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Optimizing Azerbaijan's CICA Chairmanship

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The Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) is a multinational and multi-lateral platform designed to enhance dialogue and foster cooperation among its 28 member states, including Azerbaijan. With a mission to improve security, stability, and confidence-building in the region, CICA stands out as a unique format that focuses exclusively on security issues, distinct from frameworks like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It is, in fact, the most inclusive pan-Asian security forum.

Currently, the established Western-centric security formats

are experiencing erosion and legitimacy crises that undermine their ability to address the security concerns of Eurasia in general and the Silk Road region in particular. Consequently, CICA's role as an exclusively non-Western security platform is gaining prominence across Asia. Azerbaijan's 2024-2026 CICA chairmanship presents a strategic opportunity to advance regional and pan-Asian security cooperation—or at least serve as a more effective platform for dialogue, free from the presence of outsiders.

Drawing on its successful experience in advancing efforts to institutionalize the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Azerbaijan,

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with its growing influence in multilateral formats, is well-positioned to advance the process to transform CICA from a discussion format into a more structured and impactful platform—that is to say, into a fully-fledged intergovernmental organization. To that end, this paper offers concrete and actionable policy proposals to ensure that Azerbaijan's chairmanship is productive and beneficial for its member states. None are game-changing, but taken as a whole, we believe they can help move the needle noticeably forward.

Our approach is informed by a conviction that CICA can support Azerbaijan in navigating an increasingly complex geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape, promoting security in Asia through various confidence-building measures (CBMs), and fostering new partnerships across the continent. Parts of this paper should thus also be understood as contributing to the discourse on the expanding role of the non-Western regional multilateral frameworks in a changing and highly fragmented international order.

Context

The proposal to establish CICA was put forward on 5 October 1992 by then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan at the UN General Assembly. The primary objective of this initiative was to establish a robust and comprehensive organization for peace and security in Asia.

The main initial documents regulating the activities of CICA are the Declaration on the Principles Guiding Relations between CICA Member States, adopted in 1999, and the Almaty Act, adopted in 2002.

By the Sixth Meeting of CICA Ministers of Foreign Affairs in 2021, Nazarbayev's successor as President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, was in a position to state that "CICA already possesses all the essential features of an international organization, including foundational documents, decisionmaking and working bodies, operational budget, and Permanent Secretariat." At the same time, CICA has become "matchless in terms of inclusiveness and representativeness. [...] CICA is not only a pan-Asian security mechanism, but also

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an epitome of Asia's complicated security environment," as Chen Donxiao, President of Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), has written.

In contrast to the Western Hemisphere and the European continent, Asia has been relatively lacking in collective structures for ensuring peace and security in the region. After the dissolution of the USSR, the emergence of a new geopolitical order further necessitated a structured framework for establishing cooperation in Asia.

It stands to reason that the historical, political, economic, and geographical heterogeneity of Asian countries challenges the ease of structural unity as opposed to Europe and the Americas. However, the implementation of ground-level CBMs enhances interstate cooperation efforts. In addition, considering the political priorities of Western coalitions, the shared challenges of Asian countries were not adequately addressed by existing international organizations. Thus, CICA is a forum that recognizes a close link between peace, security,

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The logic of this approach can be presented as follows: in an increas-

ingly interconnected and interdependent world, regional security cannot be evaluated in isolation, as the security environment in one region can have a spillover effect in others. Thus, ensuring lasting peace and voicing the unheard concerns of the states lies at the core principles of CICA. Such principles include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Establishing peace, security, and stability in Asia;
- Strengthening cooperation through multilateral approaches;
- Promoting trade and economic cooperation;
- Partnership on environmental protection issues;
- Cooperation within the framework of CBMs in the humanitarian field;
- Combating illicit drug trafficking;
- Fighting against terrorism in all of its forms and manifestations;

- Promoting dialogues among civilizations, cultures, and religions; and
- Cooperation to promote connectivity through modes of transport linkages

CICA has also been influenced by some of those who championed the establishment of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which eventually became the OSCE, which identifies itself as the world's largest regional security organization, with nearly 60 participating states from North America, Europe, and Asia. In fact, CICA was conceived at least in part as a mechanism to initiate an Asian version of the CSCE's "Helsinki Agenda."

