CENTER FOR ANALYSIS
OF INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS AND
MULTICULTURALISM

REPORT

SCO: Azerbaijan Participation and Its Benefit



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Contributors: Farid Bayramov, Aylin Hagverdiyeva, Nubar Jabrayil, Tayyar Jabrayilbayov, Aysu Usubova
ADA University

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Introduction

The international system is changing, which compels countries to adapt accordingly to remain relevant. Power is no longer concentrated primarily in Western countries because more nations and regions are challenging the traditional setup as they seek to become more involved in global politics and trade. Countries have realized the essence of joining regional groupings to protect their interests. When they join regional groups, they can better take care of their security, business, and diplomatic affairs. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has multiple objectives, among them working together to boost trade, education, the energy infrastructure, culture, and protect the environment.[1] Over time, it has grown in influence within the Eurasia region and on the global stage. Azerbaijan is a partner of this organization. Its geographic location and strategy require it to balance relations with multiple actors within the SCO. This report project interrogates whether Azerbaijan should seek to become a full member, remain a dialogue member, and the practical outcomes of the strategic decision that this country takes.

This project interrogates whether Azerbaijan should seek to become a full member or remain a dialogue partner, and the practical outcomes of the strategic decision that this country takes. The paper will be guided by three research question:

1. Should Azerbaijan remain a dialogue partner to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, or should it move towards membership?
2. How could Azerbaijan advance towards membership despite objections?
3. How would Azerbaijan benefit from membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as opposed to dialogue partner status?

The first one is an important question because either status presents responsibilities and advantages. Precisely, if it maintains its dialogue partner status, it will enjoy flexibility when dealing with the bloc and individual member states. Nevertheless, although full membership will increase its influence, it will require it to make stronger commitments. Regarding the second question, the project evaluates how it can move toward full membership. Achieving full member status will require Azerbaijan to secure the consensus of all SCO member states. Accordingly, it must determine how to best navigate this scenario. The last question will assess how both outcomes have practical implications for Azerbaijan because the decision it makes will affect its economy, politics, and the quality of relationships it has with members and within the region. This means that Azerbaijan must objectively evaluate the consequences of whichever strategic decision it takes, which is why this paper will conclude with several recommendations.

The study will use qualitative analysis to answer its inquiries. Qualitative analysis is a suitable approach when interrogating complex political processes because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, meanings, and motivations for decision-making that cannot be accurately captured when numerical data alone is utilized.[2] Interviews with individuals who will be carefully selected based on a predetermined criteria will be included in this paper. The methodology section will include the interviewee information, interview questions and a full explanation of the research process. The study will try to produce valuable insights into this complex issue by synthesizing credible sources, official documents disseminated by the SCO and others, and policy statements from the country and the organisation. In sum, the objective of this project is to evaluate whether the decision by Azerbaijan to become deeply involved in the affairs of the SCO as a full member could help to advance its foreign policy objectives, or whether it stands to gain the most by maintaining its status as a dialogue partner.

1 Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *"Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*", Art.1, June 7, 2002, Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/000M3130.pdf

2 Lim, W. M., "What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines", *Australasian Marketing Journal,* Vol.33, No.2, pp.202-203, July 25, 2024, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619

Methodology

Research design & data collection

The paper invokes qualitative research methodology. The first part of the paper synthesizes multiple perspectives existing on the topic, explaining what SCO is and how it operates within a regional context. Thus, the research begins with an overview of secondary sources. Yet further interviewing is warranted to gather primary data via the transcription and analysis of experts' positions on the research topic.

The rationale behind referring to primary sources first is to sift replication in any potential findings and thus prevent the common fallacy of "reinventing the wheel". It also ensures that the preparation of researchers for interviewing the specialists is adequate. Upcoming interviews are selected as a method for gaining the experts' voice beyond classical academic research. This equips the paper with the insights which might be novel or not available within an academic discourse. Moreover, it enables the authors to juxtapose both academic and hands-on arguments, and therefore, provide an audience with a more holistic view of the topic. Therefore, while a research paper is qualitative in its nature, it tends to incorporate both primary and secondary data to advance its reliability.

We employed a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews rely on a predetermined set of open-ended questions, which gives the interviewees freedom to share deeper analysis. The interview questionnaire was developed based on the paper's research questions and current international environment. The semi-structured approach was preferred over fully structured or unstructured interviews for several reasons.

Unlike structured interviews, which rely on a fixed number of questions asked in the same order to each interviewee, semi-structured interviews allow deeper analysis and follow-up discussions, providing more data for proper analysis and conclusion. The semi-structured type successfully covers essential questions of the paper, allowing the interviewer to dive deeper into unexpected questions, clarify possible ambiguities, and capture details that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Thus, flexibility is the main criterion which makes semi-structured interviews more appealing than fully structured interviews. Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, are not suitable for this research, as they pose a risk of going off topic and touching upon irrelevant issues. The semi-structured approach maintains focus on the research objectives and facilitates systematic analysis by generating data that align with predefined questions while still allowing some degree of spontaneity.

We decided to employ a question bank for our discussions and interviews with the scholars, as we reached out to a broad spectrum of experts with research focus on various aspects of our paper, such as international organisations more broadly, Chinese economy and policies on a regional level and SCO more narrowly. Therefore, we chose discussion themes and questions out of the bank that we prepared and followed up accordingly. Some of the questions included in the bank are as follows:

1. What type of benefits do you think being a dialogue partner of the SCO give to Azerbaijan?
2. Do you think becoming a full member instead would substantially increase benefits for Azerbaijan?
3. How do you think the objectives of the SCO (counterterrorism, economic expansion, etc) compliment Azerbaijani foreign policy?
4. How does Azerbaijan's participation in SCO align or conflict with its cooperation with the United States and its membership in the Board of Peace?
5. What is one suggestion you would give to Azerbaijani policymakers in their quest to advance to member status smoothly?
6. How should we understand China's approach to regional & institutional cooperation: is it mainly economic, geopolitical, or part of a broader global governance strategy?
7. How does China typically engage with middle or smaller states that occupy important transit or geopolitical positions, such as Azerbaijan?
8. In practical terms, what kinds of economic or political benefits can countries gain by align-

ing more closely with China-led regional initiatives?

9. How does China currently view the South Caucasus, and where does Azerbaijan fit within Beijing's broader regional strategy?

10. What risks should smaller states consider when deepening engagement with China's regional initiatives, especially in terms of dependency, leverage, or strategic autonomy?

11. Looking ahead, do you see China seeking a deeper political and strategic role in the South Caucasus, or will its involvement remain mostly economic and connectivity-driven?

The initial question helped us understand the view our interviewees hold on the current position of Azerbaijan in the framework of the SCO. The second question assessed their opinions on if Azerbaijan's transition into membership would be more beneficial, allowing us to gain commentary to include in the analysis of our 1st and 2nd research questions. The third dove into further details about which sections of the SCO charter Azerbaijan could focus on its future transition and allowed us to provide more informed recommendations on these relevant aspects. The answers to the fourth question added a geopolitical dimension to the analysis and assisted us in weighing how Azerbaijan's deeper participation in SCO cooperation would affect its Western-facing foreign initiatives. The 5th question functioned as a follow up to the previous one, helping us gain more insights on the cons of potentially furthering SCO involvement. The final question allowed us to compile a list of recommendations from experts. The 6th question dove deeper into China's institutional and regional policies to support our SCO analysis. The next two questions focused on smaller nations' collaborations with China to apply these insights to the Azerbaijani case, with the 9th question being directly related to Azerbaijan. The last two questions seek to analyse if committing to SCO membership would be beneficial by analysing its future prospects in the region and assessing the potential.

As part of our research, we reached out to a number of scholars and experts whose work relates to the Eurasian region, Chinese regional and economic policies and broader international organisations and policymaking. The list of experts we contacted is as follows:

1. Professor Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic - Director of Policy Research, Analysis and Publications at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD), a think-tank established at ADA University.
2. Dr. Jiahan Cao - Senior Research Fellow at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS).
3. Dr. Jue Wang - Lecturer in Chinese Economy at the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS).
4. Dr. Vusal Guliyev - Sinologist, Policy Analyst on Eurasia and Asia-Pacific, Leading Advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), a think-tank established in Azerbaijan.
5. Dr. Roza Bayramli - Senior Advisor at the AIR Center.
6. Dr. Mark McAdam - Full-time professor at ADA University, lecturing on foreign policy.

Analysis & Limitations

For our analysis, we coded responses from interviews based on major themes related to the research questions, such as political, economic, and security benefits of SCO participation, potential implications of full membership, and the balance between Azerbaijan's cooperation with Western and Eastern partners. Through this process, we were able to compare different expert opinions and analyse areas of agreement, disagreement and emerging trends in experts' analysis. Moreover, interview results were compared with the available secondary resources that were reviewed in the earlier stages of the research. This helped strengthen the reliability of our research by combining both academic literature and practical perspectives of policy experts.

Finally, the data analysed contributed to answering the main research questions of the paper. The themes identified during the analysis were used to assess current benefits of Azerbaijan's status within SCO, potential advantages and challenges of deeper integration into the SCO and formulate practical policy recommendations for Azerbaijani decision

makers. The qualitative analysis of interview data served as a foundation for the study's conclusions and recommendations.

One of the limitations of the study stems from relying on qualitative data, which was derived from a limited number of semi-structured interviews with selected experts. Although these participants possess relevant expertise in international relations and regional geopolitics, the sample size is small. Thus, the analysis may be lopsided and narrow as it will be based on the informed perspective of a few experts rather than a fuller spectrum of views. Moreover, the study depends on secondary sources, such as academic literature, policy reports, and official documents of the SCO. Although these sources are critical for contextualizing the study, their neutrality may be limited by institutional biases or the perspectives of particular states.

Despite the limitations, the study shows the strategic implications that would result from whichever level of involvement with SCO that Azerbaijan chooses. Continuing the dialogue partner status will give it the flexibility to balance relations with the bloc as well as with individual Eastern and Western actors. However, full membership could expand the country's opportunities for economic cooperation, security coordination, and diplomatic influence within Eurasia. Thus, the decision whether to be involved more deeply with the SCO must consider foreign policy priorities, regional partnerships, and long-term geopolitical interests. The findings of the study will clarify the advantages and disadvantages of the developing relationship between Azerbaijan and the SCO and pave the way for future research in this area.

Literature Review

The academic literature on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has mainly examined its institutional evolution, security agenda, geopolitical significance, economic cooperation, and enlargement. Early studies by Bailes et al. describe the SCO as a regional security institution that developed from the Shanghai Five through confidence-building, border management, and cooperation against transnational threats.[3] Aris similarly traces the organisation's origins to concerns over terrorism, separatism, extremism, and instability in Afghanistan, while also questioning whether the SCO represents a regional security mechanism or an emerging counterweight to Western influence.[4,5] Alimov extends this discussion by showing how the SCO has gradually expanded beyond security into political dialogue, economic cooperation, and wider Eurasian governance.[6] These studies establish that the SCO is a flexible intergovernmental organisation rather than a supranational bloc or collective-defence alliance. Its effectiveness depends on consensus, political convergence, and the willingness of members to implement agreements.

