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Azerbaijan's Multivectoral Multilateralism

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Azerbaijan's Multilateralist Posture

Yalchin Rafiyev

Baku Dialogues:

We are honored to feature an interview with Mr. Yalchin Rafiyev, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Lead Negotiator for COP29. The general topic of this conversation is multilateralism and Azerbaijan's growing involvement in various multilateral forums.

Mr. Deputy Foreign Minister, let's focus the bulk of our time together on the newer multilateral organizations—the ones that are contributing to a transformation of the way that the world sees multilateralism. Perhaps a good starting point is for you to outline Azerbaijan's overall posture toward multilateralism, which, of course, begins with the UN, the world's sole *universal* multilateral, inter-governmental institution.

Rafiyev:

Azerbaijan is a firm believer in—and a strong advocate of—multilateralism. That is our view, full stop. As a country that is not part of any political or military alliance, Azerbaijan has always counted on the multilateral system to work for the advancement of justice—for the restoration of justice—in world politics. In our case, this was primarily in relation to the conflict that we had for about three decades, but at the same time, to all the

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issues that we have experienced, including the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, Azerbaijan held the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement. And the multilateral system at that time worked for humanity through the World Health Organization and others.

This testifies to the fact that, sometimes, those UN specialized multilateral institutions really can help us, and help the world, to navigate difficulties and overcome challenges. Just imagine the horrendous results that we would have seen across the globe—especially in the developing world—without the WHO and the results and organizational know-how they brought to the table in terms of dealing with, and ultimately helping to overcome, that pandemic.

So, this illustrates a reason why Azerbaijan is a firm believer in—and a strong advocate of—multilateralism, despite the fact that the multilateral system is currently going through a very difficult time.

Azerbaijan thinks that, still, there is room for the possibility of continuing to have an efficient system. COP29, over which we presided, was one of the examples of that. Just as a reminder, COP29 took place just a few days after the election of the U.S. president, who is considered to be quite skeptical about climate action and climate negotiations.

Baku Dialogues:

Right. Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election on 5 November 2024 and COP29 started on 11 November 2024, which meant that the American delegation, which was led by John Podesta, was in the position of representing a lame duck administration. Now, Podesta was concurrently Senior Adviser to U.S. President Joe Biden on International Climate Policy and Senior Adviser on Clean Energy Innovation and Implementation. So had Biden or, later, the person who replaced him as the Democrat candidate, Vice President Kamala Harris, he would have been at full operational strength. But he was weakened severely, because all his colleagues knew that the Biden-Harris approach was done. Because, as you said, President Trump was skeptical about the climate action climate negotiations, but more broadly about the whole climate action agenda and the utility of multilateralism for advancing American interests. Still, COP29 was a success.

Rafiyev:

Yes, because the outcome of COP29 demonstrated that if we put collective efforts in place, then we can have an outcome that serves the interests of humanity—even in adverse political circumstances. But not only because of that.

Baku Dialogues:

Right. Your colleague, Elnur Soltanov, who is the COP29 CEO and a Deputy Energy Minister, stated in the Winter 2024-2025 edition of *Baku Dialogues* that ultimately, the global climate architecture is built on finance. So, ultimately, it's about money—climate money. He said, "With finance, this is where the promises start being felt—where the promises made start hurting the checkbook."

Of course, you know all this. In fact, because you're the Chief Negotiator, you know this probably more fully than anyone else. And we can get back to COP29 a little later on. But first, I want to stay on the broad topic of multilateralism, because what you said—that the multilateral system is in a difficult time—is particularly true in the context of the United Nations system, which is the crown of multilateralism in the world.

And so, I would like to touch upon the New York aspect of this—with New York being the location of the UN General Assembly and the Security Council and the headquarters of the organization's professional bureaucracy. Because it's clear that there's a level of dysfunction that is very difficult to imagine being overcome.

On the other hand, as you mentioned, the specialized agencies—particularly the UNFCCC, which is headquartered not in New York but in Bonn—which in a technical sense did a marvelous job coordinating with the Azerbaijani presidency of COP29, but at the same time the way they see their role points to the limits of the situation that the sovereign states find themselves in multilaterally—again, in the context of the UN system being the crown of multilateralism. Because, as you said, COP29 took place right after Trump's election.

But it wasn't just that. It was the fact that what are they called the Annex 1 and 2 parties to the UNFCCC—that is, the core of the industrialized or developed world required to provide financial resources to enable developing countries to undertake emissions reduction activities under the UNFCCC and to help them adapt to the adverse effects of climate change—tripled their financial commitment. This is evidently not enough. Tripling the quantum was a serious achievement, but it's far less than what most developing countries sought and what the UNFCCC's own studies indicate is needed. Additionally, this commitment does not take effect until 2035, which is ten years from now. And there is no provision to account for inflation.

