned to the change is strengthening its structural foundation and creating mechanisms to deal with contemporary regional issues via well-planned strategies.

Five priority fields of CBMs are being implemented by CICA: the human dimension, economic dimension, military-political dimension, environmental dimension, and the new challenges and threats dimension (CICA, n.d.-a). Core domains of thematic focus under such CBMs include counterterrorism, energy security, environmental protection, transportation corridor development, and public health. Increasing numbers of emerging and non-traditional threats challenge security, and the importance of CICA grows (Velizade, 2025). Secretary General Ambassador Kairat Sarybay highlighted in his 2022 speech that such CBMs are being pursued on a voluntary and progressive basis with a perspective to building confidence and regional stability (CICA, n.d.-a).

Another important recent move in the direction of institutional development is the creation of the CICA Fund with a view to identifying and financing projects in terms of financial assistance. The Fund functions on the basis of transparency, voluntariness, consensus, and accountability towards member states (CICA, n.d.-b).

The transformation process further gained momentum with the adoption of the Roadmap for CICA Transformation in the Resolution of the 9 September 2023 Ministerial Council Meeting (CICA, 2024). The blueprint establishes goals such as outlining broad zones of future cooperation and bolstering the institutional anchor of member state interaction. The last chairmanship of Kazakhstan placed this process of change at the forefront, and new CBMs such as epidemiological security and pharmaceuticals under the new paradigm of environmental sustainability have been added (Kemelova, 2024).

Representatives of member states discuss themes such as conflict prevention, military-political partnership, and regional integration each year at annual seminars (Bulatkulova, 2022). It is consistent with the organization's long-term vision: building CICA as a trustworthy multilateral forum with a well-developed institutional structure for the purposes of augmenting dialogue, trust, and cooperation (CICA, 2024).

2.2 Regional and Global Challenges Impacting CICA

CICA operates in a geopolitically complex environment shaped by historical contexts and global changes. Member states must weigh both internal vulnerabilities and outside forces, gaining an advantage from regional history while adapting to rapid changes within the international security environment. It is very well-known that terrorism is a leading regional concern, that bring enduring instability to Asia (Fahkeri, 2021). In addition, internal security concerns such as ethnic and religious conflicts, contribute to the difficulty of balancing national and regional security needs.

Energy rivalry is another severe challenge. The essential Caspian Sea oil and gas reserves raised competition between the principal powers. Russia, with traditional ties to post-Soviet CICA members, and China, through dyadic relations, particularly with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, have become the competing powers in regional energy politics.

An expanded strategic rivalry between "heavyweight" CICA members such as China and India makes regional cooperation more complex. At the same time, China's increasing role in both CICA and the SCO signals a more extensive strategy of containing Western influence in Asia. However, the competition between the two 'Asian giants' stems from their greater vision of Asia-Pacific region and retain their historical and civilizational greatness. Since

1959, the rivalry has manifested in territorial and border conflict, rooted in the legacy of British colonialism (Verma, 2024). Interlocking Sino-Indian rivalries, mainly over the Line of Actual Control (LAC), have escalated military confrontations and diplomatic tensions (Krishnan, 2024).

Concurrently, India-Pakistan relations, led by contentious issues in Kashmir, continue to pose a threat to regional stability. The withdrawal of India from the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty following escalated tensions in April 2025 provides a classic example of how bilateral relations can develop and derail broader regional cooperation (Honig, 2025).

Technological advances and globalization are putting added two-edged burdens. While advances in technology support economic growth, they also give rise to new security concerns. Threats to cybersecurity are an example. CICA has given this recognition through its CBM on ICTs security of and in use under the leadership of China and Russia. However, the rapid, evolving nature of digital threats makes it hard to create good, forward-looking security regimes.

Environmental sustainability is the other pressing concern. Thailand, Mongolia, and Iran spearhead CICA's CBMs on the environment. Central Asian water scarcity and climate risks exacerbate conditions and add to regional vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, environmental cooperation remains one of the core pillars of CICA's long-term agenda for regional stability and sustainable development.

Briefly, CICA's ongoing institutional transformation reflects the challenges and possibilities of a new regional setting. Through establishing dialogue, facilitating cooperation, and forging effective CBMs, CICA seeks to enhance its capacity to contribute to collective security, regional integration, and sustainable peace in Asia.

2.3 Azerbaijan's Engagement with CICA Member States

Azerbaijan is an important participant in the CICA due to its unique geopolitical positioning at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Its significant energy reserves and active participation in regional infrastructure projects have made Baku a central player in the advocacy for regional connectivity and cooperation. Specifically, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), established by China, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, reduced the transit between Asia and Europe from 60 to 14 days by land (Fakheri, 2021). This corridor enhances Azerbaijan's position in CICA and once again confirms its strategic importance for major regional players such as China and India, and reinforces economic ties with Central Asian nations.

Aside from its commercial role, Azerbaijan also serves as a key driver of peace and stability in the region. Because of its geographical proximity to areas of instability in Central Asia, Baku recognizes the imperative of maintaining security along transport lines and deterring any chance of conflict. In line with this, Azerbaijan is likely to work together with key actors, such as China, to ensure the functionality of critical infrastructure and trade routes.

Azerbaijan creates the potential for the economic and territorial integration of otherwise isolated and landlocked Central Asian countries via serving as the bridge between Europe, Central Asia, and the broader Asian continent. With the TITR and related initiatives, Azerbaijan promotes regional collaboration and connectivity, enhancing the foundations of mutual trust and economic collaboration among CICA member states. Its leadership in this sector points to its dual role as an economic engine and a force for stability in the region.