The literature on Azerbaijan adds a separate but complementary perspective. Jafarova describes a multi-vector foreign policy built on strategic autonomy and relations with competing power centres.[7] She traces it to Heydar Aliyev, who made balanced diplomacy a core principle of Azerbaijan's international standing at the crossroads of regional powers.[8] President Ilham

3 Bailes, A. J. K.,Dunay, P., Guang, P. and Troitskiy, M., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a regional security institution", *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, May 1, 2007, Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19208.7

4 Aris, S., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: 'Tackling the Three Evils'. A Regional Response to Non-traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc?", *Europe-Asia* Studies, Vol.61, No.3, pp.457-482, 2009, Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27752254.pdf

5 Aris, S., "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Mapping multilateralism in transition", *International Peace Institute,* No.2, 2013, Available at:http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09501

6 Alimov, R., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, August, 2018, pp.114-124., Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.08.001

7 Jafarova, E., "Azerbaijan's multi-vectored foreign policy and the Non-Aligned Movement", *Azerbaijan's Non-Alignment Report*, AIR Center, pp.13-21. 2022, Available at: https://aircenter.az/uploads/rmwDEeH592MO.pdf

8 Jafarova, E., "Azerbaijan's multi-vectored foreign policy and the Non-Aligned Movement", *Azerbaijan's Non-Alignment Report*, AIR Center, pp.13-21. 2022, Available at: https://aircenter.az/uploads/rmwDEeH592MO.pdf

Aliyev restates the policy as an independent course based on non-interference in internal affairs and peaceful coexistence.[9] In practice it lets Baku deepen ties with Western, Turkic and Eurasian actors at the same time without entering exclusive alliances. Guliyev presents the SCO as a platform to widen trade and investment with Asian markets, complementing the Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle Corridor, which Baku promotes as a neutral transit route.[10] Shahbazov describes Azerbaijan's approach at Tianjin as pragmatic, with deeper integration to follow gradually and in line with national interest.[11]

Therefore, existing research has not sufficiently connected these two bodies of literature. Studies of the SCO generally focus on its major powers, Central Asian security, or institutional development, while studies of Azerbaijan focus on multi-vector diplomacy, energy, and transport connectivity.

This study addresses that gap by examining whether full membership would provide Azerbaijan with meaningful additional value in four areas: foreign-policy flexibility, economic connectivity, security cooperation, and diplomatic influence. It does not assume that membership is inherently beneficial or that the SCO functions as a cohesive geopolitical bloc. Instead, it examines what formal membership would change for Azerbaijan compared with its current dialogue-partner status. It looks at how each status affects Azerbaijan's influence over Eurasian decision-making, its role in developing the Middle Corridor, and its strategic flexibility. The study therefore shifts the debate from the general importance of the SCO to the specific policy question of what deeper institutional participation would practically change for Azerbaijan.

SCO: Evolution, Regional Context and Relevance for Azerbaijan

History of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was officially established on 15 June 2001 in Shanghai, China. However, its roots trace back to the mid-1990s with the formation of the Shanghai Five mechanism. This mechanism was created in 1996 by five states: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It emerged in response to the post-Soviet political environment, as newly independent Central Asian republics confronting regional volatility required cooperative security arrangements to manage instability. The aim of the first meeting that took place in 1996 in Shanghai, was to resolve border disputes following the collapse of the Soviet Union and building military confidence along shared borders. In 1997 a new agreement was signed in order to reduce military forces in border regions. During this period, cooperation expanded and included broader regional security concerns, especially terrorism and separatism in Central Asia.

The transformation from the Shanghai Five into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was set in motion when Uzbekistan joined the grouping in June 2001, turning a border-confidence mechanism into a six-state platform. The SCO was officially created when the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was signed in Shanghai on 15 June 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The organization's legal foundation was then consolidated with the signing of the SCO Charter in St. Petersburg on 7 June 2002, which entered into force in 2003 after ratification by all members. The Charter codified core principles such as mutual respect for

9 President.az, "*Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the SCO Plus format meeting in Tianjin, China",* September 1, 2025, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/70040

10 Guliyev, V., "SCO Tianjin Summit 2025: Azerbaijan's Expanding Role in Eurasian Cooperation", *Caspian-Alpine Society*, September 2, 2025, Available at: https://caspian-alpine.org/sco-tianjin-summit-2025-azerbaijans-expanding-role-in-eurasian-cooperation/

11 Shahbazov, F., "Azerbaijan Attempts Pragmatic Diplomacy at SCO Summit", *Jamestown Foundation,* September 16, 2025, Available at: https://jamestown.org/azerbaijan-attempts-pragmatic-diplomacy-at-sco-summit/

sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and equality among member states, while also enshrining consensus-based decision-making.[12] Building on this legal foundation, the SCO's early institutionalization gave concrete shape to the "Shanghai Spirit," a normative framework that emphasizes mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, and the pursuit of common development.[13] This ethos distinguished the SCO from Cold War-style blocs by prioritizing cooperative security and inclusive development over confrontation or alignment against third parties.

One of the main steps was SCO's transition from an informal dialogue platform into a structured regional organization. In 2004, the SCO established its permanent Secretariat in Beijing and created Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent in order to coordinate counterterrorism efforts.[14] The next important phase was SCO's expansion. For more than a decade, the organization was limited only to six members. This changed in 2017 when India and Pakistan were admitted as full members, expanding the organization's geographic scope and population coverage. The expansion continued in 2023 with Iran's accession as a full member, further strengthening the organization's presence across Eurasia. Beyond full membership, SCO introduced additional forms of participation including observer states, dialogue partners and thus expanding its influence in diplomacy and region.[15] Thus, being formed as a narrow mechanism in the 1990s, the SCO has evolved into one of the largest regional organizations in the world. Its historical trajectory reflects a gradual shift from border security and military trust building toward a more comprehensive agenda that includes security cooperation, economic coordination and cultural exchange across Eurasian region.

SCO: Reasons for emergence and transition

The key dialogue around why the SCO emerged as the entity it is today is more of a discussion of why this entity transformed from Shanghai Five into the SCO. The Shanghai Five was a multilateral forum, which means that it did not have a permanent base and its scope was narrow, starting to exist only five years after the dissolution of the USSR. It was meant to fill the border security gap after the fall of the Soviet Union and build military trust between the involved countries, as seen by their signing of the Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions. However, the permanent emergence as SCO marked a transition towards a more formal way of leading intragovernmental discussions and involving more nations ultimately. What started off as a need to stabilise post-Soviet borders in Central Asia now included economic, political and international security dimensions. Other than the initial border security objective discussed above, four major reasons for SCO emergence can be analysed. These are combating the "Three Evils", counterbalancing Western influences, achieving greater economic integration and keeping the "Shanghai Spirit".

According to Stephen Aris, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan around the same as the SCO formed is no coincidence, as one of the main aims of the SCO was to prevent the Three Evils of separatism, extremism and terrorism and stop these ideologies from spreading to their countries from Afghanistan.[16] Although this was not the sole reason for SCO emergence, the security dimension of the SCO can be traced back here. This objective is still continued against newly emerging or pre-ex-

12 Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *"Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*", Art.2, June 7, 2002, Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/000M3130.pdf

13 Bailes, A. J. K.,Dunay, P., Guang, P. and Troitskiy, M., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a regional security institution", *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, p.3,p.7, May 1, 2007, Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19208.7

14 Kumar, S. Y. S., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO): An Emerging Player in South Asia Policy Options for India", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol.17, No.3/4, p.207, 2022, Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/48772510

15 Weitz, R., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism Without Partnership or Passion?", *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College*, p.75, 2008, Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11963.11

16 Aris, S., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: 'Tackling the Three Evils'. A Regional Response to Non-traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc?", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol.61, No.3, pp.472, 2009, Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27752254.pdf

isting terror and extremism threats.[17] The "Three Evils" narrative is directly juxtaposed to the Western concept of the "Axis of Evil" which originally included Iran (notably also an SCO member now), and recently some Western sources point to Russia and China as parts of the *new axis of evil*. This horseshoe rivalry is the basis for another pillar of SCO cooperation: counterbalancing Western dominance.[18] Xi Jinping positioned SCO as opposed to "external meddling" and by trying to prevent the West from getting closely involved in Eurasian affairs, it aims to create a "multilateralism minus the West".[19]

However, as BRICS is expanding from its financial-economic orientation towards counterbalancing the West,[20] SCO has been gaining a new economic dimension, representing more than 20% of the global GDP, it offers more vitality to the global economy and better trade ties for Eurasia.[21] The transition towards economic initiatives fits in with the Chinese's agenda of advancing the Belt and Road initiative which is predominantly a trade initiative, which is why SCO is venturing into "cooperation… in the trade and economy, investment and financial spheres".[22] The Chinese economic dominance however, poses threats to India who is also a part of the SCO, leading to internal tensions along geopolitical lines.[23] The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of the ambitious economic initiatives, is perceived by some sources as infringing on Indian sovereignty and raising new concerns on separatism (e.g. Kashmir)[24].

The last important initial objective of the SCO under Chinese influence which is becoming a more prominent part of its doctrine through the years is the "Shanghai Spirit". The Shanghai Spirit which is a philosophical value at the core of the SCO promoting human solidarity, mutual trust and benefit has come to the center stage especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.[25] The Shanghai Spirit, described as the "root and soul" of the organisation, was reiterated in the 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin.[26] This emergence point of the SCO is especially important for the multilateral mechanism to work more favourably and provide equal opportunities for Global South and prioritise the countries of the region.[27] As Xi Jinping emphasised in his summit speech as well, the SCO has now become more focused on economic cooperation through humane and just ways staying true to its mission and expanding to become the largest regional organisation in the world simultaneously.[28]

17 Xinhua News, "*Interview: Fight against "three evil forces" remains main task of SCO*", July 11, 2017, Available at: https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/11/c_136435641.htm

18 Aslam, S., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: The Rising Counterweight to Western Influence", *Modern Diplomacy,* July 7, 2024, Available at: https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/07/07/the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-a-rising-coun

19 Li N., "Is It Time for the West to Pay Attention to the SCO? ", *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2025, Available at: https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/is-it-time-for-the-west-to-pay-attention-to-the-sco/

20 Sohail, S., "Strategic Blocs and the Balancing Acts in the Emerging Global Order", *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research,* October 8, 2025, Available from: https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/strategic-blocs-and-the-balancing-acts-in-t

21 Xinhua News, *"SCO cooperation in full swing, offers impetus to global economy"*, August 28, 2025, Available at: https://www.scochina2025.org.cn/en/n3/2025/0828/c518818-20358430.html

22 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, "*Contacts with the China-Eurasia Economic Cooperation Fund*", February 11, 2026, Available at: https://eng.sectsco.org/20260211/2164603.html

23 United Service Institution of India, "*India in SCO: Challenges Galore Amidst Reducing Elbow Room"*, pp.8-10, 2023, Available at: https://usiofindia.org/pdf/INDIA%20IN%20SCO%20CHALLENGES%20GALORE%20AM

