FROM C5+1 TO C6: AZERBAIJAN'S FULL PARTICIPATION RECASTS CENTRAL ASIAN REGIONAL COOPERATION

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The Eighth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State (CMHS) of Central Asia was held on October 8, 2026, in Awaza, Turkmenistan. It was the first meeting at which Azerbaijan was represented as a full-fledged member of the format. More significantly, the Awaza meeting can be regarded as an effort to provide content to the expanded format since the parties adopted a Joint Statement and decided on the regulatory documents of the Consultative Meeting, designating the format Chair in 2027 to Azerbaijan. The inclusion of Azerbaijan will not transform the Consultative Meeting into a supra-state structure or an integration association. The forum remains built on the principle of consensus and consciously maintains its flexibility. The inclusion of Azerbaijan has nevertheless shifted the geographical focus and agenda of the meeting. The Caspian Sea will connect the countries, not separate them, placing Trans-Caspian transportation and energy cooperation as well as other issues of cooperation and ecology on the agenda.

BACKGROUND: CMHS is the outcome of developments in intra-regional relations due to the changing political environment in Uzbekistan from 2016 onwards. Instead of forming one more intergovernmental organization on the basis of a binding treaty, the five Central Asian countries created a leadership-oriented consultation and coordination mechanism. During the Awaza summit, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev explicitly stated his opposition to "cumbersome structures" and advocated for a flexible format of cooperation of sovereign states based on respect and pragmatism.

The importance of Azerbaijan's involvement increased gradually. Baku was asked to participate in previous gatherings as a guest since its cooperation with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan was developing politically, economically and in transport. Azerbaijan was acknowledged by all Central Asian presidents as one of the full-fledged members of the group in November 2025. The informal consultative meeting in Cholpon-Ata in July 2026 and the adoption of the Cholpon-Ata Declaration helped establish the first CMHS involving the six presidents in Awaza.

The CMHS on October 8 did more than just confirm the format's enlargement. According to Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, the trade volume between Azerbaijan and Central Asia increased by 50 percent in the past year, and more than 400 enterprises with capital from Central Asian countries operate in Azerbaijan. Baku also established joint investment funds with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and cooperation in transport, energy transit, information technologies and renewable energy is growing.

Azerbaijan's involvement in the C6 format is most significant in the transport area. The Middle Corridor passes through Azerbaijan and connects Central Asia with Georgia, Türkiye, and Europe. It has become increasingly relevant for the Central Asian states seeking access to Western markets through the Caspian Sea. According to Aliyev, the volume of cargo transported via the Middle Corridor increased by more than 10 percent in 2025 and by nearly 20 percent in the first eight months of 2026.

IMPLICATIONS: The inclusion of Azerbaijan expands the CMHS format while avoiding any attempts to change its geographic identity and creating a new regional concept in which connectivity becomes the main element.

Another implication is the shift from trade to production. The most significant idea put forward at the Awaza summit was Mirziyoyev's proposed new economic objective of "six economies – one product," implying that companies in different countries that partake in the cooperation will be involved in the same value chain instead of trading. Uzbekistan

also proposed to organize the “Central Asia-Azerbaijan” business forum in Khiva during 2027.

This will perfectly suit Azerbaijan’s appeal to the participating states to “invest together, produce together, and enter foreign markets together,” providing for more industrial zones, factories, logistics centers and investment projects along the corridor.

The meeting also addressed institutional development. The leaders adopted regulatory documents for the CMHS, while Uzbekistan proposed developing a dedicated legal framework. However, Mirziyoyev emphasized that implementation mattered more than the number of documents adopted. Greater institutionalization could improve coordination, but excessive formalization risks undermining the mechanism’s flexibility.

Transport coordination is likely to remain the most practical area of cooperation. Uzbekistan proposed establishing a Council for Infrastructure Development to coordinate transport projects and integrate national infrastructure into a broader regional framework. This initiative aligns with the development of the Baku International Sea Trade Port.

Cooperation also extends to energy resources. Oil from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is transported through Azerbaijan’s transport network, while the three countries are developing a green energy corridor to supply Western markets. These initiatives highlight the Middle Corridor’s potential for energy cooperation and digital connectivity, including the installation of fibre-optic cables beneath the Caspian Sea.

Environmental challenges are equally significant. Azerbaijan has raised concerns about declining water levels in the Caspian Sea, which could influence coastal infrastructure and increase the costs and reduce the efficiency of maritime transport.

Finally, Azerbaijan’s participation brings about a convergence of interests with the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), an important instrument of Baku’s foreign policy. Four of the six C6 countries are OTS members, while Turkmenistan holds observer status. Tajikistan, with its distinct linguistic and cultural identity, participates in other regional cooperation frameworks. The OTS has also gained importance in Azerbaijan’s security policy. At the October 2025 Gabala summit, President Ilham Aliyev proposed joint military exercises and subsequently emphasized defense and security cooperation in September 2026. Rather than competing with the OTS, however, the C6 format offers a broader platform for regional cooperation.

However, the expanded format faces geopolitical constraints, reflecting the six states’ differing relations with Russia, China, Türkiye, the EU, and the U.S. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan remain members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also belong to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Turkmenistan maintains its policy of permanent neutrality, while Tajikistan pursues distinct foreign policy and security priorities.

CONCLUSIONS: Azerbaijan’s full inclusion in the Consultative Meeting represents not merely a symbolic expansion but a structural extension of Central Asian regional cooperation. The Awaza meeting on October 8 demonstrated that the expanded format could facilitate more practical cooperation on production chains, infrastructure, investment, energy corridors, digitalization, and environmental challenges.

However, the significance of the C6 format should not be overstated. It is neither a formal organization nor an alliance, and its participants retain their sovereignty and distinct foreign policy orientations. Its potential instead lies in providing a platform for political coordination among six states connected by the Caspian Sea and increasingly integrated through transport, energy, and investment corridors, enabling them to align their interests.

Azerbaijan’s first chairmanship in 2027 will provide an important test of the format’s potential. If Baku succeeds in translating the initiatives proposed at the Awaza meeting into concrete projects, the transition from C5 to C6 could mark a significant step towards broader regional cooperation across the Trans-Caspian region.

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