3. Azerbaijan's Role and Strategy

As Chair of CICA for the 2024–2026 term, Azerbaijan has emerged as a pivotal actor in advancing regional cooperation, connectivity, and institutional reform across Asia. Building on its strategic geography, post-conflict reconstruction expertise, and growing diplomatic profile, Azerbaijan has leveraged its chairmanship to promote a pragmatic and inclusive agenda. Its efforts prioritize the implementation of CBMs across energy, transport, digital infrastructure, and intercultural dialogue, while also seeking to engage Southeast and Central Asian partners in forward-looking initiatives.

Drawing on its multilateral experience in platforms like NAM and COP29, Baku aims to position itself as a neutral convener capable of fostering consensus among a diverse group of member states. This section explores Azerbaijan's evolving role in shaping CICA's priorities, institutional direction, and long-term vision for a more integrated and resilient Asia.

3.1. Azerbaijan's Strategic Position in Asia and CICA

Since the recovery of its territorial integrity from years of Armenian occupation, Azerbaijan has been keen on enhancing relations with regional players as well as key international actors. In response to shifting realities in the international order, Baku has sought the strengthening of cooperation with Central Asian and Far Eastern countries as part of a broader move to diversify its external policy. Shared linguistic, cultural, religious,

and ethnic bonds with Central Asia form the foundation of enhanced cooperation. This commitment is supplemented by a series of strategic declarations and treaties with Kazakhstan (August 24, 2022), Kyrgyzstan (April 20, 2022), Turkmenistan (August 8, 2017), Tajikistan (May 23, 2024), and Uzbekistan (August 23, 2024) (Valiyev, 2024).

Azerbaijan's geographical position also contributes to regional energy integration. Since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, Central Asian nations have begun re-channeling their energy exports to Europe via Azerbaijan. Additionally, on November 13, 2024, Azerbaijan signed a historic deal with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to integrate their energy systems into the “Caspian Green Energy Corridor” project, still further entrenching regional energy sustainability (AERA, 2025).

Besides energy, Azerbaijan is also building regional digital connectivity. Strategically located along the ancient Silk Road, Baku has led the “Digital Silkway” initiative, a project aimed at the construction of a transcontinental digital telecommunication corridor between Asia and Europe. As per Ayaz Museyibov, the project is a digitized, next-generation version of the Middle Corridor (Museyibov, 2024).

As chair of CICA in 2024–2026, Azerbaijan is well positioned to establish the agenda of the organization. It aims to contribute substantially to CICA's core objectives, in particular in the implementation of confidence-building measures in the areas of energy security, transport infrastructure, and digital transformation. Building on its expertise in post-conflict peacebuilding following the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan also hopes to push regional efforts toward preventing conflict escalation and attaining enduring peace.

CICA's aspirations to augment security and cooperation in Asia align with Azerbaijan's foreign policy interests. Baku takes leadership at a time when transnational dangers, ranging from terrorism and cybersecurity threats to energy insecurity, require regional answers. As Roza Bayramli points out, Azerbaijan's handling of strategic energy and transport corridors places it at the center of these initiatives (Bayramli, 2025).

Azerbaijan also anticipates developing CICA's agenda in new fields of cooperation in addition to the classical ones. Particularly, it favors initiatives for intercultural dialogue, protection of cultural heritage, educational and scientific innovation, and civil society cooperation between member states. These actions aim to build social resilience and strengthen people-to-people connections.

Azerbaijan's top priority is the development of efficient transcontinental transport corridors. Being in proximity to most landlocked nations in the CICA region, Azerbaijan's infrastructure serves as a bridge, facilitating trade flows, regional integration, and economic

interdependence. According to Ambassador Kairat Sarybay, it aptly observes, “a better-connected Asia is a better-connected globe” (Sarybay, 2025-a).

Second, Baku’s geographical and diplomatic location is a key source of regional long-term peace and stability. Through infrastructural coordination that brings economies together, Azerbaijan employs economic interdependence as a tool of peace. Economies with similar transport arteries of interest are less prone to conflict, since they understand that conflict would defeat shared economic gains. In this regard, Azerbaijan also stands as a diplomatic mediator with capacity for de-escalating interstate tensions within the CICA platform (Valizade, 2025).

3.2 Priorities and Achievements of Azerbaijan's Chairmanship (2024-2026)

Improving ties with the countries of Central Asia is a priority of the foreign policy of Azerbaijan (Shafiyev, 2024), and Azerbaijan’s Chairmanship (2024-2026) of CICA with an important opportunity to practice the needed cooperation. Dr. Farid Shafiyev describes its importance as follows: “The two regions have many commonalities, such as linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious bonds. They also have similar views on most foreign policy issues” (Shafiyev, 2024).

Close cooperation and better relations with the countries of Asia can be given to Azerbaijan by security and connectivity and are amongst the main goals that will be achieved during the chairmanship. “We’ve been engaged in this war with Armenia for thirty years. Now we need to build our exterior force, in order to make a stronger connectivity with the Asian states, with China, with the Central Asian region” (Bayramli, 2025).

Being a member of CICA has given Azerbaijan an excellent stage to showcase its international diplomacy and receive wide regional recognition. ADA University Professor Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic highlights the following regarding this point:

“Azerbaijan has the ability to really project its foreign policy priorities and explain to an audience that is not used to hearing a serious, sophisticated presentation of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy. A lot of countries don’t really know Azerbaijan. Even CICA countries, even DA countries, they know President Aliyev, they know Minister Bayramov, and that’s it. Maybe they know a couple of presidential advisors but the practical effects of Azerbaijan being active in an increasing number of multilateral organizations or formats that are non-traditional for Azerbaijan’s priorities, that is actually almost as important. For Azerbaijan to be present, it is natural”.

Chairmanship of CICA offers a greater chance for Azerbaijan to present its diplomatic skills. As an instance, Azerbaijan's familiarity with NAM and COP29 can bring new policy directions and innovation to the organization so that even after its chairmanship, CICA can continue defending its interests (Mammadov, 2025).