24 Indian Council of World Affairs, "*Towards a Secure Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Views of SCO Resident Researchers at ICWA*", 2023, Available at: https://icwa.in/pdfs/TowardsSecureSCOWeb.pdf

25 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, *""Shanghai spirit" provides a solid foundation for solidarity. SCO Secretary-General's interview on the occasion of International Human Solidarity Day"*, December 21, 2020, Available at: https://eng.sectsco.org/20201221/704223.html

26 Jiping, G., "SCO upholds the Shanghai Spirit and stays true to its founding mission", *CPC Central Committee Bimonthly,* September 3, 2025, Available at: https://en.qstheory.cn/2025-09/03/c_1121677.html

27 Gao, V., "Why is SCO's 'Shanghai Spirit' significant for the Global South?", *China Global Television Network,* August 27, 2025, Available at: https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-08-27/Why-is-SCO-s-Shanghai-Spirit-significant-for-the-Global-South--1Gb09HcMwTe/p.html#:~:text=The%202025%20Shanghai%20Cooperation%20Organization,China%20and%20Globalization%20(CCG)

28 Jinping, X., "Staying true to SCO founding mission and ushering in a better future" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic*

SCO: Regional Context

The SCO's first members (Russia, China, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) are not an accidental bundle.[29] China, as the strongest political actor of the region, desired to establish cooperation with those four states simultaneously. The delimitation of the newly emerged borders was on the way post-Soviet collapse, which posed a direct regional security threat. From a regional perspective, it concerned China, as all of the above-mentioned four states share borders with it. Thus, one angle of looking at the early regional context of the organization would be China ensuring what it perceived as the smooth border delimitation for itself. Otherwise, there is a probability that the delimitation process might have become uncertain. For instance, Armenia and Azerbaijan heretofore attempt to delimit their borders with one another.

Moreover, the collapse of the USSR pinpointed another long-term political trend with a high weight regionally: the structural weakening of Russia and its zone of influence. Aris[30] argues that China attempts to fill this gap to establish oneself as the strongest economic pole in Eurasia. For China it seems to be a significant opportunity: the big territories like Kazakhstan and Russia with their abundant resources that China considers as the potential source of income. Kazakhstan is not part of the global empire the way it was during the USSR, and the Russian influence weakens in recent years.

The narrowing of the Russian sphere of influence can be analysed that from the Chinese view, this is the moment to gain higher access to Kazakh and Russian resources.[31] Russia already had to agree to the Power of Siberia pipeline in 2015 at Chinese conditions of lower prices, facing the fledgling isolation from the Western consumers. In the future, the structural dependency of the Russian economy on the Chinese market might become entrenched. As for Kazakhstan, it plans to expand the energy cooperation with China as well.[32] Therefore, the role of SCO in regional politics is partially the solidification of the Chinese position as an economic powerhouse. Keeping India in the formula might be interpreted as having the forum of cooperation, the strongest economic power of Eurasia and the highest growing economic power in the same region with India. This is further showcased from the April 2026 bilateral meeting China and India had on discussing SCO matters solely, which shows how SCO discourse transcends just multilateralism[33]. Henceforth, SCO might appear as the regional substitute of WTO in certain aspects.

Additionally, China treats the security aspect of the SCO as hedging against separatism, claims Reeves.[34] By supporting Central Asian states and Russia in managing internal instability, Beijing aims to lower the risk of separatist mobilization in their territories and, by extension, avoid setting precedents that could encourage similar movements within China.[35] From this perspective, unrest in Russia's North Caucasus, ethnic tensions in parts of Kazakhstan, and the potential recurrence of violence in the Fergana Valley are viewed in Beijing as possible triggers for separatist activism in China's western regions. Russia and the Central Asian states may in turn frame the forum as a form of protection by a stronger partner, particularly against the backdrop of their structural vulnerabilities such

of China. September 1, 2025, Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/202509/t20250901_11699345.html

29 Reeves, J., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A tenable provider of security in post-2014 Central Asia?", *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, p.3, 2014, Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14028

30 Aris, S., "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Mapping multilateralism in transition", *International Peace Institute,* No.2, pp.8-10, 2013, Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09501

31 Haug, S., "Spheres of Influence are Officially Back - and China stands to Gain", *The Diplomat*, February 3, 2026, Available at: https://thediplomat.com/2026/02/spheres-of-influence-are-officially-back-and-china-stands-to-gain/

32 Binghan, D., Juman, J., Khamzayeva, A. V., and Xuan, Z., "Energy cooperation between Kazakhstan and China under "One Belt and One Road": current state, challenges and perspectives", *Buketov Business Review*, pp.13, June 29, 2024, Available at: https://doi.org/10.31489/2024Ec2/7-18

33 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "*First India-China Bilateral Consultations on SCO Matters"*, April 17, 2026, Available at: https://www.publicnow.com/view/3B8737FA73FB640A8D066A6F78B5BE70BA7EC692

34 Reeves, J., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A tenable provider of security in post-2014 Central Asia?", *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, p.9, 2014, Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14028

35 *Ibid.*

as Central Asia's post-imperial condition and the gradual erosion of Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

Lastly, each regional actor follows what Mintz and DeRouen[36] call standard operating procedure. Standard operation procedure refers to the path dependence largely- which foreign policies a country has taken before and whether they remain in the institutional memory.[37] Since China and India, which joined in 2017, tended to cooperate with Russia and Central Asia in the single platform, since the Russia and Central Asia were part of the same country, from bureaucratic perspective, keeping the forum as such in a rebranded form would better align with standard operating procedures as per Russia, Central Asia, China, and India, as the main actors.

Geopolitical Significance of the SCO

A central realm of SCO's geopolitical importance lies in its focus on collective security cooperation and the battle against the previously discussed Three Evils. The growing demand for collective security actions is explained by a high frequency of terrorist attacks and presence of active extremist and terrorist organizations on the territories of the member states.[38] The concerns about regional security augmented after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which increased instability and probability of cross-border threats whilst making one of the core tenants of the SCO emergence doctrine (battling terrorism) relevant once again. Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), thus, is a mechanism established by SCO to fulfil the task of taking counter-terrorist measures, such as joint military training, intelligence sharing, and counter-terrorism operations and narcotics trafficking.[39] Such international coordinated practices complement national defence systems and allow member-states to ensure regional stability and domestic security.

Another geopolitical role of SCO is a platform for economic connectivity and diplomatic alignment between member states. SCO provides a legal framework for economic cooperation, which "[consists of] 122 documents [and] facilitates interactions on trade, banking, financial and investment activities." [40] Together with the Belt and Road initiative, SCO provides intertwined economic engagement opportunities for member states and decreases reliance on trade infrastructure dominated by the West. Its cooperation framework complements Belt and Road initiative by promoting infrastructure projects, energy pipelines, and transport networks linking East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East.[41] Such integration supports regional trade and decreases dependence on Western-controlled financial and logistical systems. However, despite this great variety of legal instruments fostering economic cooperation, it is more tedious to coordinate the economic goals than political and security interests of the SCO member-states.[42]

Nevertheless, despite the established cooperation mechanisms, SCO struggles with internal tensions and rivalries among its member states that hinder

36 Mintz, A., and DeRouen, K. Jr., "Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making", *Cambridge University Press*, p.73, January, 2010, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236270833_Understanding_Foreign_Policy_Decision_Making

37 *Ibid.*

38 Xiaodong, Z., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation", *Singapore: Institute for Security and Development Policy*, p.6, August, 2012, Available at: https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/publications/2012_zhao_the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation.pdf

39 Mumtaz T., Cheema A.T., Khalid J., "The Emerging Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Impacts on Geopolitics", *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol.6, No. 3, p.161, 2025, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/396000163_Emerging_Role_of_the_Shanghai_Cooperation_Organization_and_Its_Impacts_on_Geopolitics

40 Alimov, R., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, August, 2018, pp.116, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.08.001

41 Mumtaz T., Cheema A.T., Khalid J., "The Emerging Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Impacts on Geopolitics", *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol.6, No. 3, p.163, 2025, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/396000163_Emerging_Role_of_the_Shanghai_Cooperation_Organization_and_Its_Impacts_on_Geopolitics

42 Alimov, R., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, August, 2018, pp.116, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.08.001

unified action. For example, India's border disputes with China and Pakistan signify the lack of unity within the organization itself.[43] Additionally, the power struggles over political and economic influence in Central Asia between Russia and China may aggravate the dynamic within the SCO. For both countries, the Central Asian region is of utmost importance. For Beijing, stability and influence in Central Asia ensures domestic security and access to European markets through the Belt and Road Initiative, whereas Moscow views Central Asia as part of its 'Near Abroad.'[44] Economically, China surpassed Russia in bilateral trade volumes with Central Asian states, potentially becoming a regional hegemon.[45] Central Asian states are one of the remaining open markets for Russia in the light of Western sanctions, and China's takeover in the matter of trade is a potential reason for conflict of interests between the two states. Moreover, SCO's role as a mediating ground remains under question, as it played no role in de-escalation of Sino-Indian Doklam standoff and Galwan Valley clash.[46] However, the SCO member states seem to remain open to dialogue and cooperation, as seen by their active engagement. India, for example, is substantially involved in the SCO despite its territorial disputes with China and Pakistan, opening for trade, connectivity, and dialogue through such initiatives as International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).[47] On the whole, despite the existing intraorganizational tensions, SCO succeeds in fulfilling its role and goals.

The SCO exerts significant diplomatic and soft power influence by fostering multilateral partnerships and cultural exchanges that foster regional stability and cooperation. Through its emphasis on unique consensus-based decision-making and equality among diverse member states with varying international agendas, the SCO facilitates diplomatic engagement that promotes cooperation on security, economic integration, and cultural exchange.[48] Lukin et al.[49] argue that the SCO's diplomatic power is seen in its collaboration with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), where memoranda of understanding facilitate joint efforts on security, counterterrorism, and non-traditional threats. Soft power, in turn, is exercised through cultural exchanges, academic programming, and expert dialogues which build mutual respect and non-intervention principles. In summary, the SCO provides a non-Western international platform that promotes peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and non-intervention, allowing member-states to engage in strategic cooperation on various issues.

SCO's strong emergence reasons, multifaceted history, successful transition into a solid structure combined with its geopolitical significance and regional context make it an ample opportunity for Azerbaijan to increase its regional ties and collaboration initiatives. Hence, Azerbaijan's participation prospects should be studied and analysed for a successful path forward.