And this really does raise the issue of the viability of these, let's call them "legacy" multilateral institutions. Now, we can talk about various aspects of this, but perhaps you can focus on this aspect of the question: how does Azerbaijan see its place in these "legacy" institutions, and how can it benefit from them, in the context of its multilateralist approach, which includes now, let's call them the "non-legacy" or the "newer" multilateral organizations.

It does raise a question that was not being considered in the foreign ministries of most countries ten or 15 years ago, which goes beyond the age-old question of the limits of the UN system, as demonstrated on the one hand by the successes, but also by the new, more radical question of viability, given what took place at COP29. And the latter almost points to an alternative way of approaching or looking at multilateralism.

Perhaps I can phrase the question this way: How does Azerbaijan understand the limits of the UN system in the context of its independent, multivectoral, or balanced foreign policy, which clearly has an important multilateral aspect?

Rafiyev:

There is a lot to unpack in what you have mentioned, and I won't be able to get into all of it: it would take too long. But let me start by saying that the limits for the moment, of course, are that the multilateral system—and when we say multilateralism, of course, in the core of it is the UN—is an institutional heritage or legacy from 80 years ago, from global realities

reflective of power relationships from that moment in time. This year, we are celebrating the eightieth anniversary of the United Nations, and whatever was inherited from that time is, of course, no longer fitting for what we are experiencing now in international politics, economic development, and other challenges.

So, the first limitation is that the entire system itself is old-fashioned and outdated.

The second is that the UN and other legacy regional organizations and the old-fashioned integration mechanisms have some values and principles that are enumerated and sometimes explicitly defined on paper, but when you look at how these are reflected in practice, you see that these values and principles are completely different. This inconsistency between the very values and principles of such organizations vis-à-vis the real activities in practice is one of the issues that lead to an assessment that there are, in reality, very few organizations that truly deliver for their member states. Or at least for all their member states. And let's not forget that multilateralism is about states—multilateralism is an inter-*state* system.

The third limitation concerns multipolarity. The legacy organizations were born in a condition of bipolarity, and then there was this unipolar moment, but now we are in a multipolar world. This predates the Trump Administration, but with his return to the White House, we can say that the concept of a multipolar world is being reinstated.

Baku Dialogues:

One could even say "reinstated through the front door," that is, without the objection of United States, which seems to be willing to accept the geopolitical and geoeconomic reality that it no longer has the capability—and, of course, the political will—to underwrite a world in which America sat alone at the "head of the table," as Joe Biden put it, and saw nothing wrong with determine the seating chart, the rules of etiquette, and the menu—irrespective of everyone else's dietary preferences.

So, yes, as you were saying, the concept of the multipolar world is being reinstated…

Rafiyev:

…yes, and given these new circumstances, the number of multilateral organizations, institutions, and formats will grow. That's something that we can expect to happen in the future—in fact, it's already happening.

Now, for Azerbaijan, regional organizations are becoming increasingly more important. We hosted the summit of ECO—the Economic Cooperation Organization—in July in liberated Khankendi. We became the first new member of the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation in its nearly 30-year history. And the D-8 includes very important countries in terms of economic development and political influence. Each of these D-8 member states is important in its own right, but when they come together as the D-8, I think further cementing their concertedness within the organization itself is needed. And the D-8 also needs some further institutionalization to realize its full potential—in order for its structure and other aspects to more accurately reflect current realities.

Baku Dialogues:

Let's leave aside the ECO Summit and focus on what you said about the D-8—about it needing to be further cemented—both institutionally and in terms of its mandate. Could you say that Azerbaijan has noticed this, and the existing member states have noticed this, but Azerbaijan is the new kid in town? Because, as you pointed out, Azerbaijan is the first country since the inception of the D8 to be admitted. You're the first D-8 expansion country.

Given that everybody in the D-8 understands that further cementing, as you put it, is required, but also that you're new to the D-8, do you see a role for Azerbaijan to spearhead reform—to try to strengthen and deepen the institutional foundations of the D-8, and its relevance and influence?

Rafiyev:

I think we have a reason to aim for that, and we have a reason to claim a mandate for that. Because during our chairmanship of the Non-Aligned

Movement, we were also the new kid in town, as you put it. We had been a member for only about eight years when our chairmanship began, and this was not a problem. We were able to scale up NAM's activities and implement institutional reforms to address current realities. And we did that. We have proved that if a country—even a country without a long history of membership in a movement or organization—wants to chair or preside over a movement or an organization with a vision and a clear focus on what you want to do, then it's possible to do it, to succeed.