Azerbaijan has extended encounters with IOs; its experiences with NAM and COP29 can be implemented in the chairmanship of CICA. Alongside setting a base for CICA's institutionalization, Azerbaijan's experience can contribute to the advancement of Pan-Asian discussions and policies, which will add to the strengthening of Azerbaijan's reputation and relationships both in the region and on the continent (Mammadov, 2025).

Azerbaijan is expected to take initiatives that prioritize shared challenges and offer mutual benefits, such as counterterrorism connectivity and sustainable development (Guliyev, 2025):

“There is a high potential for consensus as this aligns with the interest of a broad range of members, and additionally, intensive diplomatic engagement, bilateral consultations, and open dialogue with all member states will be crucial to Azerbaijan.”

As CICA Chair, Azerbaijan will need to exercise active listening and responsive diplomacy to listen to the concerns of the member states. In close consultation with strategic partners, Baku will craft its proposals for consensus-building and building strategic partnerships (Guliyev, 2025). This participatory approach rooted in earnest consultation will help Azerbaijan secure broad-based support for its initiative and boost its credibility as a convening power.

Azerbaijan's chairmanship agenda will focus on creating and maintaining platforms for dialogue strong enough to diffuse tensions among rival member states. Despite ongoing controversy, there are still opportunities for cooperation if placed through objective, topic-specific forums (Velizade, 2025). With the awareness that classical diplomatic constructs can hold back constructive engagement, Azerbaijan aims to utilize adaptive methods friendly to challenging adversaries to rethink issues and find areas of common interest.

As Roza Bayramli emphasizes, regionalism now offers a more realistic form of governance than globalization, and the example here is the TAPI pipeline project, which brings India and Pakistan together by shared economic interests (Bayramli, 2025). Along these lines, Baku will foster the universal principles of security, on which each member can bring weight and experience tangible benefits (Velizade, 2025).

Farhad Mammadov is in agreement with the CICA vision as an arena for long-term dialogue and peace-building in geographically divided Asia (Mammadov, 2025). He cautions that agreement is always hard to come by, though, when every state pursues its own strategic interests. Azerbaijan's task, then, will be to identify convergence between national and regional interests crafting initiatives that support sovereignty while advancing mutual security, stability, and prosperity.

3.3 CICA's Confidence-Building Measures: Opportunities for Azerbaijan

CICA's institutional development closely parallels the plural identities and strategic interests of its member states. The overarching "Asian awareness" or regional identity is perhaps the central challenge that inhibits the contouring of a continent-wide broad-based security mechanism (Dongxiao, 2015). The regional identities of some members, such as South Korea's identification with the Western bloc or Israel's Middle Eastern identity, are contradicting the notion of a single Asian orientation.

Azerbaijan itself, frequently labelled as "Eurasian," "Post-Soviet," or a "Silkway Country," is rarely framed as "Asian" in international discussion. As Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic noted, Azerbaijan's destiny is not in the West but in diversifying diplomatic activity and CICA as a platform without anti-Western polemics (Miskovic, 2025). While BRICS does not stand as a counterpoint to the West but rather an alternative and does so based on narrowly geopolitical assumptions, CICA stands on dialogue-oriented aims as a non-Western alternative.

Then, Azerbaijan's chairmanship provides the opportunity for increasing contacts beyond Central Asia, and in particular with Southeast Asian states such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Vietnam. This shift towards the East is timed to coincide with Baku's desire to diversify foreign policy courses and find new strategic partnerships.

Regional economic integration within CICA can be spurred by economic cooperation. While the idea of a customs union was also discussed by the Azerbaijani delegation, the operational reality is plagued with significant hurdles, including varying economic systems and duplicative membership in other regional blocs like ASEAN and the EAEU (Kuanyshev, 2025). Despite these difficulties, Azerbaijan's geostrategic position remains very desirable for logistical integration and may be used as a transit bridge in any future economic arrangement headed by China or other large economies.

Against the backdrop of heterogeneity in CICA membership, Azerbaijan should not to polarize initiatives, especially those that are entangled in geopolitical rivalries such as the India-Pakistan or Israel-Palestine conflict. In contrast, as a non-aligned actor, Azerbaijan should prioritize consensus-building and avoid tabling proposals that are guaranteed to widen internal divisions. Historically, CICA ministerial conferences have leaned toward general principles rather than contentious high-stakes policy matters, a pattern that Azerbaijan can strategically follow. Azerbaijan increases its ability to shape pragmatic, consensus-oriented ideas through focusing on "low-politics" areas like counterterrorism, connectivity, and the security dimensions of climate change.

Azerbaijan's presidential focus—centered on themes such as 'Stronger CICA, Connectivity, Digitalization, and Sustainable Growth in Asia'—represents a realistic outreach formula. Priorities such as making SMEs, women business owners, and greener economic development strengthen the message that Baku is interested in themes that inspire large-scale cooperation without geopolitical tension (Bayramov, 2024). Bringing people-to-people engagement, tourism, and youth participation together further positions Azerbaijan as a bridge-builder across the region.

One of the strategic priorities is Azerbaijan's effort to develop humanitarian demining under the CICA framework. The issue affects a number of member states and is naturally linked with Azerbaijan's national security interests following recent conflicts. As a non-politicized and life-saving endeavour, humanitarian demining allows Azerbaijan to emphasize its commitment to peace, reconstruction, and stability in the region (Bayramov, 2024). Azerbaijan can enhance its position as a pragmatic, positive CICA leader that is capable of addressing shared challenges while working in the complex geopolitical setting of the region, through promoting such realistic and widely recognized priorities.

4. Broader Perspectives and Recommendations

This section reflects on Azerbaijan's multilateral experience and its broader strategic vision, offering insights into how these lessons can strengthen its leadership within CICA. By drawing comparisons with other international platforms—such as the OTS, the NAM, and COP29—Azerbaijan's capacity for institutional leadership, agenda-setting, and diplomatic innovation is critically assessed.

