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Between Summits: Azerbaijan's Role in EU–China Engagement with Central Asia

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Introduction

With 93 countries and a population of about 5 billion, or roughly 70% of the world's populace, the Eurasian continent is the largest landmass on Earth. In the midst of this enormous diversity, Eurasia is becoming a region where a number of integration projects are developing, all of which seek to deepen the political, economic, and cultural bonds between nations. Although integration processes in Eurasia take different forms and operate in different directions, their success could improve the region's standing internationally and offer new models of collaboration that could advance global peace and stability.

In this context, as the central link of Eurasia, Central Asia plays an important role in the formation of all integration processes and cooperation models within the region. In the context of global challenges and the rapidly changing global geopolitical architecture, Central Asian countries are demonstrating their readiness to actively participate in international processes, strengthening their role as an important subject of international politics. Although Central Asia consists of five independent countries, there's a growing sense of regional coordination—especially when it comes to engaging with major global partners. While the region doesn't act as a single unified bloc, its countries are increasingly finding common ground on key issues, allowing Central Asia to play a more active and visible role in today's shifting international landscape.

As Eurasia's geopolitical environment changes dramatically, a period of strategic recalibration, marked by heightened competition for influence and growing regional integration, has been marked by two recent high-level diplomatic engagements: Central Asia's collective summits with the European Union and the People's Republic of China. The five Central Asian nations—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are progressively embracing a multifaceted foreign policy strategy whilst fortifying their political, economic, and infrastructure connections with Beijing and Brussels. This shows a growing regional desire for autonomy and strategic agency in addition to a practical reaction to changes in the global balance of power.

The implications for the Republic of Azerbaijan in particular, as well as for the larger Eurasian region, are extensive and intricate in this regard. Despite being physically outside of the core Central Asian region, Azerbaijan is nevertheless closely linked to it through long-standing historical, cultural, and linguistic ties as well as vital

shared infrastructure, most notably the construction of the Trans-Caspian corridor, also known as the Middle Corridor. Azerbaijan is positioned as a potentially essential component in the developing East-West connectivity architecture because of these interdependencies. Azerbaijan can become a crucial player in the changing Eurasian landscape as Central Asia rearranges its external alignments and domestic development plans. It must not only maintain its status as an essential transit hub but also actively participate in determining the strategic direction of the region through increased diplomatic, economic, and infrastructure engagement.

The Central Asia–EU and Central Asia–China Summits: A Balancing Strategy

Recent trends demonstrate that Central Asian countries are choosing a policy of balancing between the major powers surrounding the region. This is reflected particularly by the abovementioned events, which have taken place in the region over the past 3 months: the EU-Central Asia Summit, held in April 2025, and the Central Asia-China Summit, held in June 2025.

On April 3–4, the city of Samarkand hosted the inaugural European Union–Central Asia summit, marking the beginning of a new phase in their strategic partnership. Discussions focused on expanding cooperation in key areas such as trade, transportation, energy, digital connectivity, and water resource management. During the summit, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a €12 billion (approximately \$13.2 billion)¹ investment package under the Global Gateway initiative. The funds are intended to strengthen collaboration with the region in areas such as transport infrastructure, critical raw materials, clean energy development, and digital connectivity.

The EU’s Global Gateway initiative reflects its shift from pursuing reactive policy to proactive engagement. In today’s geopolitical context, infrastructure projects are no longer neutral and in isolation from geopolitical trends; they are used by powers like the EU and China to promote their governance models and shape regional alignments. Projects under Global Gateway focus on digital and climate-resilient infrastructure, including smart borders in Georgia, clean logistics hubs in Kazakhstan, and port development in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan’s role extends beyond logistics—it is an energy anchor for Europe, supplying natural gas to 10 European countries, eight of which are EU member states².

¹ EU pledges €12 billion to consolidate its position in Central Asia (2025).

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-pledges-e12-billion-to-consolidate-its-position-in-central-asia/>.