Also, COP29 is another example. It was a story of a country with a very low capacity in the climate negotiations—non-existent, almost—and with a very low national institutional memory on the climate negotiations, which in only ten months was able to focus its efforts and deliver a truly breakthrough outcome at COP29.

Now, with the D-8, we are not acting in a similar capacity as we did with the NAM chairmanship and the COP29 presidency. Still, these two examples inspired us—they lead us to believe that we can also do something similar within the framework of the D-8. That we can leverage our experience, know-how, enthusiasm, and the institutional memory we have now gathered from our leadership in other multilateral organizations.

And we also have a willingness—a political willingness coming from the top of our country. This is an organization that we want to strengthen. We think this is worthwhile—for the D-8, and for Azerbaijan.

So, we already have some plans on how to do this, and we have, in fact, already started to implement some of those plans. We have prepared some concepts. We want to develop some centers of the D-8 that will be needed very much. And all this is now in the process of consultation with the member states.

Baku Dialogues:

Do you see an openness on the part of the Egyptian D-8 championship for such initiatives?

Rafiyev:

Yes, and also from the D-8 Secretary General. They are both open to these initiatives. In fact, the Egyptian chairmanship even proposed that we host a ministerial meeting focused on our ideas, even before we finalized the ratification process—of course, we have now finalized it. But the Egyptians proposed this even before that.

And we are now preparing to host such a ministerial. This is not a foreign ministers' meeting, but rather a meeting of line ministries. So, in October 2025, we will host the D-8 ministries of economy and climate. But later, of course, it could be on a rotational basis, other ministries, including foreign ministries.

Baku Dialogues:

Sure, but convening the line ministries you mentioned is, in a way, the best, the most direct way to raise the visibility of the D-8, right? Because the member states are neither great in number nor geographically proximate, the D-8 is not a global organization; yet, it also is, in a certain sense: its reach is global, one could say. And if you can deepen the economic relationship between the members of the D-8, then that would do the trick, so to speak. Should this be seen as an indicator of your level of ambition to raise the profile and influence of the D-8?

Before you answer, if I may, it seems to me that the highest level of economic ambition would be to sign some kind of free trade accord. So, I'm not suggesting you would want to start from that, but that you might be open to the idea of working up to it.

Rafiyev:

Of course, in today's world, economic and connectivity relationships are even more important than in the past. We see this nowadays in the case of the United States—this is the most visible example. How economic interests are at the very top.

And we think that we need to work hard within the D-8 as well—to build confidence among member states that, if we work together in that direction, then it would be possible.

Geographically, of course, some member states are distant from each other—they are far from being territorially connected, or territorially proximate, even. But I think this is not an impediment that cannot be overcome, since there is always a logistical possibility of access for trade with each other. I see a big potential for that. By taking small steps in the direction of economic topics of shared interest, we can further build on this success, strengthen our efforts, and keep going.

Baku Dialogues:

But there's also something about a common characteristic of the members of the D-8 in this economic context. All the members are what I and others call "keystone states," including Azerbaijan. Each has a power of attraction to their neighbors and their neighbors' neighbors. Each is centripetal. And this power is achieved not through fear or the threat of domination, and so on. And so, in a way, the D-8—although the membership is small in number—has this ability to attract. Each member state is, at the very least, a regional economic center. And so, if trade were to be enhanced between the members, then it should follow that trade between the neighbors of each of the D-8 members would be enhanced, and this would somehow be associated with a more active D-8.

Rafiyev:

Sure. The D-8 would become a significant market in this sense, as each member has existing trade and economic cooperation mechanisms with their neighbors. So, if we look beyond just the D-8 members—if we consider the geoeconomic context of each D-8 member—then we can cast a wider economic net than just the D-8 members. At the very least, this could encompass their immediate neighbors.

Baku Dialogues:

Exactly. So, if, for instance, Azerbaijan were to establish an enhanced economic presence in Nigeria, then all of a sudden, Nigeria's neighborhood would become more accessible.

Rafiyev:

Yes, because Nigeria is part of ECOWAS, Indonesia is part of ASEAN, and so on. So, yes, I think there are a lot of untapped opportunities. For us, but also for all the other D-8 countries. For Azerbaijan, there is clearly room to grow in terms of economic relations with all these countries.

Baku Dialogues:

And not just economically, but politically and diplomatically, too.

Rafiyev:

We need some tools—a vehicle for that—and the D-8 could be one of them.

Baku Dialogues:

I would like to revisit something you mentioned earlier about the lack of institutional memory in the COP universe. I have two questions to ask you about this. First, could you comment on how your experience as the COP29 Chief Negotiator and, more broadly, Azerbaijan's experience as the COP29 presidency, affects the dynamic between the UNFCCC Secretariat and the various COP presidencies?