43 Rani, T., and Khan, S. A., "Dispute Resolution Mechanism of The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): A Comparative Study of Legal Mechanisms", *Global Foreign Policies Review*, Vol.8, No.2, p.12, 2025, Available at: https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2025(VIII-II).02

44 Mirza, M. N., and Ayub, S., "Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence", *Trames: Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, p.438, April 4, 2021, Available at: https//doi.org/10.3176/tr.2021.4.04

45 *Ibid.*

46 Saini, G., and Jacob, H., "India, China, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Bilateral Relations, Geopolitical Trends, and Future Trajectory", *New Dehli: Council for Strategic & Defense Research*, p.166, 2022, Available at: https://csdronline.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CSDR_SCO_Report-1.pdf

47 Mumtaz T., Cheema A.T., Khalid J., "The Emerging Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Impacts on Geopolitics", *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol.6, No. 3, p.166, 2025, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/396000163_Emerging_Role_of_the_Shanghai_Cooperation_Organization_and_Its_Impacts_on_Geopolitics

48 Alimov, R., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, August, 2018, pp.114-124., Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.08.001

49 Lukin, A., Novikov, D., Puzanova, O., and Yenikeyeff, S., "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization amidst the Rising International Tensions", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol.16, No.2, p.178, July 7, 2025, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/18793665251357320

Findings & Analysis

Analysis of the historical precedent

In this part, it will be extensively examined which criteria are most likely to affect countries' accession to the SCO. Understanding those yardsticks might facilitate the process of joining an organization for countries with SCO partner status. While the process entails bureaucratic procedures like being enlisted as a SCO partner state first, there are also less intuitive and fairly complex reasons behind countries getting accepted to the SCO. Additionally, the timeline SCO acceptances will be designed.

Joining an organization requires multiple criteria at the time. There is no single rule of thumb which guarantees an accession to the organization; it is rather a combination of multiple factors. Those factors account for the strategic location, geography, conflicts, and support from influential member states.

The role of strategic location will be elucidated in Afghanistan's example. For a protracted period of time, Afghanistan was the centre of American politics. The American military has been present in Afghanistan, propping up a loyal political regime and holding military bases in the region. Pakistan served as a bulwark in this extended operation. From a Chinese standpoint, the strategy should have sought to confine the American military zone by encircling it with Chinese allies from each side. Partially for this reason, India and Pakistan both acceded to the SCO in 2017[50]. From that point onwards, Afghanistan was surrounded solely by SCO countries such as Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and China, together with Iran, which has long maintained an adversarial posture toward the United States. This indicates an importance of the geographic role.

Another historical precedent observed is that the accession of countries to the SCO appears to be aligned with established theories of geopolitics. Hagan claims in *Geopolitics* that there are two types of state that compete for hegemony: sea and land states[51]. The competition occurs for the shore. The goal of the "sea states" appears to be to prevent Eurasian countries from consolidating into a single "iron fist" by playing on contradictions between them[52]. There is no precedent of a non-Eurasian country joining the SCO. From this angle, it might be argued that Azerbaijan qualifies for membership, as it is a Eurasian country with crucial geography. Hence, whether a country is Eurasian or not is worth considering, as the precedent suggests that non-Eurasian countries do not join.

While weighing the criteria, it is also important to discern whether a country that joins experiences a conflict. For instance, the Pakistani and Indian accession is to a large extent an attempt to ameliorate the tensions between two longstanding rivals. This approach is grounded in historical practice. The European Coal and Steel community, the predecessor of the EU, was established to prevent any future war by Germany with other European states through economic interdependence.[53] China, by accepting both India and Pakistan, pursues stability and predictability in the region, to avoid Middle Eastern hovering escalation patterns, and, thus, denies Americans any capacity to cause instability near its borders[54].

The support from influential member states within an organization also seems to be the necessary precondition for joining SCO. Belarus, which joined the SCO in 2024, did so, enjoying the unwavering support of Russia as its vivid supporter. Pakistan, on the other hand, had close cooperation with China prior to joining in 2017. Both India and Iran tend to have strong cooperation with Russia and China in economic and occasionally military spheres. Therefore, to analyse whether the country's prospects for acceding to the SCO are high or not, observing its relationships with the Russian-Chinese

50 Bhavna, D., "Resetting India's engagement in Central Asia: From symbols to substance", *S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, p.11, 2016, Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05861

51 Hagan, C. B.,"Geopolitics", *The Journal of Politics* , Vol.4, No.4, p.480, 1942, Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2125653

52 *Ibid.*

53 Schmidt, P, and Alongi, M., "Germany, France and NATO", *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College*, p.6, October 17, 1994, Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11417

54 Khetran, M. S., "SCO Membership and Pakistan: Prospects of Relations with Central Asia" *Strategic Studies* , Vol.39, No.2, pp.83–95, 2019,Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/48544301

dyad is a worthy metric. Azerbaijan's prospects for further integration into the SCO must also be assessed in light of the evolving dynamics of its relations with Russia and China.

Thus, on the basis of precedent and its regional profile, Azerbaijan emerges as a strong candidate for deeper integration into the SCO. First, it occupies a critical geographical choke point at the Caspian-South Caucasus nexus, fitting the SCO's established pattern of admitting Eurasian states. Second, while the South Caucasus long remained a formally conflicted space, the Washington Declaration of 8 August 2025, signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the United States, marked a decisive turning point by declaring the conflict "a matter of the past" and initializing a 17-article peace agreement. The subsequent Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) has further advanced this normalization by embedding the peace process in concrete connectivity and economic interdependence projects. In this transformed context, Chinese interest in the South Caucasus is no longer driven primarily by conflict-spillover management, but by the prospect of anchoring new east-west corridors that can complement existing Eurasian initiatives. However, India's reported objection to Azerbaijan's full accession at the 2025 Tianjin summit remains a major obstacle, underscoring how intra-SCO geopolitics, especially New Delhi's sensitivities in the broader India-Pakistan-China triangle, can constrain Baku's upgrade from dialogue partner toward full-member status.

The reported objections to Azerbaijan's and Armenia's respective accession prospects illustrate how bilateral rivalries and competing strategic interests can influence consensus-based decision-making within the SCO. Previously, Armenian bid had been blocked by Pakistan as well. This taps into the previously discussed matter: middle powers have to seek the support of influential members to get admitted. Whether this consensus is tenable or not, falls outside the scope of the paper. It is also possible to trace SCO expansion with a timeline. India and Pakistan were admitted both on 9th June 2017, after 12 years of awaiting status[55]. Iran got accepted on 4th July 2023. Belarusian accession to SCO on 4th July 2024 was the last country to join SCO so far. The table below succinctly summarizes the history of countries acceding to SCO.

Countries	Time of joining SCO
India	9th June, 2017
Pakistan	9th June, 2017
Iran	4th July, 2023
Belarus	4th July, 2024

Despite these external constraints, Azerbaijan has continued to pursue its multi-vector foreign policy and deepen its engagement with the SCO. Azerbaijan participated in the 2026 SCO summit, held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on 31 August - 1 September 2026 under the theme "25 Years of the SCO: Together for Sustainable Peace, Development and Prosperity." President Ilham Aliyev attended the summit's anniversary events and addressed the "SCO Plus" dialogue[56], using the platform to present Azerbaijan as a connectivity hub linking Europe and Asia through the Middle Corridor[57]. He also emphasized the transformation of the South Caucasus from a conflict zone into a zone of peace following the 2025 Washington Declaration.[58]

Although the summit did not result in a formal upgrade of Azerbaijan's status, its practical engagement with the organization continued to deepen. Azerbaijan participated in the "SCO Plus" format and discussions concerning transport, energy and climate, while presenting itself as a potential bridge between SCO members and Western-oriented initiatives such as the Trans-Caspian connectivity agenda and TRIPP.

55 *Ibid.*

56 APA.az, "*President Ilham Aliyev addressed SCO Plus format meeting"*, September 1, 2026, Available at: https://en.apa.az/official-news/president-ilham-aliyev-addressed-sco-plus-format-meeting-photo-video-updated-3-522351

57 Caliber.az, "*From Beijing to the Caspian: What Azerbaijan gains from the SCO",* September 1, 2026, Available at: https://caliber.az/en/post/from-beijing-to-the-caspian-what-azerbaijan-gains-from-the-sco

58 Caliber.az, *"Azerbaijan and Eurasia's new geography: What the SCO summit means for Baku"*, September 3, 2026, Available at: https://caliber.az/en/post/azerbaijan-and-eurasia-s-new-geography-what-the-sco-summit-means-for-baku

This outcome reinforces the broader point that middle powers in Eurasia must navigate not only formal institutional rules but also the competing interests of other member states. The decision not to upgrade Azerbaijan's status at this summit has not prevented it from expanding its functional role in areas such as connectivity, energy and regional cooperation. At the same time, the cases of Azerbaijan and Armenia show that functional relevance alone does not guarantee institutional advancement. The 2026 summit therefore demonstrated that formal status within the SCO remains closely tied to wider geopolitical considerations, even when a country's practical contribution to connectivity, energy cooperation and regional peace is increasingly recognized.

Analysis of interview responses

This section is going to divide the responses we received from the experts we contacted into thematic sections and synthesise their perspectives on different aspects of SCO, China relations, Azerbaijan's participation, economic connectivity and foreign policy goals. It serves to inform the latter sections on if Azerbaijan should move forward with membership strategy, the benefits and the future trajectory.

Foreign Policy

A major and repeating theme across the interviews was the use of SCO to advance Azerbaijan's "multi vector" foreign policy, balancing relations between East and West. Dr. Vusal Guliyev and Dr. Roza Bayramli both of AIR Centre emphasise that the dialogue partner status of Azerbaijan allows it a platform to engage with Eurasian powers without the "political binding"[59] nature of formal alignment through full membership. However, Professor Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic argues that SCO engagement does not inherently conflict with Azerbaijan's ties to NATO and the United States. He notes that many current SCO members have diverse alignments, some very closely with the Western Powers. Guliyev warns though, that SCO could evolve into an explicitly anti-Western geopolitical bloc which could create foreign policy contradictions for Azerbaijan which should be managed beforehand.

Dr. Jiahan Cao of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) identifies Azerbaijan's strategy as balancing between the three axes. The Western EU/NATO axis, the Russian axis of security legacy and regional influence, and the emerging Eurasian bloc with China and SCO.

Economic connectivity & geopolitics

Most of the experts view the SCO primarily through an economic lens, particularly with regards to Azerbaijan's role in China-led economic initiatives. Dr. Jue Wang, Dr. Jiahan Cao, as well as Dr. Vusal Guliyev highlights Azerbaijan's strategic location along the Middle Corridor, which is a location which has become increasingly attractive to China amidst the geopolitical tensions both to the North (Russia) and to the South (Iran). Jiahan Cao argues further that becoming a full member would transform Azerbaijan from a mere "transit state" into a "norm setting"[60] hub for Eurasian connectivity governance. As mentioned by Dr. Wang Azerbaijan's work under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is complemented by its SCO engagement, facilitating investment in transport, digital and energy infrastructure. Wang also mentions how China's approach to regional institutional cooperation is fundamentally economically motivated, but it still inevitably carries geopolitical implications. Initiatives such as infrastructure financing, regional development banks and trade agreements all emerge from China's domestic economic needs because China wants to sustain highly developed industry (ex: construction sector) while expanding outwards. There is a mutual economic rationale here because many countries have demand for infrastructure and energy development, so they want to be partners with China.