Building on these experiences, the section outlines actionable proposals to enhance Azerbaijan's chairmanship, including soft power projection, diplomatic training programs, youth engagement strategies, and steps toward deeper institutional development. Together, these recommendations aim to reinforce CICA's transformation into a more coherent and impactful regional mechanism—while positioning Azerbaijan as a credible, constructive, and forward-looking convener in Asian multilateralism.

4.1 Comparative Analysis: Lessons from Other Multilateral Frameworks

Azerbaijan's experience in various international organizations reflects its active engagement in advancing diverse global causes. Through hosting high-level events, initiating regional projects, and participating in major multilateral platforms, Azerbaijan has demonstrated its

commitment to promoting connectivity, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development.

This section examines Azerbaijan's successful contributions to major international organizations and events. The analysis aims to extract key takeaways from each experience and suggest ways these lessons can support the institutionalization of the CICA and help strengthen regional cooperation across the Asian continent.

4.1.1 Organization of Turkic States (OTS)

Azerbaijan's robust involvement in the OTS and its dedication to deeper integration among Turkic nations is particularly noteworthy. Since the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009, Azerbaijan has played a pivotal role in transforming the OTS from an informal consultation platform into a fully institutionalized organization (Shafiyev, 2023).

Following the Second Karabakh War and the Shusha Declaration with Türkiye, Azerbaijan has significantly contributed to strengthening economic, political, and military ties within the OTS. These developments reinforced the organization's role in managing regional and collective security challenges, and emphasized the importance of solidarity in addressing emerging threats (Shafiyev, 2023).

Beyond security, Azerbaijan has also led cultural initiatives to promote shared heritage, such as UNESCO nominations and its bid for World EXPO 2025, both supported by the OTS (Museyibzada, 2024). Economically, Azerbaijan has worked to enhance regional connectivity through investments in transport infrastructure and by supporting the OTS Development Fund, established on August 23, 2012 (Guliyev, 2025). These actions highlight Azerbaijan's ambition to become a central node in international transit corridors.

4.1.2 Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)

Since assuming the chairmanship of the NAM at the 18th Summit in 2019, Azerbaijan has significantly contributed to the revitalization and institutional consolidation of the organization. One of the landmark initiatives under its leadership was the establishment of the NAM Parliamentary Network in 2021, providing a platform for inter-parliamentary cooperation among member states and reinforcing the movement's foundational principles.

Azerbaijan has also prioritized youth and gender inclusion within NAM. The creation of the NAM Youth Organization (NAMYO) in 2022 enabled meaningful engagement of young people in addressing pressing global issues. NAMYO has since led more than 50 initiatives, including high-level events, cultural exchanges, and NAM Model Simulations (NAM Youth, n.d.).

Recognizing the adverse legacies of colonialism on women's rights, Azerbaijan has proposed establishing a dedicated NAM Women's Platform. This initiative would further elevate women's participation across social, economic, and political spheres and reflect Azerbaijan's broader commitment to gender equality.

4.1.3 Conference of the Parties 29 (COP 29)

Environmental protection and sustainable development have become core pillars of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. As the host of COP 29 in November 2024, Azerbaijan facilitated critical global negotiations and proposed several forward-looking initiatives.

The conference concluded with a historic agreement to mobilize \$300 billion in climate financing by 2035—a major boost to global climate action, particularly for the Global South (Mammadov, 2024). The financing aims to support renewable energy projects and strengthen resilience to climate impacts.

Azerbaijan also introduced two signature initiatives at COP 29: the COP29 Peace and Climate Initiative and the COP29 Truce Appeal. The Peace and Climate Initiative seek to establish support hubs for countries lacking resources for peacebuilding and climate adaptation (Hajiyev, 2024). The Truce Appeal advocates for a temporary halt to military operations during the conference, allowing for focused and peaceful climate negotiations (COP29, 2024). These initiatives underscore Azerbaijan's holistic view of climate security that integrates environmental, peacebuilding, and humanitarian concerns.

4.2. Recommendations for Advancing Azerbaijan's Chairmanship

4.2.1 CICA as a Platform for Projecting Azerbaijan's National Identity

“No more than this can be said: half of power politics is now image making. Moreover, as publics increasingly participate in foreign affairs, image making has continued to grow steadily” (Museyibzada, 2024). Member states' action within IOs can reinforce or undermine the organization's image. For rising middle powers, IOs represent significant platforms of discussion, issue-definition, and identity shaping through multilateralism and coalition-building. With their comparatively limited structural capacity, RMPs will tend towards policy areas of tangible rewards, particularly in environments where traditional sources of power are waning. In such situations, diplomatic finesse and discursive prudence take on more prominence (Museyibzada, 2024).

Azerbaijan's membership in various IOs and IGOs illustrates the trend. Its foreign policy

actively contributes towards projecting a good image for the country globally by means of inter-civilizational dialogue, raising awareness, and averting negative stereotypes through real and active diplomacy. In this regard, Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship is a chance to promote further itself as a non-aligned actor believing in multilateralism and intra-regional confidence-building.

4.2.2 CICA as a Platform for Training Aspiring Diplomats

One of the advantages of CICA staying in a development phase is that it serves as a valuable training ground for novice diplomats to learn. With its comparatively low global profile, CICA provides Azerbaijani diplomats with a risk-free platform where they can get seasoned and gain regional experience (Krnjevic Miskovic, 2025). Azerbaijani diplomatic training in the past has focused on sending personnel to Western institutions, but this latest trend is now evolving. As part of youth participation policy, Azerbaijan is able to organize placement for diplomacy, political science, and international relations students at the CICA Secretariat in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Therefore, the students would be able to observe ministerial sessions, shadow top officials, and engage firsthand with top diplomats from across Asia. Such real-life exposure would not only be helpful in creating experiential diplomatic skills but also make students aware of internship, traineeship, and career opportunities at CICA and other regional organizations, for instance, ASEAN or policy think tanks such as SIIR.

