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The D-8 and Azerbaijan

The “Islamic Eight” and the Ongoing Shift in the Global Balance of Power

Inara Yagubova

“Out of approximately 60 Muslim countries worldwide, Azerbaijan has been chosen as the newest member. This is both a great honor and a significant responsibility for us. [...] We view the interests of all Muslim countries as our own, which is likely why Azerbaijan was the first choice after the decision to expand D-8 was made. Of course, our country’s economic potential, political influence, and military strength were also taken into consideration. Additionally, our policy of Islamic solidarity, which I mentioned earlier, played a role in this decision. At the same time, this organization is expanding its geographical reach. D-8 has already extended to both the Caucasus and the Caspian region, and the broader our geography becomes, the greater our opportunities.”

– Ilham Aliyev,
7 January 2025

The long-held notion of the rules-based liberal international order, which may be defined as consisting of globalization and a world order headed by the United States (benignly, in its self-conception), is progressively waning. A new perspective that acknowledges the Global South’s importance and its increasing prominence on the international scene is beginning to take shape, with a

shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. Instead of following the lead of the superpowers, the strong, serious, and ambitious countries that make up the Global South have become outspoken and influential players in international affairs, promoting causes that serve their own interests. In the conduct of foreign policy, one can say that more countries in more parts of the world are putting their countries first.

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Several key features highlight the growing autonomy of countries in the Global South. Despite their significant differences, they all prioritize economic expansion and strengthening ties with other countries through trade and investment. They are free from the geopolitical ambitions of the leading countries of the developed world and conduct

their affairs in an independent (or multivectoral) way. In fact, rather than only reacting to outside forces, they are increasingly establishing new trade, technological, and economic development relationships that fit with their own strategic aims.

Global power dynamics are therefore changing, particularly in the areas of commerce, climate diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation. Azerbaijan stands out as a strategic pivot in this context, using its location, political neutrality, and assertive diplomacy to operate as a link between these two international arenas.

To that end, Azerbaijan has put forward several initiatives to be a platform for cooperation between

the Global South and the Global North by increasing its interaction with developing countries. As President Ilham Aliyev stated

Azerbaijan is an active supporter of multilateralism that pursues an independent foreign policy posture. Its membership in the D-8 is a testament to its successful strategy.

on 20 July 2024 at the Shusha Global Media Forum, “We launch initiatives. We now actively work with developing countries in order to build bridges between the Global South and the Global North. Our advantage

is that we’ve been chairing the Non-Aligned Movement for four years.” At an international forum themed “Facing the New World Order” at the ADA University on 25 April 2025, Aliyev stated that “Of course, we played an important role in building bridges between the Global South and the Global North. That was one of the important assignments, which we put in front of ourselves. So, the way how we tackled COVID, the way how we hosted COP29 [...], and bilateral contacts with African countries demonstrate clearly our agenda.”

In the past year or so, this agenda has included the successful organization of COP29, the takeover of the chairmanships of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in

Asia (CICA) and Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), served as host of the summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization, and completed its chairmanship of GUAM. Next year, it will preside over both the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and so on.

Azerbaijan is one of a handful of countries that is a member of European, Asian, Turkic, and Muslim interstate organizations. As an active supporter of multilateralism that pursues an independent foreign policy posture and is situated at the crossroads of flagship connectivity projects, Azerbaijan seeks to enhance its standing as a bridge between East and West, as well as North and South.

As part of such a strategy, Azerbaijan applied for membership in the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation (the 'D' here stands for "Developing"). During the 19 December 2024 D-8 Summit held in Cairo, this application was unanimously approved: Azerbaijan became the ninth member of the D-8 on 7 March

2025 after the ratification of the D-8 Charter by the Milli Majlis, which Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev later signed.

Azerbaijan is the first new member of the D-8 in its nearly 30-year history. This is seen as a significant step for Azerbaijani independent (or multivectoral) foreign policy, an important thread of which is deepening and expanding relations with the Global South. It is expected that Azerbaijan's involvement in the organization will open up new opportunities for economic, trade, and transit collaboration. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's strategic alliances—such as its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)

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and its cooperation with Türkiye and Pakistan—are likely to enhance its role within the D-8 group. As a central player in the Middle Corridor, the country is well-positioned to strengthen connections between East and West via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Baku International Sea Trade Port. At the same time, this unprecedented move serves Azerbaijan's foreign policy goals and ambitions as a key-stone state of the Silk Road region that, as Aliyev said in Khankendi

in July 2025, "conducts a highly independent policy, doesn't listen to instructions, ignores advice, and does whatever it decides is in its national interest."

This essay will analyze the factors explaining Azerbaijan's quest for D-8 membership by (1) assessing the Organization and its strategic potential, (2) the foreign and domestic policy implications thereof, and (3) the expected benefits for the country of membership in this grouping.

Economic Cooperation

Also known as the "Islamic Eight," the D-8 was established under the leadership of Türkiye, Egypt, and Pakistan in 1997 and also includes Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, and Nigeria as member states. Each is a majority-Muslim developing country that is either a middle power or a key-stone state. All are key economic players. Together, they constitute one-seventh of the world's population (i.e., 1.1 billion), with 60 percent of the world's Muslims residing in D-8 countries.

The idea behind the D-8's founding was first put forward by Türkiye's then-prime minister Necmettin Erbakan in Istanbul in October 1996. From the start, it was conceived as a global arrangement rather than a regional one. Consider the geographic location of D-8 member states: one is located in Sub-Saharan Africa; one at the intersection of North Africa and the Middle East; one at the junction of Europe, the Silk Road region, and the Middle East; one at the intersection of the Middle East, the Gulf, the Silk Road region, and South Asia; two that bookend South Asia; and two in heart of East Asia. The necessity for increased collaboration through the utilization of member nations' comparative and competitive advantages, as well as underlying complementarities, served as the impetus for the group's founding.