The aims and activities of both groupings converge in areas such as the political-economic dimension of security, combating terrorism, conflict prevention, economic and environmental activities, and cooperation in the human dimension, coinciding with the OSCE's "three baskets." There are also similarities between CICA's CBMs and those outlined in the Helsinki Final Act.

However, CICA should not be viewed as the "Asian analogue" to the CSCE, or be identified as "Asia's OSCE," because the nature of the challenges faced by

the CICA region is considerably different from those that were or are currently being faced in the OSCE space. Moreover, the CSCE was established in the context of the détente phase of the Cold War, with its members divided into three main groups, namely, the West (NATO), the East (Warsaw Pact) and the Neutral and Non-Aligned Countries (NNAC), which managed to co-exist in an era of relative peace but sometimes high tension. During that same period, what is now the CICA space witnessed horrific and brutal conflicts. But this did not result in the establishment of a CSCE-equivalent—not only for geopolitical reasons, but also for socio-economic ones.

Fast-forwarding to 2025 highlights that the OSCE itself is facing its most acute legitimacy crisis among any intergovernmental security organization worldwide. Understanding the reasons behind this phenomenon is essential for CICA member states to minimize risks on the path to CICA's institutional development.

The rise of regionalism in the post-Cold War era reflects the relative increase in the political and economic weight of the "rest" compared to the West. In one of his writings, Italian political scientist Giovanni Barbieri identified

“non-Western” regionalism as generally addressing “sovereignty concerns” and prioritizing “boundary preservation” while noting that “regional institutions in those areas show a tendency towards low levels of formality, light bureaucracies, and non-binding outcomes.”

The foregoing seems to describe the overarching posture of CICA member states, none of whom are interested in pursuing modes of cooperation that would soften sovereignty in favor of anything that resembles “political integration,” which in turn results in the loss of sovereignty through “pooling.” The practical application of this cornerstone of Asian statecraft sometimes makes it easier, rather than harder, to forge a positive form of consensus, as all member states appear to be in sufficient agreement on the outer limits of what can be achieved through CICA. This includes a strong awareness of geopolitical circumstances, both within the CICA space (its pan-Asian context) and more broadly.

Institutional Evolution

CICA is in the midst of transitioning into a more fully-fledged international organization, focusing on promoting peace, security, integration, and

cooperation across Asia. The current stage of this process started with the adoption of the Roadmap for CICA Transformation at the CICA Ministerial Council Meeting on 9 September 2023. According to the relevant document, the goals of transformation consist of “defining the overarching areas of future cooperation [across Asia] and strengthening the organizational and institutional base of [member states’] interaction.” The institutional transition process has been one of the main focus areas ever since.

Within the framework of ongoing reform, CICA is positioning itself to serve as Asia’s premier discussion platform, where all member states can gather to exchange views and clarify their positions. The central focus of CICA’s institutional development and transformation is to strengthen its framework, expand its regional and global influence, and address contemporary challenges faced by member states through structured initiatives and strategies.

As part of its institutional development, CICA now implements CBMs across what the relevant document calls “five dimensions of cooperation with 18 priority areas,” namely: military-political dimension; new challenges and threats

(combating terrorism, ICT security, combating illicit drugs, epidemiological safety, public health and pharmaceuticals); economic dimension (small and medium enterprises development, energy security, information technology, tourism, secure transportation corridors, agriculture, finance, trade and investment); environmental dimension (sustainable development, natural disaster management, environmental protection); and human dimension.

This is, more or less, where things stand at present, as Azerbaijan approaches the midpoint of its chairmanship of a perhaps soon-to-be fully-fledged intergovernmental organization, in which geographic belonging is the primary factor driving the cooperation process.