The program could leverage the model experience of ADA University's 2022–2023 Foreign Policy Program, which was conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan (MFA). The program focused on enhancing theoretical and practical experience, more suitably equipping young diplomats for bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and preparing them for the complexities of the global arena (MFA, 2023). The program consisted of intensive courses instructed by a multidisciplinary team of over 30 trainers composed of scholars, government officials, and representatives of international organizations. More than 2,000 young and senior diplomats and civil servants from 30 institutions were the beneficiaries of the program (MFA, 2023).

Building upon such success, ADA can initiate a new series of programs that are specifically targeted towards Asia-centric multilateral diplomacy, with special emphasis on CICA and its evolving function. Along with diplomatic schools or universities in Almaty and other CICA member states, Azerbaijan can utilize its chairmanship to host an exchange program for young diplomats. A "Foreign Policy Series – Asia" or "Foreign Policy Series CICA" program would establish lasting institutional ties and create the platform for the establishment of permanent

representative offices in willing member states. Such steps would assist in establishing CICA's institutional base, as well as in encouraging a future generation of regionally focused diplomats.

4.2.3 National CICA Youth Platform: YCICA

The CICA Youth Council serves as an advisory body responsible for coordinating the activities of youth organizations, associations, and movements across CICA Member States (CICA, 2014). The representative of the current CICA Chair performs the duties of the Chairperson of the Youth Council, while the Coordinators and Co-coordinators of the Human Dimension (currently Uzbekistan, China, India, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) act as its Co-Chairpersons.

Youth engagement is a key priority of Azerbaijan's CICA Chairmanship. Under the framework of the CICA Youth Council, Azerbaijan has already initiated five events, two of which are the International Essay Contest for CICA Youth and the CICA Youth Brainstorming Competition. They were successfully held in March and April 2025. The remaining three, namely, the Side Event on "SDGs in Action," the 8th CICA Youth Council Meeting, and the Rally of Volunteer Movement Leaders of CICA Countries are scheduled for the fourth quarter of 2025.

This focus on youth aligns with Azerbaijan's broader strategy of promoting education and academic cooperation across Asia. One proposed mechanism to advance this agenda is the establishment of a Partner Network of Leading Universities (PLNU), coordinated by ADA University in Baku. Through this network, Azerbaijan seeks to strengthen academic collaboration and promote scientific advancement among CICA member states. Special attention should be paid to ensuring outreach beyond ADA University to other academic institutions nationwide.

To further promote CICA's visibility among Azerbaijani youth, particularly students of political and cultural studies, Azerbaijan could establish a national CICA Youth Platform. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs could support the platform's creation and budget management, with the national think tank—Center of Analysis of International Relations—playing a key role in its leadership.

Building on the success of Model United Nations (MUN) initiatives, Azerbaijan could launch a "Model CICA" program. These simulations would mirror CICA's structure and decision-making processes, providing students both at university and high school levels with experiential learning opportunities in multilateral diplomacy and confidence-building.

Participants would engage in debates, draft mock declarations, and explore regional cooperation through simulated negotiations.

Such formats have gained considerable popularity among Azerbaijani youth over the past five years (BSU, 2024; ICYF-ERC, 2024; IOM, 2023). The Azerbaijani Student Youth Organizations Union has led multiple MUN-style conferences, simulating global bodies such as the UN, ICJ, OIC, and NATO, allowing students to develop early familiarity with international institutions. During Azerbaijan's Presidency of the NAM, the creation of the NAMYO offered youth firsthand exposure to the vision, mission, and operations of a key multilateral platform.

A similar structure could be adapted for CICA through the launch of the Youth Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (YCICA). In collaboration with student and university simulation clubs, YCICA would organize recurring conferences, training a cohort of youth familiar with the CICA format. Early support from experienced organizers of existing simulation events would be crucial in shaping the first rounds of YCICA conferences. Once a skilled base is established, these events can be expanded further across institutions and borders.

Regularly organizing YCICA events would cultivate a growing pool of young individuals deeply familiar with CICA's values and structure—many of whom could later contribute to CICA's activities as professionals. Recruitment from high-performing simulation participants could reduce training time for junior staff positions, particularly at the new CICA headquarters to be established in Baku, further enhancing Azerbaijan's institutional leadership role.

Additionally, YCICA could amplify youth outreach through a dedicated social media presence, drawing on existing networks from youth diplomacy forums. One particularly impactful initiative would be to organize YCICA simulation events in Azerbaijan's liberated territories. Hosting conferences in Shusha, Azerbaijan's cultural capital, or at Karabakh University in Khankendi would enhance international visibility for the region and contribute to its cultural and academic revitalization.

In line with the international nature of MUN-style forums such as the International MUN (IMUN), the YCICA model could evolve into International YCICA (IYCICA). This globalized format would further increase the visibility of Azerbaijan's chairmanship, strengthen CICA's youth dimension, and foster long-term interest in regional cooperation. Engaging foreign students in simulations hosted in Shusha, Khankendi, or other symbolic locations would serve not only to internationalize the CICA platform but also to project Azerbaijan's soft power and regional leadership.

4.2.4 Promoting CICA's Institutional Development

Short of institutionalization, CICA may be given empty words rather than an operative tool for concerted regional security (Marlene & Sébastien, 2012). As outlined earlier, institutionalization has been a key aspect targeted by CICA with its successive chairing states having taken tangible steps to come closer to this objective. During his 2025 visit to Azerbaijan, CICA Secretary-General Kairat Sarybay emphasized the point that “CICA member states view transformation as an evolutionary process and do not set artificial timeframes for its completion”. He further emphasized that “the main challenge of Azerbaijan’s presidency will be successful completion of the process of transformation negotiations with the endorsement of the CICA Charter at the next CICA Summit in 2026” (Sarybay, 2025-b).