In some instances involving international organizations—the multilateral aspect of the international system—we hear whispers that Secretariats have more power than they should in terms of agenda-setting, priorities, and so

on. Now, there is a solid reason for this, and it has to do with maintaining continuity. And there is the counterargument, which is that multilateralism is, at bottom, intergovernmentalism. And so that any international or regional organization should be driven by its member states. I recently heard someone refer to it as the "bureaucratic impetus to want to monopolize institutional memory."

Rafiyev:

When I spoke earlier about institutional memory, I meant that in the previous 28 COPs, Azerbaijan had not been an active part of the discussions—of the climate negotiations. We made no secret about this. And that is one of the main reasons why it took some time for our COP29 presidency to build the capacity to understand what was happening in the negotiation process—the key concepts, the key issues to which we should pay more attention. Because climate action is one of the most fragmented topics that you can find in the whole international system—in the large and complicated world of multilateral negotiations within the UN system. And when it came to finance—since we were discussing climate finance—this topic further aggravated an already difficult and complex situation in terms of the negotiations.

So, our lack of institutional memory meant that we had to get up to speed, and this took some of our time. We had to reach a level of competent understanding of what happened before—the nuances, the various positions, and so on.

Our interaction with the UNFCCC Secretariat in this regard was also important. The officials in the Secretariat helped us to build this capacity in a short period of time, because they are the ones who have been within it since the beginning of the process. And they helped us a lot.

Another difficulty was that COP28 resulted in a milestone achievement of a global stocktake, where, in paragraph 28, the parties called upon themselves to "contribute […] pathways and approaches [to transition] away from fossil fuels in energy systems."

This formulation—"transition away from fossil fuels"—was the most significant mitigation outcome ever achieved in the COP processes.

Therefore, there was some expectation from, let's call it the wider international community, that COP29 could—should—reach beyond that on the mitigation front.

However, our narrative from the very beginning was that COP28 was a mitigation COP, and that COP29 would be about finance—it had to be. And that necessarily meant that we would pay more attention to finance rather than adding to the language. Because there was no realistic room to go beyond the "transition away from" formulation. You remember that there were those who advocated for "phase down" or "phase out," but that was not going to be acceptable to all the parties a year later, because it was tried at COP28.

So, at COP29, what made the process so meaningful—the reason it was so important for the whole international community—was inclusiveness. COP29 was one of the most inclusive UN processes that I have attended, since the civil society organizations themselves were also part of the negotiations. So, as the COP29 presidency, we needed to brief them monthly—to inform them about what's going on, ask them what they would like to see be the outcome at the end of the negotiation process, and so on. And we had a very inclusive process: I met with nine what are called "observer constituencies,"—you know, farmers, city organizations, business NGOs, youth NGOs, women NGOs, gender NGOs, and so on.

This made it very diverse and inclusive. I heard many valuable perspectives and ideas. And also, what made it more inclusive was how the business community was involved in different capacities, as philanthropies, as those that had social responsibility projects, as those that advanced themselves, their activities, or their institutional setups to be more climate and environmentally friendly. So, all of this was very complex—it was a massive system of undertakings, with the Secretariat bearing the institutional memory and simultaneously supporting our presidency.

But of course, like other parts of the broader UN system, the UNFCCC Secretariat is also sometimes subjected to political influences. This occurs in two senses: seeking to affect the outcomes of the negotiation processes and also sometimes the logistics—to have certain preferences. Here, it depends on the specific presidency: how strong it is in dealing with such matters.

In our case, I think we did well with them. We had very good cooperation with the UNFCCC Secretariat right until the end. And that was one of the keys to our success.

Baku Dialogues:

You mentioned earlier that COP28 was the mitigation COP. And in a way, COP28 was the peak of the mitigation push. But COP29 was the finance COP. It's where the talks were about money—"climate money," as your colleague, whom I quoted earlier, put it. Who gives how much to whom, and under what conditions, and whether the conditions are acceptable to those who are mandated to receive it, and so on. This was a central focus of COP29.

And we know that, all other things being equal, the preference of the developing world is adaptation over mitigation. Because the developing world understands—I think this is now clear to everybody—that meeting the maximalist understanding of all the climate action goals, aspirations, and financing amounts is not going to happen. And so, you had this rising desire to emphasize—much more so than in the past, and certainly much more than at COP28—adaptation over mitigation. And in the concluding document of COP29, there's a passage that underscores earlier commitments to finance mitigation and adaptation in a fifty-fifty split. Half here, half there. And at the same time, this has never happened.

