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# Azerbaijan within the C6: A New Stage of Regional Integration and Connectivity between Central Asia and the South Caucasus

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## **Azerbaijan within the C6: A New Stage of Regional Integration and Connectivity between Central Asia and the South Caucasus**

### **Key takeaways:**

- Azerbaijan has established itself as a vital link between Central Asia and Europe, underpinned by significant infrastructure, including the Port of Alat, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and the Middle Corridor.
- Central Asian nations are actively expanding their export routes, with the Middle Corridor gaining increasing significance amidst broader geopolitical and economic developments.
- The European Union and the United States are intensifying their engagement with the region, emphasizing the Middle Corridor and demonstrating interest in new routes, including the Zangezur Corridor, as components of broader connectivity and supply chain strategies.
- Cargo traffic along the Middle Corridor has experienced significant growth, with EU officials anticipating further expansion by 2030 contingent upon ongoing investments in capacity and interoperability.
- Azerbaijan's accession to the C6 framework constitutes a significant political development, facilitating Baku's engagement in regional endeavors and collaboration with external entities in conjunction with Central Asian nations.

Over the past few years, the Eurasian connectivity map has changed significantly. The shocks experienced between 2020-2022, including the pandemic, supply chain disruptions, the war in Ukraine, and sanctions on Russia, have pushed both governments and companies to begin a search for alternative corridors. Transport corridors that were long considered stable proved to be far more vulnerable than expected. As a result, the search for alternative routes has intensified. This change brings new focus to the land and sea links that connect Central Asia with the South Caucasus.

For countries in Central Asia, this shift is more than just a logistical exercise. It is part of a larger effort to diversify access to global markets and lessen reliance on traditional northern and southern routes. In this new landscape, Azerbaijan has transformed from a transit country into a genuine strategic connector. It offers both political reliability and growing logistical capacity.

Azerbaijan's role as a gateway between Central Asia and Europe relies on several key factors. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway has established a continuous rail link from the Caspian Sea to Türkiye and further into European markets. The Baku International Sea Trade Port in Alat has become the most modern maritime hub on

the Caspian, handling a rapidly increasing share of regional cargo. Additionally, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), known as the Middle Corridor, now serves as a vital east-west route that supports the diversification goals of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other regional states.

These developments represent a deeper political alignment. Recently, *Azerbaijan joined the **Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia as a full participant***, marking the first time a non-Central Asian country has been included in this high-level regional forum. This step is more than just symbolic. It shows that Central Asian governments see Azerbaijan as part of their long-term connectivity strategy. They view it as a partner whose stability, diplomatic ties, and logistics network are crucial for accessing global markets.

Overall, these trends lead to a straightforward but significant conclusion: Azerbaijan's role in the evolving Eurasian transport landscape is becoming central.

There is a growing interest in connecting Central Asia with the South Caucasus. It is based on a combination of economic needs, political calculations, and global developments. These forces have come together to make regional cooperation a strategic necessity.

When talking about the economic reasons for this growing connectivity, it should be noted that Central Asian countries are growing their trade and production capacities, and there appears to be a strong need for cheaper and more reliable ways to access global markets. For economies that lack access to the sea, stable transit routes have a direct impact on their ability to compete. Central Asian countries view working with Azerbaijan as a way to reduce their reliance on traditional routes through Russia or Iran and gain safer access to European and global markets.

The trade, logistics, and multimodal transport infrastructure that connects Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus is vital for strengthening economic performance. Central Asian exports had already been passing through Azerbaijan. However, recent geopolitical changes and infrastructure upgrades have considerably enhanced the attractiveness of this transit route.

The current geopolitical situation has made northern transit routes significantly less appealing, prompting both governments and businesses to reconsider how goods move across Eurasia. At the same time, the European Union has greatly increased its involvement in Central Asia, moving from sporadic cooperation to a real strategic partnership. The first-ever EU-Central Asia Summit took place in Samarkand in April 2025. During the meeting, EU leaders promised a large investment package under the Global Gateway framework, committing €12

billion to improve transportation, connectivity, critical raw materials, clean energy, and digital infrastructure across the region<sup>1</sup>.

A significant portion of this investment is directed toward strengthening the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (Middle Corridor). The EU now sees it as a priority route that connects Europe to Central Asia through the South Caucasus and Türkiye. This approach is being pushed further at the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor and Connectivity Investors Forum in Tashkent on November 27, 2025. There, EU Commissioners and representatives from Black Sea, EU, and Central Asian countries discussed regulatory harmonization, infrastructure investment, and digitalization, as well as presenting the EU's new Connectivity Agenda for the wider region<sup>2</sup>.