China is a major power, so economically motivated initiatives also take a geopolitical significance, and they trigger reactions from other global actors like the United States or Japan. Cao notes that

59 From an interview with Dr. Roza Bayramli on April 9th, 2026

60 From an interview with Dr. Jiahan Cao on April 22nd, 2026

China has a global governance plan which stems mainly from its economic plans. He mentions that closeness with China in economic initiatives can still trigger geopolitical uncertainties. On the other hand, Wang claims that China does not operate with a single top-down global governance strategy and its approach is more decentralised and pragmatic. There are overarching principles in Chinese foreign policy and as China's global role matures, there can emerge a more structured strategy. Both of these perspectives are embodied within the Shanghai Spirit, which is one of the five pillars of the SCO. When asked about the "geopolitical polarisation", Cao elaborates that relationship with China can lead to increased demands from the EU or other Western allies, whilst China does not ask its allies to "take sides"[61], as it prefers bilateral engagements to multilateral groupings.

Dr. Wang and Dr. Guliyev warn that deeper economic engagement with China can lead to reduced financial autonomy and vulnerability to fluctuations in Chinese investment. Dr. Mark McAdam adds that China uses regional organisations such as SCO and ASEAN to present alternatives to Western modes of economic development which can be a tool of gaining regional dominance but also add to financial dependency argument. Considering that one of the five core principles of the SCO is non-Western-centric development, this argument stands.

Security

Despite security being one of the core reasons for the creation of SCO, the experts present a nuanced perspective on this aspect of the organisation. Guliyev points out that SCO's focus on the Three Evil Forces (terrorism, extremism, separatism) align with Azerbaijan's domestic policy. Azerbaijan has these concerns domestically as well and seeks a post-conflict stability in the South Caucasus. Krnjevic Miskovic offers a more critical perspective, noting that intelligence sharing within the SCO must be approached cautiously. This is because some current SCO members are themselves perceived as potential sources of security concerns, leading to significant "trust issues" that may limit the depth of institutional cooperation. This tension is reflected in the SCO's history, where the organisation has sometimes been viewed as a "talking shop" regarding active security crises.

India factor

The experts generally agreed that Azerbaijan's current status is not a matter of internal hesitation (to join or not to join?) but of institutional feasibility. In fact, Azerbaijan has been an SCO dialogue partner since March 2016, after initially applying for observer status in 2012.[62] Moving beyond this status, however, requires the consensus of all full members[63], making the position of individual member states critical to Azerbaijan's prospects. In this context, New Delhi has emerged as a key obstacle. India's broader strategic concerns, shaped by its concerns and relations with Pakistan and China have complicated Azerbaijan's efforts to advance its position within the organization.

This institutional constraint became more apparent at the SCO summit in Tianjin on 31 August-1 September 2025. Member states adopted the Tianjin Declaration and the SCO Development Strategy to 2035 and agreed to consolidate the organization's previous observer and dialogue-partner categories into a single "SCO Partner" status.[64] Against this backdrop, India reportedly opposed Azerbaijan's bid for full SCO membership, although New Delhi did not publicly explain its position.[65] Notably, this stance was inconsistent with the "Shanghai Spirit" of mutual trust and with the

61 From an interview with Dr. Jiahan Cao on April 22nd, 2026

62 Azertag, "*Azerbaijan becomes SCO dialogue partner*", March 14, 2016, Available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijan_becomes_SCO_dialogue_partner-935224

63 Commonspace.eu, "*Stumbling blocks for Armenia and Azerbaijan on the road to SCO membership*", September 4, 2025, Available at: https://www.commonspace.eu/news/stumbling-blocks-armenia-and-azerbaijan-road-sco-membership

64 APA.az, "*Azerbaijan to join SCO's new partner status*", September 1, 2025, Available at: https://en.apa.az/foreign-policy/azerbaijan-to-join-scos-new-partner-status-476461

65 Eurasianet, "*The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the thin veneer of unity*", September 3, 2025, Available at: https://eurasianet.org/the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-and-the-thin-veneer-of-unity

principle that bilateral disputes should not be transferred onto multilateral platforms.[66]

India's position towards Azerbaijan in the SCO also needs to be viewed within a broader pattern of resistance to Baku's participation in other multilateral frameworks. In August 2022, India reportedly blocked Azerbaijan from attending a BRICS summit even as a guest, at a time when Baku had not yet formally sought membership in that forum.[67] The episode foreshadowed the difficulties that emerged more clearly after Azerbaijan formally applied for BRICS membership on 20 August 2024.[68] That application came shortly after Azerbaijan and China signed a declaration on establishing a strategic partnership during the SCO summit in Astana on 3 July 2024, with Beijing expressing support for Baku and Russia also backing the application.

In this context, Professor Krnjević Mišković notes that Azerbaijan has demonstrated a clear political commitment to full SCO membership and is effectively blocked by India from realizing this objective. Dr. Bayramli also reiterates that Azerbaijan has participated in a lot of high-level meetings and SCO summits which serves to restate its commitment.

Dr. Jiahan Cao describes India as a "variable" within the SCO who has a "very unique"[69] role. He notes that India's rivalry with Pakistan and its ongoing border disputes as well as economic mismatch with China create a structural tension within SCO and "dilute [its] effectiveness and efficiency". We can see this tension and ineffectiveness clearly from India being the sole obstacle to Azerbaijan joining the SCO despite it being very important for several economic and geopolitical reasons and having the full backing of China. It can also be that, as Cao mentions, there is a "spillover effect" complicating India's approval of Azerbaijan due to the latter's close ties with Pakistan and China.

To overcome the India obstacles, Krnjevic Miskovic suggests a reciprocal arrangement involving regional diplomacy with Armenia. He explains that Armenia could encourage India to lift its objection to Azerbaijan's membership, and Azerbaijan could encourage its ally Pakistan in return. This strategy would be very fitting with SCO's history of managing bilateral rivalries within a multilateral institution, such as the example of the 2017 ascension of India and Pakistan at the same time to avoid rifts. However, this suggestion is only viable if Armenia still has strong commitments towards joining the SCO as a full member as well.

Path forward

The collective expert opinion suggests that Azerbaijan should be following a gradual approach towards SCO membership, prioritising an interest-driven integration rather than a fast-paced policy. Both Dr. Bayramli and Dr. Guliyev mention that SCO participation can be used as a way of advancing cooperation with Central Asia.

Should Azerbaijan move towards SCO membership?

The question whether the SCO full membership will advance Azerbaijan's long-term strategic interests remains open for discussion. As the literature in this topic is limited, this section will attempt to analyse (1) the alignment of Azerbaijan's full SCO membership with its long-term foreign policy strategy and (2) the implications of the SCO membership in multipolar international order using existing discussion on the topic, official statements, opinions, and interview answers. The evidence suggests that by advancing to a full member status, Azerbaijan reinforces its multi-vector foreign policy strategy by consolidating its position as a transit hub between Europe and Asia. Moreover, deeper engagement with the SCO, enables Baku to take part in the Eurasian decision-making through dialogue- and consensus-based framework.

66 Caucasus Watch, "*India reportedly blocks Azerbaijan's bid to join SCO*", September 6, 2025, Available at: https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/india-reportedly-blocks-azerbaijans-bid-to-join-sco.html

67 NEWS.am, "*India blocks Azerbaijan's participation in upcoming BRICS summit as a guest*", August 16, 2022, Available at: https://news.am/en/news/716228

68 Jamestown Foundation, "*Azerbaijan applies for BRICS membership*", October 16, 2024, Available at: https://jamestown.org/azerbaijan-applies-for-brics-membership/

69 From an interview with Dr. Jiahan Cao on April 22nd, 2026

Coherence with Azerbaijan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

Azerbaijan has historically pursued a multi-vector foreign policy strategy, emphasizing strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and active engagement with multiple power centers. As President Ilham Aliyev explicitly stated, Azerbaijan pursues "an independent foreign policy based on the principles of non-interference in internal affairs and peaceful coexistence."[70] Such a strategy allows Azerbaijan to deepen ties with Western, Turkic, and Eurasian actors simultaneously, without entering exclusive alliances. The accession to full membership will align with Azerbaijan's existing foreign policy strategy, reinforcing sovereignty, diversification of partnerships, and regional influence. Moreover, it will not oblige exclusive alignment with any single bloc.

Located in the crossroad of regional powers, Azerbaijan, historically, had to balance between different power centers. Established by Heydar Aliyev, the multi-vector or balanced foreign policy strategy became a core principle of Azerbaijan's international standing.[71] SCO's emphasis on respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and equality coincides with Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy based on non-alignment principles. Vusal Guliyev describes SCO as a multilateral platform that brings together major Eurasian powers such as China, Russia, and Central Asian states, which stress ideas aligning with Azerbaijan's foreign policy goals.[72] As one of the key goals mentioned in the SCO charter is "mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States and inviolability of State borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations," Azerbaijan may find strengthening of its foreign policy in the framework of the SCO.[73] Consequently, promoting dialogue with external actors and stressing non-interference, the SCO offers a plausible platform for Azerbaijan to adhere to its foreign policy principles. Additionally, accession to SCO membership will manifest deeper engagement with China after the joint statement on comprehensive strategic partnership, continuing the trend of rapprochement between Baku and Beijing. The institutional structure of the SCO is a solid ground for Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy, as it allows stronger symbolic and diplomatic engagement with China, whereas avoiding substantial commitments which may seem ambiguous to other parties. As evidenced by historical precedent, Azerbaijan seeks to avoid unnecessary or one-sided commitments and adheres to mutually beneficial partnerships, which give neutral signals to other potential partners. For example, Azerbaijan opted not to pursue the Eastern Partnership Association Agreement proposed by the EU, as it appeared ambiguous and favouring the European side more, but, instead, it proposed bilateral strategic partnership signed in 2016.[74] This signifies that Azerbaijan is prone to evade one-sided arrangements and vague commitments to remain adherent to its main foreign policy trajectory. SCO, in turn, is not an organization which will send ambiguous signals to Western partners, as emphasized by the interviewees. Vusal Guliyev and Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic state that joining SCO is unlikely to irritate the Western side or contradict Azerbaijan's engagement with the United States and the Board of Peace.[75,76] In this regard, the full membership at the SCO aligns with Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy, increases its strategic leverage, and leaves room for strengthening other diplomatic ties.