² Establishing a Strategic Partnership Framework: Azerbaijan, Central Asia and the European Union in a Shifting Geopolitical Order (2025) Aircenter.az. https://aircenter.az/uploads/1ivzE_dxjc57.pdf.

In a world increasingly defined by the speed and resilience of connections, the European Union has recognized that infrastructure is not just about trade—it is also about power, influence, and values. Through its Global Gateway initiative, the EU is charting a course toward shaping global connectivity on new terms, guided by sustainability, transparency, and geopolitical balance. This strategy is particularly relevant in regions like Central Asia and the South Caucasus, where the struggle for influence between global powers is increasingly playing out through infrastructure development.

At its core, the EU's connectivity approach reflects a desire to offer an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, rather than engaging in direct rivalry, the EU positions itself as a partner committed to fair competition, where projects are aligned with democratic principles, environmental sustainability, and local ownership. The Global Gateway, launched in 2021, is the embodiment of this vision—mobilizing up to €300 billion in public and private investments globally by 2027³.

On June 16-18, Astana hosted the second China–Central Asia Summit with the participation of the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Following the meeting, the Treaty on Eternal Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation and the Astana Declaration were signed, which consolidated common approaches to regional cooperation. In recent years, China and Central Asia have expanded economic cooperation. The Central Asian region has become the main link of the Belt and Road initiative, and since its launch, mutual trade between the region and China has grown by almost 35%, exceeding \$100 billion last year⁴.

In addition to the Astana Declaration, more than 50 documents were signed between China and the countries of Central Asia during the summit. Besides that, during the summit, the parties presented 31 joint initiatives reflecting the desire to deepen cooperation in key areas. An agreement on trade diversification, simplification of procedures, and updating of the investment agreement was also reached during the event. Among the initiatives, particular attention was given to measures aimed at facilitating the movement of citizens and enhancing consular and tourism cooperation. Furthermore, support was expressed for a comprehensive

³ Ruggi, T. (2025) 'China in Europe: April 2025,' Council on Foreign Relations, 1 May. <https://www.cfr.org/article/china-europe-april-2025>.

⁴ Second China-Central Asia summit concludes in Astana with call for multipolar world order (2025). <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/06/18/second-china-central-asia-summit-concludes-in-astana-with-call-for-multipolar-world-order/>

energy partnership that would encompass the entire value chain—from extraction to processing⁵.

Among the key projects discussed at the summit, the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan International Railway (CKU) was of particular note. The railway is expected to be completed by 2030, with its overall budget estimated at approximately \$8 billion. This railway is seen as a key strategic route with the potential to reshape Eurasia’s transit infrastructure. Looking ahead, the CKU line is expected to link with the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TMTM or Middle Corridor), positioning Azerbaijan as a vital component of this broader corridor.

Both the European Union and China have expressed growing interest in the development of the Middle Corridor, recognizing its potential as a reliable alternative for East–West trade. Azerbaijan plays a central role in this initiative, offering a strategic transit route that provides a shorter and more efficient connection between Western China and Europe—one that bypasses both Russian and Iranian territory. This enhances the corridor’s geopolitical value and positions Azerbaijan as a critical link in the emerging network of transcontinental infrastructure.

The Middle Corridor as a Strategic Link Across Eurasia

The Middle Corridor spans China, Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, connecting East Asia to Europe. Once viewed as supplementary to the Northern Route through Russia, its strategic profile has grown amid rising geopolitical tensions. According to OECD data, freight volumes along the Northern Route fell by 50% in 2023, while Middle Corridor traffic surged by 89%, followed by an additional growth of 70% in 2024⁶.

Despite this momentum, the corridor still handles only a fraction of total China–Europe trade. In 2024, only six million tons of goods transited through this route—far below the Northern Route’s capacity of 100 million tons. Operational inefficiencies, infrastructure limitations, and regulatory mismatches remain significant barriers⁷.

In 2024, Azerbaijan reported that it transported 18.5 million tons of goods via the corridor—a 5.7% increase from 2023. Kazakhstan’s rail freight volume reached

⁵ Key outcomes of the second China-Central Asia Summit (2025). <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202506/19/WS68534601a310a04af22c71bd.html>.