Anyway, it seems to me that part of the reason this fifty-fifty formulation made it into the final text is that the COP29 presidency pushed it. My assumption is based on your earlier discussion about inclusivity in our conversation, where you emphasized the importance of ensuring that the developing world is heard, and so on. And it's also based on the following logic: if the UNFCCC process—the COP process—is going to produce *a* result, which is unlikely to be the *ideal* result, then the likelihood of that happening increases dramatically the more adaptation is emphasized, which is something that the developed world doesn't want to do. And perhaps some in the developing world also don't really push for this, for various reasons.

Rafiyev:

Exactly. Let me briefly explain the underlying spirit within the whole process. So, you have the wider public—the media, the youth, and others who want to see more mitigation-prone outcomes, because for them, the real outcome of the COP process should be how much you decrease the amount of greenhouse gas emissions. This is the prevailing understanding within the whole NGO and international media universe. And most developed countries are part of this, as well.

And then you have developing countries. As you rightly said, they generally want more adaptation-prone outcomes, because they are the ones bearing the highest burden of changes in the climate.

And for both of them—mitigation and adaptation—you need finance. The third pillar—finance—is much more important than the other two, because without the critical enabler of finance, you cannot do anything. One and two are very much dependent on the third. This is what you have laid out in the Paris Agreement text.

Now, adaptation is something that will always be a top priority for most developing countries, because it's an existential issue for them. For others, like for some of the SIDS—the Small Island Developing States—mitigation is important, too. But even for them, when they talk about mitigation, they talk about the necessity for mitigation to be implemented in *other* countries, because those other countries need to decrease *their* emissions, so that the temperature increase and resulting sea level rises do not go beyond the point at which the SIDS countries literally disappear under water. But for them, also, adaptation is or should be much more important, because they themselves need to adapt—they need to somehow build resilience and build the sea walls. And they need to relocate their hospitals and schools to higher ground on these islands. Their homes, too. And they need adaptation money for that.

But, unfortunately, the political landscape within the COP process is that some of the SIDS and some of the Least-Developed Countries—the LDCs—work very much on the mitigation side, because the developed countries support them in terms of their economic development,

development assistance, and so on. And they forget what they need, in fact, on the ground. So, this is something that is very visible, but also very sensitive. And so, you have this very thin line between their position of being more ambitious on getting real support or politically being backed by some institutions and interests.

Now, when it comes to finance, in the previous 28 COPs, there was not a single decision on finance—on the quantum. In 2009, at COP15 in Copenhagen, a commitment was made to mobilize $100 billion per year by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries. But this was not the outcome of negotiations. It was more like a declarative statement that was inserted in the text. There was no debate, no discussion. Therefore, the climate finance quantum had never been negotiated at any COP until Baku. At COP29, the $300 billion quantum was, for the first time ever, a product of negotiations. It is the first UN-negotiated figure. That's my first point.

Secondly, besides *quantitative* financing elements, COP29 put in place *qualitative* elements, like providing categories of payers and contributors. It also referred to the $1.3 trillion scale-up financing target for 2035 "from all public and private sources," as the text says. So, from all sources, not only from public sources.

Now, when you look at the general spectrum of the process—the different views—you get to the question of why COP28 was considered so successful. And here, you can point to the international media, because for them, the mitigation outcome is more important, as it's much more visible. The audience understands it more easily.

Baku Dialogues:

Sure. However, in addition, emphasizing adaptation leaves ample room for the cleanest fossil fuel, namely natural gas, to play a role in the global energy mix well past the 2050 deadline, which, at this point, is very unlikely to be met. And that obviously irritates some people who view this issue through a rigidly ideological lens. But the reality is that if there's a switch from burning wood or coal right now, today, then it makes much more sense, in many cases, especially in the developing world, to switch to gas. Instead of switching to wind and solar and hoping that the battery storage

technology will appear imminently and be reliable, viable, scalable, inexpensive, and so on, all so that the switch to renewables can catch up to the aspirations of those who champion that sort of thing.

My point is that, at the end of the day, the more you emphasize adaptation, the better it is—genuinely—for the developing world. It's fairer and more just. It gives them a fair chance to develop, to catch up—not just to survive. Some of them have a serious physical survivability issue, obviously, but that's not enough—that just subsistence. Adaptation increases the likelihood that most developing countries can engage in the world's economic affairs, rather than relying solely on handouts forever. And it seems to me that Azerbaijan understood this in the context of your COP29 presidency.

Rafiyev:

Exactly.

Baku Dialogues:

It also seems to me that Azerbaijan really began to understand the nuances and the complexities of all this through your NAM chairmanship—conceptually, although perhaps not in all the technical particulars, because of the specific subject matter. However, when you began to be seriously and actively engaged in NAM, which culminated in your election to lead the movement, and then even more so when COVID-19 swept across the globe and Azerbaijan was at the forefront of it all—plus there was an extra year, 4+1, of that chairmanship. I think you have come to understand the needs of the developing world deeply—in a deeply objective way. And then the next step on the ladder was COP29—the way you ran the presidency in the run-up to COP29, during the conference, and throughout your term.