Marta Kos, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, stated that the Middle Corridor is more than just a transit route — it is “a geopolitical and economic win for everyone along the way”.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, it was mentioned that the Corridor's cargo volumes have already quadrupled since 2022 and could triple by 2030 if the correct investments to increase capacity and remove bottlenecks are made<sup>4</sup>.

With this renewed institutional and financial support, the corridor through the South Caucasus, especially through Azerbaijan, is increasingly viewed as a central component of a more diversified and resilient Eurasian connectivity architecture.

Simultaneously, the renewed emphasis by the United States on Central Asia indicates yet another geopolitical realignment. In November 2025, the C5+1 Summit convened the leaders of the five Central Asian republics in Washington, D.C., marking a significant diplomatic event under the auspices of the U.S. presidency<sup>5</sup>. The Summit highlighted Washington’s increasing focus on the resilience of regional supply chains, improving access to critical minerals, and achieving diversified connectivity<sup>6</sup>.

For Azerbaijan, this evolving dynamic offers a significant strategic opportunity. The United States should adopt a more proactive approach in engaging with Azerbaijan regarding long-term collaboration with Central Asian nations, acknowledging Baku's role as a potential conduit between Central Asia and Western

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<sup>1</sup> Joint press release following the first EU-Central Asia summit, European Council, 04.10.2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/04/04/joint-press-release-following-the-first-eu-central-asia-summit/>

<sup>2</sup> EU advances economic partnerships and connectivity agenda with South Caucasus, EU Neighbors East, 26.11.2025, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eu-advances-economic-partnerships-and-connectivity-agenda-with-south-caucasus/>

<sup>3</sup> Marta Kos: Middle Corridor should become reliable alternative to other routes – EXCLUSIVE, Report.az, 27.11.2025, <https://report.az/en/other-countries/marta-kos-middle-corridor-should-become-reliable-alternative-to-other-routes>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> C5+1 Summit: What’s at Stake for the US and Central Asia, The Diplomat, 31.10.2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/c51-summit-whats-at-stake-for-the-us-and-central-asia/>

<sup>6</sup> U.S.-Central Asia Summit, Council on Foreign Relations, 07.11.2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-central-asia-summit>

supply networks <sup>7</sup> . Given its strategic geographic position and developing infrastructure, Azerbaijan possesses the capacity to serve as a vital link, facilitating the connection of U.S. interests in Central Asia's resources and markets with the logistical networks of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route.

In addition to its increasing focus on the Trans-Caspian route, the United States has also expressed interest in the prospective function and strategic significance of the Zangezur Corridor, considering it as an additional component that could bolster regional connectivity and improve East–West transportation resilience. U.S. policymakers view the corridor as a means to enhance secure and diversified transportation alternatives through the South Caucasus, aligning with broader American strategic interests in Central Asia and the broader Eurasian region<sup>8</sup>. For Azerbaijan, this external interest introduces an additional dimension of geopolitical importance to the project, further emphasizing its influence on the development of the region's transportation infrastructure.

Recently, Azerbaijan has also been strengthening its collaboration with China. What initially spanned the fields of energy and infrastructure has progressively developed into a broader strategic partnership, in which connectivity plays a vital role. Chinese and Azerbaijani officials increasingly characterize their collaboration as a strategic partnership, emphasizing Baku's position as a logistics and energy hub in the South Caucasus and as a vital connector in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Azerbaijan, in turn, provides China with direct access to the Middle Corridor, linking Western China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Turkey<sup>9</sup>.

This trend was further solidified during President Ilham Aliyev's state visit to Beijing in April 2025, when the two nations declared the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership<sup>10</sup>. Beijing is progressively viewing Azerbaijan as both a valued bilateral partner and a strategic node within its wider westward connectivity architecture.

China recently became a member of Middle Corridor Multimodal Ltd., the joint logistics enterprise formed by the railways of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia to enhance the efficiency and competitiveness of transit shipments along the Trans-

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<sup>7</sup> Luke Coffey: US needs to include Azerbaijan in its co-op with Central Asian countries, Report News Agency, 06.11.2025, <https://report.az/en/amp/region/luke-coffey-us-needs-to-include-azerbaijan-in-its-co-op-with-central-asian-countries>

<sup>8</sup> Trump rebrands trade route in Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal, Financial Times, 08.08.2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/fbcfa3b5-3422-412f-8888-cb13111b2099>

<sup>9</sup> Restoration of the Great Silk Road, Prezident.az, <https://president.az/en/pages/view/azerbaijan/silkroad>

<sup>10</sup> China's President Xi says tariffs and trade wars hurt world economic order, Reuters, 23.04.2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-president-xi-says-tariffs-trade-wars-hurt-world-economic-order-2025-04-23/>

Caspian International Transport Route. Furthermore, railway companies from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have entered into new agreements with China Railway Container Transport Corporation to jointly develop the Middle Corridor as a consistent and commercially sustainable route for China–Europe freight. For Azerbaijan, these developments affirm that its alliance with China is progressively grounded in tangible projects that enhance its position as a key connectivity hub.