Additionally, being in the key connector position between Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan's accession to the SCO will allow more profound integration with the regional powers and increase its strategic

70 Aliyev, I., "Ilham Aliyev was interviewed by China's Xinhua News Agency", *Xinhua News Agency*, April 21, 2025, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/68627

71 Jafarova, E., "Azerbaijan's multi-vectored foreign policy and the Non-Aligned Movement", *Azerbaijan's Non-Alignment Report*, AIR Center, p.13. 2022, Available at: https://aircenter.az/uploads/rmwDEeH592MO.pdf

72 From answers to interview questions provided by Dr. Vusal Guliyev on April 12th, 2026

73 Shanghai Cooperation Organization, " *Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*", Art.2, June 7, 2002, Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/000M3130.pdf

74 Jafarova, E., "Azerbaijan's multi-vectored foreign policy and the Non-Aligned Movement", *Azerbaijan's Non-Alignment Report*, AIR Center, pp.15-16, 2022, Available at: https://aircenter.az/uploads/rmwDEeH592MO.pdf

75 From answers to interview questions provided by Dr. Vusal Guliyev on April 12th, 2026

76 From an interview with Professor Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic on April 13th, 2026

importance for both blocs. In the environment of regional instability caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Iran war, Azerbaijan strengthens its position as an important alternative transit route connecting Central Asia and Europe.[77] This gives Azerbaijan more flexibility in the international arena. Presenting itself as a bridge in the Middle Corridor (MC), Azerbaijan pushes the non-alignment agenda and reinforces its role as a strategic transit hub.[78] Moreover, Vusal Guliyev states that cooperation with the SCO provides Azerbaijan with opportunities to deepen trade and investment ties with rapidly growing Asian markets and complements Azerbaijan's infrastructure projects under BRI and the development of the MC.[79] In his speeches on latest SCO summits in 2024 and 2025, President Aliyev stressed Azerbaijan's continuous efforts to develop its trade transit capabilities and expressed intention for deeper integration with the SCO.[80] Hence, full membership will allow more efficient execution of Baku's role as a transit hub by increasing energy security for Europe and opening Asian markets, thus consolidating Azerbaijan's place in Eurasia as a key strategic partner.[81] Moreover, deeper economic integration will act as a mediating aspect, decreasing chances of regional instabilities and conflicts. Overall, Azerbaijan's accession towards full membership will further its long-term foreign policy strategy and economic goals as a transit hub in Eurasia.

Strategic Agency in an Emerging Multipolarity

The ongoing turmoil within the international system signals a shift towards a multipolar world, where several power agglomerations exist. Azerbaijan, being a middle power, may want to increase its agency in the rapidly transforming world order. In his 2025 Tianjin Summit speech, President Xi Jinping stressed the transformation of the contemporary world system towards multipolarity and pointed on the SCO's task to adapt to it and provide a platform conducive for dialogue. Therefore, accession towards SCO membership will give Azerbaijan a strong political standing along the strongest regional powers. Azerbaijan's role as a connecting corridor underscores the necessity to have an impact on Eurasian trends and norms rather than merely react to them. Vusal Guliyev touches upon the importance of SCO as a strategic platform which will give Baku access to decision-making mechanisms within the organization, but also put increased expectations and potentially constrain Azerbaijan's foreign policy autonomy.[82] The SCO would enable Azerbaijan to influence agendas on security, economic connectivity, and normative principles of international order within a consensus- and dialogue-based framework. Deeper SCO engagement allows Baku to strengthen its ties with China, India, and Russia, simultaneously preserving a high level of neutrality and collaboration with Central Asian and Western partners.[83] In contrast, prolonged dialogue partner status poses a risk of marginalization of Azerbaijan's voice in the Eurasian forums that are decisive in shaping trade routes, security architecture, and economic framework in a very volatile international system. Lastly, full membership will affirm Azerbaijan's identity as an active middle power capable of contributing to a multipolar world order. The SCO membership is consistent with Azerbaijan's roles in other international organizations, such as the United Nations and Non-Alignment Movement. It will demon-

77 The World Bank, "*Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030",* p.5, November, 2023, Available at:https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/7e6a216e-eb56-4783-ba1b-b7621abddcd9/content

78 Guliyev, V., "SCO Tianjin Summit 2025: Azerbaijan's Expanding Role in Eurasian Cooperation", *Caspian-Alpine Society*, September 2, 2025, Available at:https://caspian-alpine.org/sco-tianjin-summit-2025-azerbaijans-expanding-role-in-eurasian-cooperation/

79 From answers to interview questions provided by Dr. Vusal Guliyev on April 12th, 2026

80 President.az, "*Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the "SCO plus" meeting in Astana",* July 4, 2024, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/66439

President.az, "*Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the SCO Plus format meeting in Tianjin, China",* September 1, 2025, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/70040

81 Guliyev, V., "SCO Tianjin Summit 2025: Azerbaijan's Expanding Role in Eurasian Cooperation", *Caspian-Alpine Society*, September 2, 2025, Available at: https://caspian-alpine.org/sco-tianjin-summit-2025-azerbaijans-expanding-role-in-eurasian-cooperation/

82 From answers to interview questions provided by Dr. Vusal Guliyev on April 12th, 2026

83 *Ibid.*

strate Azerbaijan's reliability and capacity to exercise autonomous agency, beneficially affecting its international image. In this regard, Baku may find it pragmatic to put significant emphasis on increasing its engagement with the SCO in near future.

Benefits of SCO membership for Azerbaijan

As mentioned previously, by becoming a full member of the SCO, Azerbaijan will intensify the political, strategic and economic benefits it gains from SCO participation. The perspectives of experts touch upon different strategic advantages of being a member state. While the previous section focused on whether Azerbaijan should or should not join the SCO, this section will focus on the benefits in terms of economic development, security, and energy cooperation of becoming a full member.

First, Azerbaijan accession to the SCO should not be viewed as a geopolitical shift, but more as a pragmatic extension of the long standing multi vector policy. Since Azerbaijan prioritizes balance between Western institutions and Eurasian powers while at the same time preserving its strategic autonomy, SCO membership serves as a tool to expand Azerbaijan's economic connectivity, enhance its flexibility and present itself as a hub linking Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan already strategically leverages its geographic and political advantages, but SCO membership would consolidate a large multilateral platform to amplify its voice and promote cooperation on infrastructure and development projects.

Another advantage is that Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities are overlapping with the main objectives of SCO: regional security, development and economic cooperation.[84] Thus, increased cooperation within the SCO framework will offer an opportunity of maintaining a balanced approach and good relations with multiple actors. This cooperation strengthens existing bilateral and multilateral security partnerships without creating excessive binding military obligations. Moreover, becoming a full member would increase Azerbaijan's bargaining power, since by being a member Azerbaijan would have an opportunity to negotiate economic and infrastructure agreements from a stronger position. This is especially important given Azerbaijan's role as an energy hub linking Central Asia to Europe. [85]

From an economic perspective, Azerbaijan is already a central actor in the Middle Corridor, which connects China and Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus, thus the benefits align with its growing role in transcontinental trade. This route got high prominence as an alternative to existing traditional maritime and northern land corridors, by offering short delivery times and low geopolitical risk. By relying on estimated data provided by the World Bank, with the help of continuation of right policies and investments, the MC could triple its trade volumes which will benefit not only local and regional economies, but also having its positive implications on creating employment opportunities, and attracting business.[86] Recent data on Azerbaijan illustrate that this potential is increasingly being translated into actual freight flows. In 2024, Azerbaijan Railways (ADY) transported more than 18.5 million tonnes of freight overall, while transit freight rose by 5.7 percent year on year to 7.3 million tonnes.[87] The East West corridor accounted for more than 3.2 million tonnes of cargo.[88] Container traffic through the Middle Corridor expanded particularly rapidly, with more than 27,000 containers transported in 2024, over

84 From answers to interview questions provided by Dr. Vusal Guliyev on April 12th, 2026

85 Guliyev, V., "SCO Tianjin Summit 2025: Azerbaijan's Expanding Role in Eurasian Cooperation", *Caspian-Alpine Society*, September 2, 2025, Available at: https://caspian-alpine.org/sco-tianjin-summit-2025-azerbaijans-expanding-role-in-eurasian-cooperation/

86 The World Bank, "*Middle Corridor through Central Asia, Caucasus Can Boost Trade, Connectivity and Supply Chain Resilience, Says New Report*", November 27, 2023, Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/11/27/middle-corridor-through-central-asia-caucasus-can-boost-trade-connectivity-and-supply-chain-resilience

87 ADY, *"Azerbaijan Becomes a Transportation Hub: ADY's Key Achievements in International Corridor Development in 2024"*, January 10, 2025, Available at:https://corp.ady.az/en/2/news/news/azerbaijan-becomes-a-transportation-hub-adys-key-achievements-in-international-corridor-development-in-2024

88 *Ibid.*

25 times the level recorded in 2023.[89] During the same year, 358 container block trains were dispatched from Xi'an to Azerbaijan, of which 287 had arrived in Baku by the end of the year.[90] These figures demonstrate that Azerbaijan is increasingly functioning not merely as a geographic passage, but as an operational logistics hub within the China Central Asia Caucasus Europe transport system.[91] In this context, membership would not create Azerbaijan's transit role, but it could significantly enhance it by offering coordination mechanisms such as enhanced cooperation on custom procedures, logistics standards, transport agreements that would reduce costs of transaction and increase efficiency of trade, thus getting higher revenues and broader economic spillovers[92].

This economic logic is further supported by the empirical evidence from existing SCO member Kazakhstan. For example, Kazakhstan's trade turnover reached $66 billion in 2023, reflecting steady growth and economic exchange within SCO space. Moreover, the presence of more than 29,000 companies with SCO capital and thousands of joint ventures highlight how integration in the SCO can facilitate foreign direct investment (FDI), and business expansion. This case is significant since it provides real observable patterns of how SCO membership correlates with deeper economic integration rather than relying on theoretical assumptions.[93]

The broader Central Asian context further strengthens the case for Azerbaijan's closer economic engagement with the SCO. Azerbaijan was admitted as a full participant in the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia at the seventh meeting, held in Tashkent on 16 November 2025.[94] Although the expanded C6 platform is not an SCO institution, it is directly relevant to Azerbaijan's prospective SCO membership because four of the five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, are SCO members. Azerbaijan's inclusion in the C6 therefore places it within an increasingly interconnected regional economic environment that substantially overlaps with the SCO space.

The significance of this development is reinforced by the scale of Azerbaijan's existing economic engagement with these states. At VIII Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Azerbaijan and Central Asia, held in Turkmenistan on 8 October 2026, President Ilham Aliyev stated that Azerbaijan's trade turnover with the Central Asian countries had increased by more than 50 percent over the previous year.[95] He also noted that more than 400 companies with Central Asian capital were operating in Azerbaijan and highlighted the establishment of joint investment funds involving Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, each capitalised at hundreds of millions of dollars.[96] President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev further stated that intra-regional trade among the C6 states had reached approximately $13 billion in 2025, equivalent to around 8 percent of their combined external trade, and proposed a joint action

89 *Ibid.*

90 Turkic World Strategic Studies, "*Volume of Cargo Transported from China via the Middle Corridor Skyrockets*", January 10, 2025, Available at: https://turksam.manas.edu.kg/index.php/en/azerbaijan/8851-volume-of-cargo-transported-from-chi-na-vi-a-mi-ddle-corri-dor-skyrockets

91 ADY, *"Azerbaijan Becomes a Transportation Hub: ADY's Key Achievements in International Corridor Development in 2024",* January 10, 2025, Available at: https://corp.ady.az/en/2/news/news/azerbaijan-becomes-a-transportation-hub-adys-key-achievements-in-international-corridor-development-in-2024

92 Dexue, Y., "Economic Cooperation under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Achievements and Prospects", *China International Studies,* pp.94-122, June, 2021,Available at: https://rus.ecnu.edu.cn/u/5_2111/59269_1.pdf

93 Kazinform International News Agency, *"Kazakhstan-SCO Trade Turnover Rose 7.5% in 2023",* June 28, 2024, Available at: https://qaz-inform.com/news/kazakhstan-sco-trade-turnover-rose-75-in-2023-254630

94 Report.az, *"Azerbaijan becomes full-fledged participant of Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia",* November 16, 2025, Available at: https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/decision-made-in-tashkent-on-azerbaijan-s-accession-to-format-of-consultative-meetings-of-central-asian-countries

95 APA.az, *"Turkmenbashi hosted 8th Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Azerbaijan and Central Asia"*, October 8, 2026, Available at: https://en.apa.az/official-news/turkmenbashi-hosted-8th-consultative-meeting-of-heads-of-state-of-azerbaijan-and-central-asia-updated-3-528813

96 *Ibid.*

plan to raise this figure to at least $20 billion.[97]

These developments are particularly relevant to the membership question because they show that Azerbaijan is already economically connected to several SCO member states through growing trade, investment and regional connectivity. In this respect, SCO membership would represent a potential continuation and institutionalisation of an economic trajectory that is already underway. The SCO would offer a wider platform connecting Azerbaijan with Central Asian economies as well as China, Russia, India, Iran and Pakistan. The next question, therefore, is what broader economic environment Azerbaijan could become part of through SCO membership.