⁶ Realising the Potential of the Middle Corridor (2023). https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/realising-the-potential-of-the-middle-corridor_635ad854-en.html.

⁷ Ibid.

4.1 million tons, reflecting 63% year-on-year growth. This progress underscores growing regional commitment to the corridor's development⁸.

The Middle Corridor offers significant advantages in terms of transit time. Shipments from China to Europe now take just 10–20 days—nearly half the time required for maritime routes. However, the corridor remains economically less attractive, with freight costs ranging from \$6,000–\$7,000 per container—2 to 8 times higher than sea transport⁹.

For Azerbaijan, the corridor is not merely a logistical route—it is a geopolitical asset. Baku's strategic location enables it to connect with China, Central Asia, Türkiye, and the EU simultaneously. Azerbaijan's expanding infrastructure—such as the Port of Baku and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway—supports its ambition to become both a regional hub and a policy leader¹⁰.

Given its geographical location and its role as a developing logistics center, Azerbaijan has become a crucial component of the Middle Corridor and its growth as a transport route. The nation has invested heavily in modernizing its transportation infrastructure over the past ten years, including developing new ports, enhancing rail connections, and enlarging roadways. Azerbaijan's status as a dependable link between the East and the West has been reinforced by these initiatives, which have made it simpler and quicker to transport commodities over its territory. Azerbaijan's constant emphasis on efficiency, from cross-border logistics to customs procedures, is another characteristic that makes it a unique location. Baku, however, has not been afraid to voice its concerns. President Ilham Aliyev made it crystal clear that Azerbaijan expects to have “a seat at the table” in significant and influential regional projects, particularly those like the Global Gateway which directly affect corridors passing through its territory. This position was reiterated after the country was left out of the EU-Central Asia meeting in Samarkand. For Azerbaijan, participation in the Middle Corridor project is about long-term impact and strategic recognition as opposed to purely economic gain¹¹.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Azerbaijan aiming to increase Baku Port's cargo turnover 1.7-fold in (2025). <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/109764/>.

¹⁰ The Middle Corridor Remains Supplementary to Major Trade Routes between the EU and China (2025). <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13864-the-middle-corridor-remains-supplementary-to-major-trade-routes-between-the-eu-and-china.html>.

¹¹ Strengthening South Caucasian identity (2025). <https://aze.media/strengthening-south-caucasian-identity/>.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries are continuing their efforts to position themselves at the heart of the quickly evolving EU and China dynamic, which vis-à-vis the Central Asian region fluctuates from competition to selective and targeted engagement and even cooperation. This applies particularly to the sphere of green transition, technological innovation, and global governance. The EU's regulatory strength and China's green manufacturing capabilities position both as global and highly influential players in sustainable development. Joint efforts in carbon markets, smart cities, and environmental technology signal a shift from confrontation to pragmatic synergy.

For countries like Azerbaijan, this evolving EU–China dynamic presents opportunities. By aligning with sustainability goals and digital innovation initiatives, Azerbaijan can deepen its role within the Middle Corridor—not just as a logistics hub, but as a participant in the broader transition toward green, and smart infrastructure which is rules-based and governed fairly¹².

Hence, although political and economic competition between the West and East remains a defining feature of global affairs, both the EU–Central Asia and China–Central Asia summits have demonstrated a notable point of alignment: a shared commitment to developing regional infrastructure, particularly in the energy and transport sectors. Despite their differing strategies, both the European Union and China view improved connectivity across Eurasia as a priority—and the Middle Corridor stands out as a key element of this vision. As a route that offers a practical alternative to traditional paths through Russia and Iran, it holds strategic value for both sides. In this context, Azerbaijan's role becomes especially significant, serving as a vital link that can facilitate cooperation across seemingly competing frameworks.

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¹² Awan, Engr.Z.A. (2025) A new horizon in EU-China relations. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/05/10/a-new-horizon-in-eu-china-relations/>.