In other words, nothing resembling the “Asian values” period of the 1990s, which suggested a substantive or normative conception of a “pan-Asian identity,” is presently on offer in the context of CICA. This lack of “Asian awareness,” as Chen Dongxiao has put it, represents an often-underappreciated impediment to the establishment of an overarching security mechanism in the region.

Chairmanship Priorities

The priorities of Azerbaijan’s CICA chairmanship revolve around its chosen theme, namely “Stronger CICA, Connectivity, Digitalization, and Sustainable Growth in Asia.” Baku’s focus is on transport connectivity, promoting small and medium enterprises (SMEs), women’s entrepreneurship, the green economy, and fostering people-to-people contacts, tourism potential, and additional CICA Youth Council activities.

The country has also emphasized its intention and willingness to explore the promotion of humanitarian demining as an area of interaction within CICA to address the challenges faced by several member states due to contamination of their lands/territories with landmines and explosive remnants of war. By focusing on such a concrete and non-polarizing issue within its CICA chairmanship, Azerbaijan has the potential to reassert itself as an advocate for peace, security, and stability in the region, thereby highlighting a problem that continues directly to undermine its national security.

It is against this background that we offer the following set of four interrelated modest proposals and

recommendations for advancing Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship. We repeat: none are game-changing, but taken as a whole, we believe they can help move the needle forward.

Recommendations

First, leverage the CICA chairmanship to showcase Azerbaijan's identity as a non-aligned, multicultural hub connecting Europe and Asia. Aside from substantive considerations, this recommendation also falls within the purview of "public diplomacy." We will not reiterate or elaborate on what one of the premier scholars on this topic, Alan K. Henrikson, wrote on the subject in the Winter 2023-2024 edition of *Baku Dialogues*. Instead, we will refer to a remark made by John H. Herz (most famous for having conceived of the concept of the "security dilemma") in 1981: "It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that today half of power politics consists of image making. With the rising importance of publics in foreign affairs, image making has steadily increased."

The conduct of member states within international organizations has the potential to either

bolster or tarnish an organization's reputation. Keystone states, such as Azerbaijan, particularly regard the potential of international organizations as a platform through which they can engage in discourse, frame global issues, and construct new identities in their relationships through multilateralism and coalition-building. They also tend to focus on policy areas where they have the most competence and discursive capacity, and then build upon that foundation.

Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship activities should be understood in light of the foregoing—that is to say, to be in the service of helping the country both entrench and more successfully project an image that builds up its international standing and reputation. An Uzbekistan-based scholar, Jovhar Museyibzada, has noted that past Azerbaijani multilateral chairmanships have helped the country establish a "positive identity [abroad] by increasing awareness, reducing negative perceptions, and providing authentic associations." Therefore, through its chairmanship of CICA, Azerbaijan has the opportunity to elevate its pan-Asian standing and reputation as a country that genuinely and actively contributes to confidence-building efforts.

Second, utilize the CICA chairmanship to leverage the low-risk/high-reward potential of on-the-job training for Azerbaijani junior diplomats and civil servants, thereby building capacity for future multilateral engagements. This is an under-appreciated advantage of CICA's nascent stage of institutional development. Such an initiative, which should extend past Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship, could go beyond the standard operating procedure of supporting various meetings hosted in Baku or other parts of the country. Opportunities for seconding staff at CICA headquarters in Almaty should also be considered, along with arrangements to work alongside friendly foreign diplomats in CICA ministries (foreign ministries but also line ministries). This could also include one-on-one exchanges of junior diplomats.

A related approach could involve funding targeted executive training courses (through ADA University, which is already a standard practice) that focus specifically on multilateral diplomacy, emphasizing organizations such as CICA, OTS, OIC, the D-8, and others.

The logic here is CICA-wide: diplomats and civil servants in all CICA member states need to get to know each other much better

than they currently do. Any reasonable initiative or program that can achieve this should be seriously considered.

Third, utilize the CICA chairmanship to focus more broadly on the next generation. This should involve taking the CICA Youth Council (YCICA) to the next level by engaging young people from CICA member states.