Long term trade data from the SCO member countries themselves point to the significant expansion of this economic space. According to the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization's 20 Years of Trade Development Report", the total trade value of SCO member states rose from 667.09 billion dollars in 2001 to 6.06 trillion dollars in 2020, while their share of global trade increased from 5.4% to 17.5% over the same period.[98] More recent data show that this momentum has continued. By 2022, intra-SCO trade was already approaching 500 billion dollars[99], and by 2024 China's trade with other SCO members alone reached a record 512.4 billion dollars, or 36.3 times the level at the organization's founding[100]. When observers and dialogue partners are included, China's trade with the wider SCO network reached 890 billion dollars in 2024, accounting for 14.4% of its total foreign trade.[101] This demonstrates that the benefits of membership extend beyond growing aggregate economic weight to deeper integration of SCO economies into global trade networks. This demonstrates that benefits of membership are not limited only to the growing economic weight, but also increasing integration of its members into global trade networks. It would create opportunity for Azerbaijan to deepen engagement with a rapidly growing economic area whose influence has been growing over the past two decades.

Investment and industrial development are other benefits of becoming a full member. The SCO member states, especially China, showed its ability to finance large scale infrastructure and other industrial projects across Eurasia. China's investment stock in other SCO member states had exceeded $84 billion by 2025, while its annual trade with those states surpassed $500 billion, illustrating the economic scale of China's engagement across the organisation's wider region.[102] In this context, Azerbaijan's existing initiatives such as the development of the Alat Free Economic Zone (AFEZ) and modernization of transport infrastructure are possible fields to attract such investments. Alat Free Economic Zone (AFEZ), located next to the Baku International Sea Trade Port and the East-West and North-South transport corridors, is designed to attract high-value-added, export-oriented manufacturing and internationally traded services. Its approved master plan covers 850 hectares across three zones for light manufacturing, standard manufacturing, and heavy industry, while the government has reserved more than 7,000 additional hectares for potential future expansion.[103]

Membership in the SCO could enhance investor confidence by presenting Azerbaijan as a partner with deeper integration into regional economic structure and coordination with major capital exporting economies. However, it is quite important

97 Report.az, *"Tokayev proposes increasing mutual trade in C6 region to $20B"*, October 8, 2026, Available at: https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/tokayev-proposes-increasing-mutual-trade-in-c6-region-to-20b

98 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's Trade and Economic Multifunctional Platform, *"The Total Trade Value of the SCO Member States Has Increased Nearly 100 Times in the Past 20 Years",* February 17, 2022, Available at: https://scotemp.org/en/h-nd-246.html

99 Qatar News Agency, "*SCO Summit in Astana 2024 ... Growing Expansion Efforts Amid Increasing Global Challenges*", July 3, 2024, Available at: https://qna.org.qa/en/news-bulletins-details?id=0025-sco-summit-in-astana-2024--growing-expansion-efforts-amid-increasing-global-challenges--1-&date=3/07/2024

100 The State Council Information Office of China, "*China's trade with other SCO members hit US$512.4B in 2024*", August 28, 2025, Available at: http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/2025-08/28/content_118046692.html

101 The State Council Information Office of China, "*Key things to know about SCO Tianjin Summit*", August 27, 2025, Available at: http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/in-depth/2025-08/27/content_118044771.html

102 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, "*Staying True to SCO Founding Mission and Ushering in a Better Future*", September 1, 2025, Available at: https://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng//zgyw/202509/t20250901_11699345.htm

103 Invest in Azerbaijan, "*Alat Free Economic Zone (AFEZ)"*, Available at: http://invest.gov.az/en/page/investment-opportunities/afez

to note that the majority of investment flows within the SCO are driven by bilateral agreements instead of centralized mechanisms. Thus, the benefits offered would depend on Azerbaijan's ability to negotiate favourable terms and avoid dependence on a single actor. Although, by becoming a member Azerbaijan could participate more broadly in SCO events which are held in China and in other SCO member states, which would increase negotiation opportunities in economic areas.

The benefits of SCO membership include political engagement extensively. Membership also contributes to the visibility of Azerbaijan in the political arena, allowing it to be fully integrated into the organizations' structure. Being part of the SCO increases interaction of Azerbaijan with major powers in high level meetings and working groups. This would provide Azerbaijan a stronger formal status and greater participation in discussions.[104] It also would create good conditions for Azerbaijan to learn from other member states' governance and practices in areas such as trade, transport logistics, and regional development. Over time, these exchanges could positively impact domestic institutional capacity and the effectiveness of policymaking. Additionally, if Azerbaijan were to become a member of the SCO, it would benefit from the strategic balancing via which it can carefully manage relations with global powers. Thus, Azerbaijan would not be perceived as a country leaning exclusively Eastward and Westward.[105] Another visibility benefit is that full members rotate in hosting the annual SCO Summits, which are the most important meetings within the SCO framework. Azerbaijan already having served as the Chair of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Chair of Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) as well as the host of COP29 has proven that it is an exceptional host for high-level summits and meetings and organizes them very well. Therefore, becoming an SCO member would allow it to host one of the upcoming annual summits and include its citizens and youth in the preparatory process as well.

Dr. Cao Jiahan, in his response, reinforces the idea that SCO's economic impact might be limited because it is not an economic bloc, has no tariffs or strong economic integration, and no immediate economic benefits should be expected.[106] It may also positively affect development of economic relations with China. Considering the fact that Azerbaijan is already exporting oil and gas to Europe, SCO membership would only deepen engagement with Asian energy consumers. This could potentially lead to the long-term contracts, joint projects, and the development of pipelines and transit networks.

Ultimately, potential benefits of being a member, should be understood as conditional and cumulative, since they depend not only on formal accession, but also on the country's ability to upgrade infrastructure, navigate complex geopolitical relationships, and implement domestic reforms. If managed well, membership could accelerate the transition of Azerbaijan from resource dependent economy to diversified trade and logistics hub.

In conclusion, the SCO membership offers a set of benefits including economic, political and other strategic opportunities that align with Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy. For these reasons, we propose a membership path strategy for Azerbaijan over the next several years where Azerbaijan's position can evolve together with SCO's framework evolution and development.

Azerbaijan's membership strategy

Traditionally, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has followed a multi-vector approach as mentioned, as it has strived to balance the ties between China and Western states. So far, Baku has viewed the SCO as a means and platform to advance Azerbaijan's interests in regional security and connectivity without committing to full alignment with the bloc. As a current SCO "dialogue partner" rather than a full member, Azerbaijan has made indications that a decision to integrate more deeply into the SCO will happen gradually and will be driven by its inter-

104 From an interview with Professor Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic on April 13th, 2026

105 Guliyev, V., "SCO Tianjin Summit 2025: Azerbaijan's Expanding Role in Eurasian Cooperation", *Caspian-Alpine Society*, September 2, 2025, Available at: https://caspian-alpine.org/sco-tianjin-summit-2025-azerbaijans-expanding-role-in-eurasian-cooperation/

106 From an interview with Dr. Jiahan Cao on April 22nd, 2026

ests.[107] Over the next few years, the approach towards integration can unfold in three phases: early engagement, selective integration, and conditional alignment. Each of these phases will be characterized by a significant change in strategy informed by specific actions, strategic rationales, and constraints.

Phase 1: Early Engagement

In this phase, the likely strategic action for Azerbaijan involves intensifying its existing engagement with SCO without seeking formal membership. The potential specific actions under this choice involves officials attending all major SCO meetings and working groups, hosting SCO forums on the MC, and negotiating new economic and transport agreements with member states. One of the likely outcomes from these engagements is memorandums of understanding (MoUs) between Baku and Central Asian partners to expand the MC, upgrade port and railway infrastructure, and Baku participating and playing a more prominent role in SCO dialogues relating to security, such as the RATS exercises. Therefore, Azerbaijan would deepen practical cooperation in trade, security, transit, and energy but stopping short of becoming an official member of the SCO.

The strategic rationale for this cautious engagement is to allow Baku to use the SCO as a supplementary platform for regional coordination, instead of as the main driver of the MC. Azerbaijan is already promoting the MC independently despite lacking full SCO membership status through its own infrastructure policy and bilateral partnerships with countries such as China.[108] As a result, Azerbaijan would use SCO at this stage of engagement as a framework for coordinating that agenda within a broader Eurasian system. This posture is critical because many operational segments of the Middle Corridor extend across the territories of SCO members where regulatory alignment, customs facilitation, and infrastructure compatibility hinge on consistent cooperation among the partner governments. Therefore, Azerbaijan's engagement within the SCO framework would help improve its capacity to coordinate its transit operations, minimize fragmentation, and fit its role in the corridor into larger regional transport and trade discourse. Effectively, this strategy improves Azerbaijan's negotiating position as a transit country without compromising its policy goals or undermining its relationship with either the East or the West.

Despite the benefits in this first phase, a long-term strategy is still more advisable. As Dr. Wang mentioned before, China values bilateralism[109] and the general consensus is that membership over dialogue partnership does not pose immediate positive results, it can be extended over a longer timeframe.

Phase 2 : Selective Integration

Under this phase, the likely action involves building on the first phase to deepen institutional ties. Azerbaijan could send experts to SCO committees and participate more frequently in military or police exercises under the auspices of the organization. Strategically, a selective integration approach unlocks full benefits and avoids unnecessary hurdles on the road to quick full membership. Azerbaijan's gradual enrolment into SCO programs would allow it to benefit from Chinese financing to develop its energy infrastructure and transport networks.[110] As a result, Baku would "embed its interactions" and engage with many big powers within a multilateral setting while at the same time neutralizing any frictions in its bilateral relationships. Baku could also use this phase to consolidate its value to the SCO as a key energy producer and transit state. However, the primary advantage of maintaining a SCO partner status is that it enables Azerbaijan to preserve foreign policy flexibility and strategic autonomy.

107 Shahbazov, F., "Azerbaijan Attempts Pragmatic Diplomacy at SCO Summit", *Jamestown Foundation,* September 16, 2025, Available at:https://jamestown.org/azerbaijan-attempts-pragmatic-diplomacy-at-sco-summit/

108 Azernews, "*Azerbaijan aligns with China's Belt and Road strategy through Middle Corridor*", February 22, 2026, Available at: https://www.azernews.az/analysis/253996.html.