Azerbaijan’s chairmanship has the ability to bring a turning point in this transformation by capitalizing on its previous experience of leading other multilateral mechanisms. These priority steps, such as the periodic gathering of the Special Working Group, confidence-building measures attuned to niche requirements, and establishment of inclusive youth and women’s platforms can provide replicable models of institutions. Through these efforts, CICA can become more coherent, credible, and well-positioned to influence regional security architecture more strategically.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan’s Chairmanship of CICA in 2024-2026 is a significant moment of strategic significance for advancing regional security, connectivity, and multilateral cooperation in Asia. CICA’s reputation as a pan-Asian, non-Western multilateral organization positions it specifically as an increasingly important vehicle for advancing the solutions to the advanced geopolitical, economic, and social challenges confronting the organization’s 28 member states. Azerbaijan gained multilateral diplomatic experience, and commitment to non-aligned foreign policy by drawing on geographical centrality. The gained experience is particularly well-equipped to lead the platform towards greater institutional bolstering and greater global applicability.

Azerbaijan’s Chairmanship of CICA at a time when the forum is being progressively formalized as an international organization from being essentially a consultative dialogue mechanism is emphasized by this work. This growth reflects a broader trend in the international system, in which aging western-oriented security frameworks have proved insufficient to capture and respond to the specific concerns of Eurasian states. From its recent successful experience as Chairman of the NAM and current role as host to COP29, Azerbaijan is

poised to spearhead CICA's institutional progress with the implementation of administrative coordination, improvement in operational capacity, and greater international exposure.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's geostrategy aimed at increasing regional connectivity, especially in the Middle Corridor and the Caspian Green Energy Corridor, which plays a crucial role in ensuring regional economic interdependence. These initiatives not only promote green development as well as energy diversification but also risk reduction, as regional economic integration between CICA member countries may serve as a strong bulwark against regional geopolitics of tension and confrontation.

A further contribution of Azerbaijan's Chairmanship is the CICA's CBMs operationalization on a wide range of fields from economic cooperation to environmental security, counter-terrorism, digitalization, and post-conflict rehabilitation. Azerbaijan's focus on realistic CBM implementation in zones of high priority such as humanitarian demining, digitalization, and transregional transport corridors responds well both to its home agenda and regional necessity and thereby substantiates the forum's relevance and utility.

Finally, the character of CICA's membership, consisting of states with varying security doctrines, political orientations, and strategic interests, necessitates careful and accommodative diplomatic management. Azerbaijan's capacity to mediate between conflicting views and nurture healthy and consensus-based interaction will be essential to navigating through domestic tensions and external forces, particularly in an environment marked by intensified geopolitical contest and competition for influence and resources.

In order to make the fullest use of the strength and long-term utility of its Chairmanship, Azerbaijan needs to pursue an agenda prioritizing institutional building capacity, inclusive diplomatic engagement, and implementation of concrete, results-oriented projects responding to shared regional priorities. Under this agenda, Azerbaijan can help to put CICA on the trajectory toward becoming a more dynamic and active multilateral instrument for Asian security and cooperation in the twenty-first century.

- 1. Project National Identity:** Azerbaijan should utilize CICA as a platform to project its identity as a non-aligned, multicultural hub bridging Europe and Asia, increasing its global standing through cultural diplomacy and initiatives like CICA youth Council.
- 2. Training Aspiring Diplomats:** Leverage CICA's developmental stage to provide low risk training opportunities for young Azerbaijani diplomats, building capacity for future multilateral engagements.
- 3. Strengthen the CICA Youth Council:** Expand youth engagement through initiatives like the proposed CICA Youth Platform, promoting academic collaboration and civic

participation to promote CICA's visibility and long-term sustainability.

- 4. Advance Institutional Development:** Prioritize the adoption of the CICA Charter by 2026, focusing on less contentious issues like economic connectivity and humanitarian demining to build consensus and strengthen CICA's organizational framework.

In conclusion, Azerbaijan's Chairmanship presents a breakthrough opportunity to consolidate CICA's position as a pillar of Asian security architecture and regional cooperation. Azerbaijan stands well-placed to promote a more integrated, secure, and resilient Asia in the form of capitalizing on its unique geographical position, diplomatic prowess, and unshakable commitment to inclusive multilateralism. These projects are not only going to increase CICA's institutional visibility and global standing but also to contribute further to Azerbaijan's role as a constructive and stable partner in the new world order of international relations.

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ANNEX

Interviews

The interviews conducted for this study focused on experts and scholars affiliated with leading institutions in Azerbaijan, all of whom possess deep insights into regional diplomacy, multilateralism, and Asian security dynamics. Interviewees included representatives from the ADA University, the AIR Center of AIR, and local media. These individuals were selected for their direct engagement with Azerbaijan's foreign policy and their analytical expertise on multilateral forums like CICA. The questions focused on Azerbaijan's positioning within CICA, its foreign policy strategy, regional consensus-building, and the potential for institutional reform. Their contributions reflect a range of academic and policy-oriented perspectives, offering nuanced assessments of Azerbaijan's role, challenges, and opportunities during its 2024–2026 chairmanship of the CICA in Asia.

Interviewees:

1. **Prof. Damjan Krnjević Mišković** – Co-founder of the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (ADA University)
2. **Dr. Roza Bayramli** – Leading Advisor, Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)
3. **Ilgar Valizada** – Political scientist and journalist
4. **Dr. Farhad Mammadov** – Director, Center for Studies of the South Caucasus (CSSC)
5. **Dr. Vusal Guliyev** – Sinologist and Policy Analyst, AIR Centre

1. What is the added value of Azerbaijan chairing CICA for the 2024–2026 term?

Prof. Damjan Krnjevic Mišković described Azerbaijan as a “strategically neutral facilitator” capable of bridging East–West divides. He noted that Azerbaijan's geopolitical stance enables it to maintain open lines of communication with various regional actors. This unique positioning allows Baku to promote dialogue across ideological and political camps. Further-

more, he concluded that Azerbaijan can act as a mediator for soft balancing within the CICA framework.