For the Central Asian nations, China has historically been one of their most significant economic partners, serving both as a primary export market and as a key source of investment and infrastructure financing. The whole region has seen steady growth in transportation, energy, and industrial projects funded by China as part of the BRI framework, including large rail and road projects designed to improve connections between Central Asia, China, and global markets.

Institutionally, the nature of relations has also transitioned into a new phase. The China-Central Asia Summits, beginning with the inaugural session in Xi’an in May 2023, have established a specialized high-level forum for the coordination of policies related to trade, infrastructure, and connectivity<sup>11</sup>. Subsequent meetings and ministerial dialogues have concentrated on enhancing overland transportation, streamlining border procedures, and advancing digital trade, indicating that connectivity has now become a central element of China's regional agenda.

Recent agreements reinforce this trajectory. In 2025, China and the five Central Asian countries agreed to improve connections by updating rail and road systems, making border crossing easier, and adding more direct flights, all aiming to strengthen economic ties and encourage more exchanges between people<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, regional and multilateral development institutions estimate that at least \$9 billion worth of transport projects directly associated with China-Central Asia connectivity are currently at the planning stage or already underway, encompassing new railways such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan line and upgrades to existing corridors<sup>13</sup>.

In this context, the Middle Corridor is progressively regarded as a supplementary route to the conventional northern corridors through Russia. As Central Asian nations diversify their external relationships and China enhances its BRI

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<sup>11</sup> President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech, MFA of People’s Republic of China, 19.05.2023,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq\\_665435/2675\\_665437/3255\\_664392/3257\\_664396/202305/t20230519\\_11080116.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/3255_664392/3257_664396/202305/t20230519_11080116.html)

<sup>12</sup> China, Central Asian countries agree better connectivity by land, flights, Reuters, 18.06.2025,

<https://www.reuters.com/markets/emerging/china-central-asian-countries-agree-better-connectivity-by-land-flights-2025-06-17/>

<sup>13</sup> EDB Estimates Central Asia-China Transport Connectivity Projects at \$9 Billion, The Times of Central Asia, 08.09.2025, <https://timesca.com/edb-estimates-central-asia-china-transport-connectivity-projects-at-9-billion/>

strategy, both parties possess significant incentives to establish multiple, robust connections westward. Here, the C6 format (comprising Central Asian states and Azerbaijan) can serve a vital coordinating function: it offers a platform for these nations to engage with China collectively, synchronize their connectivity objectives, and advance joint initiatives along corridors connecting Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Europe. This renders the trilateral engagement between China, Central Asia, and Azerbaijan a vital element of Eurasia's evolving connectivity framework.

The evolving connectivity landscape throughout Eurasia is experiencing swift changes, with the strengthening collaboration between Central Asia and the South Caucasus positioned at its center. As regional stakeholders pursue resilient, diversified, and politically stable corridors, Azerbaijan has transitioned from merely a transit nation to an indispensable strategic hub -geographically, logistically, and increasingly, in political terms.

Azerbaijan's accession to the Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia (C6) represents a significant milestone in this process. For the first time, a South Caucasus nation has been integrated as a full participant in what was previously an exclusively Central Asian framework. This advancement consolidates Baku's position within the region's institutional framework and creates new opportunities for collaborative engagement with third parties.

With Azerbaijan's inclusion, the C6 format is now better positioned to engage more effectively with partners such as the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, China, and other stakeholders involved in Eurasian transportation and connectivity initiatives. Baku's involvement enhances the group's capacity to coordinate external partnerships, negotiate investment agreements, and present unified positions on key infrastructure initiatives, spanning the Trans-Caspian route to South Caucasus transportation links, including the Zangezur Corridor.

With this new arrangement, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian nations can work together to influence the future of Eurasian connectivity by fostering corridors that are not only economically feasible but also strategically sound and politically balanced. The C6, which now includes Azerbaijan, has the potential to develop into a crucial diplomatic and economic platform. As several different international actors shift their attention to the broader region, this grouping can advance common interests and promote a new, interconnected architecture across the heart of Eurasia.

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