109 From a discussion with Dr. Jue Wang on April 14th, 2026

110 Guliyev, V.,"Bridging Green Transitions: Advancing Azerbaijan–China Renewable Energy Cooperation Across Multilateral Platforms", *The Hague Research Institute*, November, 2025, Available at: https://hagueresearch.org/bridging-green-transitions-advancing-azerbaijan-china-renewable-energy-cooperation-across-multilateral-platforms/

The country would emphasize that any steps for cooperation that it takes are complementary to other partnerships and in no way indicate a substitute for Western alliances. However, as mentioned by Krnjevic Miskovic, many existing SCO members maintain reputable bilateral relations with Western powers as well, which is why this point would not create many foreign policy obstacles for Azerbaijan[111].

The main risks and constraints under the second phase include the reactions of SCO member states. For instance, India has already pronounced that it will block Azerbaijan's full membership efforts, and some reports claim that Russia helped India to block Azerbaijan's membership bid.[112] However, the fact that Azerbaijan's bid for SCO membership was reportedly blocked by a single objection, despite broad support from the other member states, underscores that Baku's accession is primarily constrained by a political obstacle rather than any fundamental incompatibility with the organization. This suggests that Azerbaijan can continue strengthening its path toward full membership without the need for drastic domestic changes, building instead on its existing diplomatic engagement and established cooperation with the SCO. As India's veto is closely associated with Azerbaijan's ties with Pakistan, a slow-paced strategy could benefit from the relationship between India and Pakistan evolving in upcoming years. In fact, an ascension strategy similar to India and Pakistan's in 2017 could be followed which will be discussed as a policy recommendation.

Phase 3: Conditional Alignment

In the final phase, Baku would need to decide whether to become a full member or remain as a SCO partner. If it feels that the benefits accrued so far as a non-member have been tangible and consequential for its economy, then Azerbaijan might submit a formal application for membership once again. However, the gains are not consequential enough for its economy, Baku would likely consolidate its ties as a SCO partner state until such a time when it feels that the benefits are worth scaling through full membership. Here, it would benefit Azerbaijan to extend its trajectory even further and follow a very gradual timeline, as suggested by Vusal Guliyev as well.[113]

The strategic rationale for membership would be based on whether the status would give Baku greater influence in the bloc and guarantee long-term benefits. Full membership would give Baku a voice in SCO decision-making on projects. Full membership could also help Azerbaijan achieve a soft tool for balancing its relations with the East and the West. Joining institutions led by China, such as the SCO, has been interpreted as a strategy for Azerbaijan to diversify its strategic options without openly siding against the West.[114] However, if Azerbaijan decides against joining SCO as a full member, it would still enjoy the benefits it does as a non-member currently and maintain sovereign autonomy over its foreign policy. The flexible framework of the SCO allows Baku to remain as a dialogue partner and not put forward another bid without having to stop participating in SCO events and activities.

Due to the flexible nature of the SCO established before, the decision for Azerbaijan is not imminent. Therefore, a detailed policy approach can be produced before acting definitively. Below, we outline some viable policy recommendations for Azerbaijan which can serve as a continuation of its current balancing approach.

Policy Recommendations

1. Prioritise economic dimensions of SCO

The first set of actions that Azerbaijan should focus on, as implied by gathered data, is further gradual economic integration with the SCO members,

111 From an interview with Professor Damjan Krnjevic Miskovic on April 13th, 2026

112 Ostiller, N., "Azerbaijan Claims Russia Helped India Block SCO Membership Bid", *OC Media*, Available at: https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-claims-russia-helped-india-block-sco-membership-bid/

113 From answers to interview questions provided by Dr. Vusal Guliyev on April 12th, 2026

114 Guliyev, V., "SCO Tianjin Summit 2025: Azerbaijan's Expanding Role in Eurasian Cooperation", *Caspian-Alpine Society*, September 2, 2025, Available at: https://caspian-alpine.org/sco-tianjin-summit-2025-azerbaijans-expanding-role-in-eurasian-cooperation/

through instruments provided by the organization, such as SCO Economic and Trade Platform that facilitates resource integration and innovation, ecosystem construction, service, and support initiatives.[115] Azerbaijan plays a crucial role in the region as a transit hub country, which gives Baku leverage in economic terms. A lot of stakeholders are interested in development of the Middle Corridor, and Azerbaijan should take it as an opportunity for deeper SCO integration and further development of its transit role.[116] Under the BRI and the MC projects, Azerbaijan should utilize the SCO framework to consolidate its transit hub position. This recommendation is for the continuation of Azerbaijan's current engagements. For example, participation in the recent Tianjin summit of 2025 is an example of an act which serves the goal of deeper integration with the SCO. However, further actions that bear more economic implications could be taken. These could be investment agreements or other economic partnership commitments. As emphasized by Dr. Wang, China focuses on infrastructure development in the Central and South Asian regions to ensure alternative routes to European markets.[117] In this framework, Azerbaijan should pursue infrastructure-focused development strategy, as it will serve Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy goals by entrenching Baku as a connector state and provide a solid basis for further accession to a full member status at the SCO.

2. Consider SCO Development Strategy 2026-2035

The new development strategy for the organisation for the years 2026-2035 that was signed in the 2025 Tianjin Summit should indicate to Azerbaijan that it should continue engagement with SCO within an economic dimension. The new documents signed into law clearly show SCO's pivot from a security-based organisation into a more economic development bloc[118]. This is very relevant to Azerbaijan as a MC state, and it can join SCO's new development and Global Governance Initiative (GGI) more deeply.

3. Continue promoting Middle Corridor position in SCO events

In line with the economic dimension of SCO, Azerbaijan can continue focusing on being promoted as the Eurasian transit hub connecting China and Asia with Europe. This is what Azerbaijan has been doing since gaining partner status in 2015 and especially since 2022 this has led to trade intensifying[119]. Hence, continuing in this track would combine geopolitics and economics in a strategic manner and help advance Azerbaijan's multifaceted foreign policy as well as integrate the MC promotion with SCO involvement. Azerbaijan's key role in Asia-Europe transportation and leadership in MC initiatives can be strengthened through dialogue within SCO events.[120]

4. Suggest repeating the 2017 accession precedent

Thirdly, as the main obstacle to Azerbaijan's formal ascension to full membership is the Indian veto, Azerbaijan can suggest repeating the 2017 mutual ascension method to mitigate this. In 2017, India and Pakistan became a full member of the SCO at the same time to mitigate regional rivalries. This could be repeated in the upcoming years with Armenia and Azerbaijan ascending to full membership at the same time to present a message of geopolitical stability and cooperation. This could serve

115 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's Trade and Economic Multifunctional Platform, *"Platform Introduction",* Available at: https://sco-temp.org/en/col.jsp?id=101

116 From an interview with Dr. Jiahan Cao on April 22nd, 2026

117 From a discussion with Dr. Jue Wang on April 14th, 2026

118 Xinhua News, "*SCO acts to assume a greater role in development, governance",* September 2, 2025, Available at: https://www.scochina2025.org.cn/en/n3/2025/0902/c518818-20361090.html

119 Guliyev, V.,"Bridging Green Transitions: Advancing Azerbaijan–China Renewable Energy Cooperation Across Multilateral Platforms", *The Hague Research Institute*, November, 2025, Available at: https://hagueresearch.org/bridging-green-transitions-advancing-azerbaijan-china-renewable-energy-cooperation-across-multilateral-platforms/

120 Afandiyev, M., "Azerbaijan strengthens its global role through SCO engagement", *Azernews,* September 1, 2025, Available at: https://www.azernews.az/nation/246824.html

to bypass an Indian veto and be a balancing act within SCO as well. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan formally submitted their membership applications in July and August 2025 respectively[121] so they can retry within a short timeframe of each other once again.

5. Pursue a gradual ascension to membership by lengthening the timeframe

Azerbaijan should formalize a five-year gradual ascension roadmap to SCO membership using the ongoing SCO-linked engagements, and more specifically, upcoming SCO summits to signal commitment without an outright alignment. For example, at a convention such as the recently completed International Forum on Countering Drug Threats convened by the SCO Secretary General in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan should join similar SCO-engagements at the dialogue partner level and publicly frame its involvement as part of a phased integration strategy. At the next SCO Heads of State Council meeting, the country should formally announce its extended ascension timeline whilst volunteering to host a future SCO sectoral forum focused on transit and regional connectivity in Baku, while positioning itself as an important logistical hub. Over time, it should lead targeted initiatives, such as corridor development discussions with India and Central Asia members and progressing toward membership through increased participation in ministerial meetings and SCO working groups without depicting obvious geopolitical alignments. Thus, over a prolonged timeline, Azerbaijan will gradually deepen engagement, build credibility within the organization, and move toward full membership without compromising its strategic flexibility.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyse Azerbaijan's position within the SCO framework currently, examine the benefits of its participation and suggest paths forward for optimal form of integration. The paper answered three research questions thoroughly. We concluded that Azerbaijan should follow a graduate and balancing strategy to slowly advance towards membership by overcoming the current institutional obstacles, whilst not straying away from its foreign policy objectives. For Azerbaijan, dialogue partnership is an addition to its already existing and flourishing relations in Eurasia and either remaining a dialogue partner or becoming a member would not change this reality according to our analysis.

Our recommendations suggest prioritising the economic and visibility benefits that can come from SCO membership over security and geopolitical concerns. We also suggest focusing on SCO's own 2026-2035 development trajectory to align Azerbaijan's plan with and promoting the Middle Corridor discourse further. We also weighed the benefits of becoming a full member which are marginally positive in terms of economic involvement and better negotiating options as a MC power but significantly better in terms of Azerbaijan's political visibility on multilateral platforms. This informed our recommendation of becoming a member gradually as it does not pose drastic benefits which would require urgency. Our recommendations are for Azerbaijan to seek smooth continuation of its current policies rather than go for a drastic change or policy shift.

We conclude that being a dialogue partner of the SCO is very beneficial for Azerbaijan in geopolitical as well as economic spheres and a steady, balanced trajectory towards membership can be taken within 5-years' time as Azerbaijan continues to participate in SCO-related activities in its current status.

121 Tass Russian News Agency, *"Armenia, Azerbaijan apply for full-fledged membership in SCO — top Armenian diplomat",* August 28, 2025, Available at: https://tass.com/world/2008243

Appendix

AFEZ – Alat Free Economic Zone
ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI – Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CICA – Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CPEC – China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU – European Union
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
FDI – Foreign Direct Investment
GGI – Global Governance Initiative
IDD – Institute for Development and Diplomacy
INSTC – International North-South Transport Corridor
MC – Middle Corridor
NAM – Non-Aligned Movement
RATS – Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure
SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SIIS – Shanghai Institute for International Studies
TRIPP – Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity
USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO – World Trade Organization

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NOTE

NOTE

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REPORT

SCO: Azerbaijan Participation and Its Benefit

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BAKU - 2026

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