Dr. Bayramli emphasized Baku's growing visibility on multilateral platforms and the trust it has earned in regional affairs. She pointed out Azerbaijan's success in managing multilateral chairmanships like NAM as evidence of its leadership capacity. According to her, Azerbaijan's credibility in the Global South adds further weight to its proposals. This contributes to a more inclusive and representative CICA agenda.

Ilgar Valizada highlighted Azerbaijan's balanced diplomacy and proven logistical capabilities in hosting major events. He argued that Azerbaijan has demonstrated a consistent ability to lead without antagonizing regional stakeholders. This diplomatic tact makes it a reliable actor in consensus-building environments. He noted that Azerbaijan's visibility also enhances CICA's global outreach.

Dr. Farhad Mammadov pointed to Azerbaijan's post-conflict diplomacy as a stabilizing asset in CICA's evolving security framework. He stressed that Azerbaijan has firsthand experience managing delicate regional issues, including reconstruction and reconciliation. These experiences give Azerbaijan credibility in promoting peaceful coexistence and confidence-building. He also mentioned that Azerbaijan's neutrality is often seen as pragmatic rather than ideological.

Dr. Vusal Guliyev argued that Azerbaijan's geographic location at the intersection of key transit routes gives it both symbolic and strategic value. He emphasized Baku's capacity to engage across Central, South, and West Asia. Azerbaijan's outreach to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the OIC, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) also supports its role as a connector. This inclusiveness aligns with CICA's mission to reflect Asia's diversity.

Summary: Azerbaijan offers pragmatic neutrality, regional credibility, logistical strength, and multilateral leadership to advance CICA's goals.

2. How does Azerbaijan's multilateral experience (e.g., NAM, COP29) influence its CICA leadership?

Prof. Mišković noted that Azerbaijan's presidency of the NAM sharpened its capacity to manage highly diverse memberships. He remarked that managing such heterogeneity re-

quired coalition-building, flexibility, and persuasive diplomacy. These are directly transferable to a consensus-based forum like CICA. He also said that Azerbaijan's ability to depoliticize sensitive issues adds institutional value.

Dr. Bayramli emphasized that Azerbaijan's organizational experience in COP29 demonstrated its preparedness to lead on cross-cutting global issues. She argued that logistical competence and message discipline developed during COP29 will benefit its CICA tenure. She also noted that Azerbaijan's capacity to host complex diplomatic events boosts the credibility of CICA under its chairmanship. These assets translate into stronger agenda-setting.

Ilgar Valizada explained that Azerbaijan's rising visibility on global platforms has strengthened its ability to craft compelling diplomatic narratives. He mentioned Baku's successful branding of itself as a neutral and constructive actor in multilateralism. This reputation enhances Azerbaijan's ability to propose innovative CBMs and thematic priorities. He also stressed that continuity across platforms boosts institutional trust.

Dr. Mammadov observed that Azerbaijan has become adept at aligning its national goals with broader multilateral agendas. He highlighted its consistent promotion of digital diplomacy, energy security, and post-conflict recovery across platforms. This thematic coherence ensures a smooth translation of experience from NAM and COP29 to CICA. It also enhances Baku's internal coordination mechanisms.

Dr. Guliyev added that experience from these platforms has enabled Azerbaijan to foster issue-based coalitions and promote horizontal leadership. He said that such mechanisms are particularly valuable in the Asian context, where hierarchical alliances often falter. CICA, with its emphasis on soft security, stands to benefit from this governance model. Moreover, Azerbaijan can help reinforce inclusivity and innovation.

Summary: Azerbaijan's multilateral background enables it to manage complexity, promote thematic leadership, and bridge national priorities with regional cooperation at CICA.

3. What challenges is Azerbaijan likely to face in achieving consensus among CICA's 28 member states?

Prof. Mišković cautioned that CICA's broad geographic footprint includes states with long-standing geopolitical rivalries. He cited tensions between India and Pakistan or Gulf countries and Iran as structural impediments. These rivalries could stall progress on joint

initiatives or CBMs. Azerbaijan will have to adopt a highly calibrated and neutral approach to overcome these divides.

Dr. Bayramli highlighted that institutional mechanisms within CICA remain weak, making policy enforcement difficult. She added that member states hold divergent threat perceptions, making consensus harder. For example, cyber threats may rank higher for some, while terrorism may dominate for others. This divergence requires highly tailored policy proposals.

Ilgar Valizada pointed to the enduring geopolitical divides, particularly those exacerbated by competition among major powers like China, India, and Russia. He argued that Azerbaijan must walk a fine line not to appear aligned with any one camp. The perception of neutrality will be key to gaining trust. He also flagged the risk of deadlock on key reforms.

Dr. Mammadov emphasized that CICA's informal and voluntary nature means that even small objections can derail collective action. He stated that reaching quorum for even non-binding CBMs requires extensive pre-negotiation. This consumes time and resources, often without guaranteed outcomes. Still, Baku's recent record shows it is prepared for this challenge.

Dr. Guliyev noted that Azerbaijan might face quiet resistance from regional powers wary of losing influence. He emphasized that larger states may resist structural changes that empower smaller actors like Azerbaijan. To navigate this, he advised leveraging multilateral legitimacy rather than bilateral bargaining. He also highlighted the value of starting with less contentious issues.

Summary: Political fragmentation, weak institutional structures, and divergent interests will make consensus-building difficult, requiring tailored diplomacy and strategic neutrality.

4. How can Azerbaijan use its chairmanship to advocate for national priorities, and what are the benefits?

Prof. Mišković argued that Azerbaijan can promote transregional energy and transport corridors under the guise of pan-Asian infrastructure initiatives. These projects align with both national and regional priorities. He noted that digital corridors and port infrastructure could feature prominently in CBM discussions. This dual benefit strengthens CICA's relevance and Azerbaijan's international profile.