We understand that Baku is already working on this, as youth engagement is a key element of Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship. Within the framework of YCICA, the chairmanship has already planned various events. Some have already taken place: the International Essay Contest for CICA Youth was held in March 2025, and the CICA Youth Brainstorming Competition in April 2025. Three other events are expected to take place in the fourth quarter of 2025: a Side Event on "SDGs in Action" on the sidelines of the 8th CICA Youth Council Meeting, the 8th CICA Youth Council Meeting itself, and a Rally of the Volunteer Movement Leaders of CICA Countries.

However, we recommended that more be done.

For instance, we propose establishing a *national* CICA Youth

Platform. Azerbaijan did something similar in the nascent stage of establishing, first, a NAM youth network and then, in 2021, the NAM Youth Organization (NAMYO). This could involve selecting aspiring diplomats and civil servants (advanced undergraduate and graduate students) to volunteer or observe expert-level CICA meetings chaired by Azerbaijan through internship and traineeship opportunities.

At the CICA level, the Partner Network of Leading Universities (PLNU) program, which ADA University coordinates, could be expanded to include students, not just faculty and staff at these universities. This could take the form of establishing a format similar to the Model United Nations (MUN). Therefore, a ModelCICA could be launched, and simulations mimicking MUN conference formats could be organized.

Simulation conferences have become increasingly popular among Azerbaijani youth organizations in recent years (e.g., BSU, 2024; ICYF-ERC, 2024; IOM, 2023). The Azerbaijani Student Youth Organizations Union has been actively building an MUN community and organizing various large-scale youth conferences that simulate the UN, ICJ, OIC, NATO, and other international organizations. These efforts have involved youths

from universities and even high schools, helping to familiarize young people with these institutions from an early age.

A sets of steps similar to NAMYO's implementation could be used for CICA. A Youth Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia could be organized in 2026. With support from student organizations and intra-university groups such as university simulation conference clubs, this Youth Conference could be popularized and attract many young participants. The organizers of other youth conferences could help organize the initial events and committees.

Consistently organizing different types of YCICA events will increase the number of young people familiar with the format and willing to use their energy to improve CICA later on. Many young people who have participated in simulation conferences of various organizations have gone on to work in actual diplomatic roles, contributing to the meetings of the organizations they had simulated as university students.

Fourth, leverage the CICA chairmanship to advance CICA's institutional development. Focusing on less contentious issues,

such as economic connectivity and humanitarian demining, can help build consensus and strengthen CICA's organizational framework in order to achieve the adoption of the CICA Charter by 2026. This may also involve adjusting the approach Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship takes for this effort.

Unless institutionalized, CICA will remain merely a declaration of intent rather than a forum where security issues are addressed in a coordinated fashion. As previously discussed, institutionalization has been a primary goal and focus for CICA, and previous chairmanships have taken steps toward this aim.

During his visit to Azerbaijan, CICA Secretary-General Kairat Sarybay stated that "CICA member states view transformation as an evolutionary process and do not set artificial deadlines for its completion." He also mentioned that "the most important task of Azerbaijan's presidency will be the successful completion of the transformation negotiation process with the adoption of the CICA Charter at the next CICA Summit in 2026." By

applying lessons learned from Azerbaijan's chairmanship in other multilateral frameworks, including the organization of an annual Special Working Group event, implementing CBMs concerning each state, and providing platforms for youth and women, CICA can achieve better institutionalization and exert considerable influence over the region.

Azerbaijan's CICA chairmanship presents a transformative opportunity to strengthen CICA's role in coordinating security cooperation in Asia. By leveraging its geopolitical position, diplomatic expertise, and commitment to inclusive multilateralism, Azerbaijan can make a significant contribution to building a more connected, stable, and prosperous Asia. These efforts would not only boost CICA's standing and influence but also enhance Azerbaijan's reputation as a dynamic leader in the changing landscape of international relations. Our proposals and recommendations were presented with the above considerations in mind. ^{BD}