Rafiyev:

Yes, that's right. Of course, the NAM chairmanship helped us a lot to understand the dynamics of the multilateral system as well as the needs and requirements of the developing countries.

And also our engagement through AIDA—the Azerbaijan International Development Agency. We closely follow CARICOM and the Pacific Island Forum, enabling us to understand the needs and requirements of countries belonging to these regional organizations. We try to alleviate the suffering of the people from various aspects. We also work with the Commonwealth Secretariat, where, before COP29, we reached an agreement to donate $10 million to Commonwealth SIDS countries. There are other examples.

So, yes, before COP29, we had an understanding. And during our COP29 presidency, we have built on that.

Let me next turn to your other issue. Some are questioning whether COP29 was successful in adaptation-related outcomes. And my answer is, "yes." We achieved an agreement on an adaptation roadmap. We have the Baku Adaptation Dialogues that will take place at every subsequent COP. And we have the Baku Work Program on Indigenous Peoples. This last is also a matter of adaptation that we put a lot of effort into getting everyone to agree. And we finally got it done. So, yes. Our previous experience in multilateral diplomacy has been invaluable.

Baku Dialogues:

I'd like to come back to something you said at the beginning of this conversation. The context was multilateralism—that multilateralism is, at the end of the day, about states—you said that "multilateralism is an inter-*state* system." You mentioned that very few multilateral organizations effectively deliver for *all* their member states.

And I'd like to ask for your view about the multilateral organizations that genuinely deliver for all their members—ones to which Azerbaijan is a party. So, multilateral organizations that are action-oriented or results-oriented.

Rafiyev:

There are two types of organization to which Azerbaijan is a party, and from which we have benefited.

Organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement provided significant political support to Azerbaijan during the conflict period. We really benefited from being a member of these two organizations, because over 30 years, we got a lot from them. And this is something we will not forget.

When it comes to economic benefits—benefits on the ground, so to speak—where we can feel the concrete benefits now and will continue to do so in the future, I can single out the Organization of Turkic States. There is a very fast integration process underway in the OTS world. So, things like a common alphabet, for instance, as well as a whole host of other cultural and identity matters. Connectivity, obviously. Also investments: the numbers continue to increase. And there could be a common economic area in the future. There is even talk of conducting joint military operations or something similar.

So, in *all* aspects, the cooperation via OTS is going very fast. Every year, we have formal and informal summits of heads of state and government. The leaders have very good chemistry among themselves. And also, the full members are all countries that are part of the Middle Corridor region. Geography binds us to each other—not just a common heritage. We occupy this vast connectivity space. And, naturally, we have economic interests aligning. All this, and much more, means that OTS has very good prospects for the future.

I could also mention a program called SPECA—it's not an organization in a technical sense. Its full name is the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia. It's designed to strengthen economic cooperation in what some call the greater Central Asia region.

Baku Dialogues:

At *Baku Dialogues*, we call this the Silk Road region, although it's not an exact match to what you're talking about, because the SPECA countries are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. And the Silk Road region encompasses a few others—at least in my conception. Anyway, please continue.

Rafiyev:

SPECA is a UN program. It is supported jointly by the UN Economic Commission for Europe, or UNECE, and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific—here, the acronym is ESCAP.

In the past few years, Azerbaijan has led the effort to build up SPECA further. In November 2023, we hosted the first SPECA Summit, a full 25 years after the Tashkent Declaration established SPECA. We were not an original member: we became what's called a "participating state" five years later, in 2002.

SPECA operates on the basis of a geographic logic. We all take into account the geographic proximity of the parties and our region's geoeconomic location on the Middle Corridor—or the Silk Road, as you put it. And we did our best to reinvigorate this program with the support of the UN and our partners—the other participating states.

So, organizations like these, I would say, on political, economic, and practical terms, are ones for which Azerbaijan has delivered concretely—both for all the member states and for Azerbaijan itself. All of us have benefited. Not just in words, but in concrete action.

Baku Dialogues:

You mentioned OIC. And related to OIC is ICESCO, the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. One of ICESCO's many events in Azerbaijan last year was hosted by ADA University—it was a thought-provoking, high-profile conference on the topic of strategic foresight in decisionmaking. And Shusha was designated an ICESCO Cultural Capital for the year 2024.

ICESCO has recently established an office in Baku, aiming to serve as a bridgehead for the Islamic world's cultural organization to engage with not only Azerbaijan but also Central Asia.