Dr. Bayramli underscored the opportunity for Azerbaijan to expand its soft power through culture, education, and tourism. She suggested launching CICA fellowships or youth forums

as tools for long-term influence. These initiatives help shape perceptions of Azerbaijan as a constructive regional actor. They also reinforce Azerbaijan's role in shaping the regional narrative.

Ilgar Valizada stated that CICA's CBMs in trade, transport, and technology offer a natural entry point for Azerbaijan's Middle Corridor agenda. He argued that framing national interests as regional solutions will help avoid pushback. This strategy also builds deeper bilateral ties with under-engaged members like Vietnam or Bangladesh. It additionally opens doors for economic partnerships.

Dr. Mammadov pointed to Azerbaijan's ability to introduce post-conflict and environmental themes grounded in its national experiences. He emphasized the country's efforts in mine clearance, green energy, and reconstruction as areas of value. These themes resonate across Asia, where many states face similar challenges. Successfully embedding these priorities will enhance Azerbaijan's regional leadership.

Dr. Guliyev added that by shaping policy narratives through inclusive messaging, Azerbaijan can ensure its initiatives gain broader support. He proposed thematic framing that benefits multiple stakeholders while advancing national objectives. For example, climate-resilient transport links benefit both Azerbaijan and Central Asia. This strategy ensures policy traction and reputational gains.

Summary: Azerbaijan can project national strengths such as energy corridors, digital infrastructure, and post-conflict expertise into CICA's agenda through soft power, inclusive messaging, and regional framing.

5. How does Azerbaijan plan to navigate geopolitical tensions among CICA states?

Prof. Mišković emphasized Azerbaijan's non-aligned, non-confrontational posture as its greatest diplomatic asset. He argued that Baku's careful foreign policy balancing, maintaining relations with Russia, China, the EU, and Iran, positions it as a credible convener. This enables Azerbaijan to mediate or bypass contentious issues in favor of consensus-based themes. He added that symbolic neutrality increases Baku's convening legitimacy.

Dr. Bayramli recommended focusing Azerbaijan's chairmanship on thematic, low-politics areas such as climate action, public health, and digital innovation. She stated that these subjects are less likely to provoke divisions among CICA states and are still highly impact-

ful. She also proposed using Azerbaijan's coordination of transport corridors as a practical trust-building mechanism. This provides functional cooperation without political baggage.

Ilgar Valizada argued that Azerbaijan's credibility as a neutral facilitator offers de-escalation tools within a fractured multilateral environment. He mentioned Baku's ability to listen and create bridges as a hallmark of its foreign policy. Valizada noted that Azerbaijan's emphasis on practical deliverables rather than ideological alignment makes it an acceptable leader even among rival states. He stressed that conflict-sensitive language will be essential.

Dr. Mammadov highlighted Azerbaijan's practice of issue-specific diplomacy, avoiding zero-sum alignments and focusing instead on shared development goals. He suggested that Baku will likely emphasize connectivity and resilience, framing them as transnational priorities. He also observed that Azerbaijan's chairmanship should avoid pressuring members into unified positions, and instead create opt-in frameworks. This will mitigate potential push-back.

Dr. Guliyev pointed out the importance of sequencing initiatives and calibrating ambition according to the political mood within CICA. He recommended a "low-hanging fruit" strategy that builds momentum with early successes in non-sensitive areas. According to him, Azerbaijan's credibility depends on delivering incremental, but tangible, outcomes. Guliyev also warned against framing CBMs in a way that could be interpreted as taking sides.

Summary: Azerbaijan will rely on a mix of non-aligned diplomacy, thematic neutrality, conflict-sensitive framing, and sequenced cooperation to navigate tensions within the diverse CICA membership.

6. Can CICA transform into a full-fledged international organization under Azerbaijan's Chairmanship?

Prof. Mišković believed procedural reforms such as improving documentation, digitalizing communications, and standardizing meeting formats, are achievable first steps. He cautioned, however, that transforming CICA into a treaty-based organization would require longer-term consensus. Nonetheless, Azerbaijan can lay the groundwork for institutional maturity. He also noted that symbolic upgrades, like formalizing the Secretariat's capacity, are within reach.

Dr. Bayramli proposed expanding the Secretariat's functional scope and creating a rotating "CICA Dialogue Forum" to give the platform more visibility. She added that Azerbaijan

could pilot capacity-building initiatives or thematic subcommittees, enhancing institutional depth without challenging sovereignty. These steps can also help CICA compete with other regional groupings in relevance and utility. Bayramli sees Baku as well-positioned to advance this agenda pragmatically.

Ilgar Valizada emphasized that full institutionalization is a generational process, but argued that Azerbaijan can initiate digital platforms and regional thematic hubs as transitional steps. He proposed investing in data-sharing mechanisms and policy repositories to support CBM implementation. These tools would boost transparency and operational coherence. He underlined that institutional trust must be earned gradually, not imposed.

Dr. Mammadov pointed to Azerbaijan's unique opportunity to lead the adoption of regular review cycles and standardized reporting protocols. He suggested this could begin with annual progress reports on CBM implementation and member engagement. Azerbaijan can also promote internal reforms that reflect best practices from other multilateral institutions. This would strengthen internal discipline and stakeholder confidence.

Dr. Guliyev warned against pushing for full legal institutionalization too early, as some states may perceive this as a threat to their autonomy. Instead, he advocated for gradual structuring through voluntary commitments, technical working groups, and trust-building mechanisms. He suggested that institutional progress must be politically neutral and technically grounded. Guliyev emphasized the value of flexible but consistent evolution.

Summary: While full transformation into a legal international organization is unlikely within one term, Azerbaijan can initiate pragmatic reforms—focusing on procedural, structural, and thematic innovations—to lay the foundation for CICA's long-term institutional development.



CENTER OF ANALYSIS
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