And so, it seems as though that is one of those niche organizations—maybe "niche" is the wrong word. So, let's say specialized organizations that

emphasize the commonality of Islamic civilization, through culture, in a way that can be more than simply symbolically beneficial to Azerbaijan.

This occurs to me because, although you did not use the term, OIC was one of the "pillars" of international support for Azerbaijan throughout the conflict over Karabakh with Armenia. Now, this conflict is effectually over—the treaty hasn't been signed for reasons we both know, and there is the Zangezur Corridor issue, and so on. But peace and full normalization have really never been closer.

My point here is that we're at a point where it seems unlikely that Azerbaijan will need, in the time ahead, support from OIC in the same way as you did not that long ago. And so, the question becomes—for a country like Azerbaijan—what next? You could say that part of the answer is, "it's time to give back to the organization." And one way of doing that is precisely through this ICESCO office in Baku, and the emphasis on culture and Islamic civilization, and so on, right? So, can you share some thoughts on how Azerbaijan now views its engagement with the Islamic world?

Rafiyev:

Next year, we will host the OIC Summit here in Baku, and then we will preside over OIC for two years. Now, we are working on our vision, our concept, for the presidency.

And I personally believe that we should focus on economic cooperation within OIC.

OIC was founded on the Palestinian issue, and OIC has always been vocal and supportive of the Palestinian cause. But the organization has considerable capacity to build upon and to focus on other areas, including economic cooperation.

It has such important structures. The Islamic Development Bank, which will also have its annual session next year in Azerbaijan, is one of them.

Now, the Islamic Development Bank's capacity is so vast that it can support all development activities within the OIC system, but we need to create

a conducive political environment for this to happen. And Azerbaijan's presidency could offer this.

You mentioned ICESCO, which is really an organization that can play a more significant role in building solidarity through cultural cooperation in the Islamic context—to stress in a more concrete way the shared values and principles of the Islamic Ummah. ICESCO can build further upon this legacy. Also, we have some bilateral mechanisms with ICESCO that can be replicated in other countries as well—like youth support programs and cultural exchange programs—that can further strengthen OIC.

So, I think OIC has very good potential, and I think that Azerbaijan is keen to make a real effort during our upcoming presidency to move the organization in the direction of fulfilling its potential more fully.

Baku Dialogues:

One of the most important things that I've experienced in the past five or so years that I have lived in Baku is that pretty much all of the countries that are part of the Silk Road region are genuinely vested in the idea of developing their agency more fully—of no longer and never again being objects of great power rivalry, but of being subjects of an international order, equipped with agency.

And you have all of these outsider-led investment and finance mechanisms: banks, funds, and so on. And sure, the countries of the region are formally shareholders in some of these, but clearly have little to no decisionmaking power—even when they vote as a bloc. And in others, they have no say, like the EU budget's funding of EU priorities via Global Gateway or some of the BRI funding vehicles for Chinese firms and projects. And it seems to me that this increases the risk—if not the danger—that, say, the Middle Corridor can just become a transport corridor instead of an economic corridor, since the outside funders are not stakeholders in the region in the same way—if at all—as the countries that are part of the region.

So, again, there's this risk that the Middle Corridor will be just a highway, and there's some toll collecting that passes for economic activity. I'm

exaggerating a little to make the point that there is a possibility that this part of the world won't have a real opportunity to add value to the goods and services that are produced or provided by outsiders. That it won't really contribute to the value chain—not just factories, but also big data and AI centers, and other elements and sectors that drive economic development in the twenty-first century.

And I think this is part of the thinking that informs what you said about making full use of the Islamic Development Bank in the context of Azerbaijan's upcoming OIC presidency.

Rafiyev:

Yes, for sure.

Baku Dialogues:

Azerbaijan is also going to chair OTS next year, and there's an opportunity there, too, to champion homegrown financing mechanisms that could serve as a basis for taking the organizations to the next level—for the strategic benefit of the membership, of their development that is less reliant on outsider financing and the outsider priorities and preferences and conditionalities and so on.

It's undoubtedly part of the thinking that informed our decision to publish an article proposing what its authors called a "Trans-Caspian Development Bank" in the Spring 2025 edition of *Baku Dialogues*.

And, as you said, there clearly needs to be the right political context for such ambitious ideas to ripen and bear fruit. And that has to be connected to a healthy sort of ambition. Like the World Bank used to be, or the IMF, or some of the Asian banks.

What you're suggesting—and what the authors of that proposal we published were suggesting—is a strategic opportunity, with an open door, to do some really serious strategic financing.

Rafiyev:

Exactly. There is a real potential for all that. The Islamic Development Bank is a specific institution that offers highly advantageous benefits to OIC member states, but I think there is a huge untapped potential that can be utilized. And the Middle Corridor is one such untapped potential. Various projects in Africa that need serious financing are also on my mind. Similarly, Middle East-Central Asia linkages exist, with Azerbaijan serving as a connecting link between these two regions.

So, yes, there are a lot of areas where the Islamic Development Bank could be a real asset. And its resources are no less than those of the EBRD, for instance.

Baku Dialogues:

It could be a real game-changer. More so than it has been in a while.

Rafiyev:

Exactly.

Baku Dialogues:

Let me turn to a broader topic. I recently made a list of the multilateral organizations to which Azerbaijan belongs, and there's an increasing number of them that don't involve Westerners. Or where Western powers are not at the center of the agenda setting, whether they're members or not.

But this is not a reflection of Azerbaijani political preferences—that's not my point. Instead, my point is that most "non-legacy" or "newer" multilateral organizations are non-Western. And this is very different from how it used to be. And this is producing different reactions in various Western capitals—especially in those that too easily equate non-Western with anti-Western. Now, I'm not asking you to say anything about that—it would

take our conversation off course. But what I am asking you to do is to say something about Azerbaijan's understanding of how this emerging reality changes things, because it seems to me that, when you look at all these new or newer or non-legacy organizations—I mean not just BRICS or SCO, but a plethora of others—it seems like the Western variable in the overall equation is lighter—it's less weighty. This appears to be a reflection of how the world is indeed undergoing a significant transformation in its geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape.

Rafiyev:

Yes, the growing role of newer regional organizations or, let's say, smaller multilateral organizations, is an important topic. We briefly discussed this earlier, so I'd like to touch on another aspect.

I think that having a large number of member states in an organization makes it more difficult to manage. And not only in terms of administrative management, but also the fact that in many countries, there are frequent changes in government, which can lead to different policies and priorities, and so on. Sometimes, it doesn't even have to be a large membership, like GUAM. In its early stages, we had a very strong organization with real political and economic plans. Many outsiders wanted to establish a dialogue mechanism with it, such as Japan, the U.S., Poland, and others. But later, due to a change in the government of some member states that resulted in changes in priorities, it lost its effectiveness.

BSEC had a similar trajectory: it was a very important organization at its inception, but now it's a paralyzed organization due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict—both are member states. We chair BSEC this year, and the members can't even agree on adopting the agenda for meetings, which take place online—there are no in-person meetings. In short, there are no tangible outcomes—and there is no real expectation that this will change in the near future.

Then you have big organizations—traditional ones—that base themselves on values and principles. These "legacy" organizations are much stronger. The historical record shows this. And then there are some regional ones, if they are *not* built on economic interests, they can more easily become less relevant. On the other hand, those organizations that *are* based on

economic interest—since the member states are benefiting from them—and if they have some institutional mechanisms, like financial ones, or entities supporting the activities of the organization, then these sorts of organizations tend to prove themselves to be much more efficient.

Baku Dialogues:

You mentioned the solidity of the values and the economic foundation of a multilateral organization. Another possibly solid foundation is what we can call the "brotherhood factor." OTS is obviously much more than that, but the foundation is similar to the Arab League. The Turkic factor, the Arab factor. The idea that OTS is somehow an extended family organization.

Rafiyev:

Yes, all OTS members consider ourselves to be part of an extended family.

Baku Dialogues:

And, naturally, that then creates a firmer-than-usual foundation for enhancing economic ties.

Rafiyev:

Yes, that plays an important role. But you also have to take into account that this family relationship is not something new. It's coming from very historic times. So, it depends politically on when you are ready to materialize this family kingship or relationship into real opportunities.

Now, geopolitical developments and the difficulties that the member states were experiencing necessitated the establishment of OTS—to coalesce at *this* critical stage, more than ever before. In the case of OTS, it was brotherhood plus these other factors. Brotherhood was a necessary but insufficient condition.

Baku Dialogues:

As a final question, I would like to ask you briefly about CICA, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. I know that CICA does not fall under your direct purview, so I'm not asking for details; however, could you share your general thoughts on CICA's potential?

Rafiyev:

I think that, in political terms, CICA has real value because it brings together some countries with contradictory views on world politics on many issues. However, at the end of the day, it is sometimes possible to agree on some important issues.

For 2024-2026, Azerbaijan is chairing it. And CICA offers a political platform for countries in Asia to become engaged, including member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, some BRICS member states, and others. This means there is considerable potential. But what needs to be done is to adjust it to the current geopolitical landscape.

Baku Dialogues:

That's both a succinct and sober way to end our conversation. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Foreign Minister, for taking the time.

Rafiyev:

You're welcome. Thank you for the invitation. BD