The D-8 was conceived as a forum in which membership would have no adverse impact on their other bilateral, regional, and multilateral commitments. Since member states do not share a common area, the grouping is founded on common adherence to a set of principles and objectives rather than a shared geography,

Azerbaijan is the first new member of the D-8 in its nearly 30-year history.

all of which are in the service of its strategic goal of furthering the socio-economic development of its member states.

Formally, the D-8's principles are identified as being:

- Peace instead of conflict,
- Dialogue instead of confrontation,
- Cooperation instead of exploitation,
- Justice instead of double standards,
- Equality instead of discrimination,
- Democracy instead of oppression.

Moreover, the D-8's four main objectives are identified as improving member states' position in the global economy, diversifying and creating new opportunities in trade relations between them, enhancing their participation and influence in decisionmaking at the global level, and improving living standards in their respective countries.

In short, the D-8 collectively represents a group of emerging economies that are eager to overcome obstacles to their future modernization and regional empowerment, and do not solely rely on natural resources to prosper economically.

The majority have accepted international trade as a key driver of growth. Along with the adoption of neo-liberal policies and new vulnerabilities, this also entails a greater outward orientation.

Furthermore, each D-8 member state is an economically significant developing country. The total economic size of the Organization exceeds \$4 trillion, with its economies accounting for over 14 percent of global trade. This represents about 60 percent of the economies of Muslim-majority countries.

The fact that the D-8 countries encompass leading economies in

every corner of the Muslim world lends special significance to the Organization. All D-8 members are also leading

members of OIC in terms of their technological and economic development levels, commercial potential, and population. Membership in the D-8, which has a global rather than a regional character in terms of its principles and the geographical area it covers, is open to all developing countries. But for right now, think of the D-8 as the geopolitical and geoeconomic vanguard of OIC.

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Again, Azerbaijan is the D-8's first new member in its nearly 30-year history. Clearly, this is a sign of Azerbaijan's successful diplomacy, which could position Baku as a reliable partner in the field of political, economic, and cultural cooperation. Azerbaijani diplomacy is making serious efforts to have a significant impact on global discourse and is asserting itself as a major player in the world's dynamic geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape. Through broad-based engagement, Azerbaijani diplomacy has succeeded in promoting its national interests while contributing meaningfully to international efforts in sustainability, development, and conflict resolution.

In written remarks to an international conference held in Shusha on 15 June 2025, Aliyev referred to this point. "Azerbaijan, which has always demonstrated its commitment to a just world order through concrete actions, advocates for transforming not only the South Caucasus region where it is located, but also the entire Eurasian space into a hub of dialogue and cooperation," his remarks stated. "The projects we implement jointly with friendly and partner countries make significant contributions to regional and international security and create a favorable basis for constructive and promising

cooperation between both East and West, as well as North and South," the remarks concluded.

In this context, Azerbaijan's admission to the D-8—an organization that brings together dynamic emerging economies from the Islamic world—should be seen as both a recognition of its diplomatic achievements and a strategic alignment with nations that share similar visions of inclusive growth, regional cooperation, and sustainable development. It underscores the country's rising profile and the success of its diplomacy in adapting to and shaping the evolving global landscape.

Why D-8 Membership?

First and foremost, the shift in both the regional balance of power and the South Caucasus's geopolitical dynamics are factors behind Azerbaijan's several initiatives in diversifying its partners aiming to balance competing interests, maintaining strategic autonomy in the Silk Road region, and avoiding overdependence on any country. Relatedly, ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region prompt Azerbaijan to seek alternative trade routes and partners that connect it with other parts of the world. Against the backdrop of

great power competition and ongoing shifts in the balance of power in the Silk Road region and beyond, this is an attempt to strengthen its role in the overlapping set of regions to which Azerbaijan and its neighbors belong.

Another reason Azerbaijan pursued G-8 membership is that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has heightened the importance of the Silk Road region as a vital connectivity corridor between East and West. In his 14 February 2024 inauguration speech, Aliyev alluded several times to the significance of international cooperation in the context of OIC, OTS, and NAM as a part of Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy approach. The hosting of COP29 signaled a significant shift in posture, whereby Azerbaijan has been exploring new horizons in its foreign policy. In this context, it has become clear that the country's new foreign policy direction already reflects some internal paradigm shifts, which are expected to result in a more active and significant position on the international stage.

Moreover, an ongoing rivalry is leading to the politicization and securitization of many aspects of the global economy. Nearly 30 years ago, Türkiye aimed to offer an alternative economic model

to the (de-)globalizing capitalist system controlled by the West in launching the D-8. The grouping's emphasis on leading developing states working together was viewed as a means of upending the current economic structure and strengthening the Global South.

The global balance of power continues to shift from the West to Asia, resulting in the West no longer being a hegemonic economic power. Under these geostrategic circumstances, Azerbaijan chooses cooperation, which occurs "when actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination" (as Robert Keohane and other scholars have put it). Under the same circumstances, Azerbaijan also seeks to promote its interests, which also aims at mutual advantage. Azerbaijan's official application for membership in BRICS+ is also a part of this broader cooperation strategy—a response to geoeconomic and geopolitical changes.

The Turkish Connection

Strong and longstanding bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Türkiye also played an important role in Baku's choice to apply for D-8 membership. Their

deepening economic, cultural, and political ties—driven by shared aspirations to challenge Western dominance and promote a "just multipolar world order"—have intensified notably since the Second Karabakh War.

Thanks to the June 2021 Shusha Declaration, the relationship has now become an alliance. While it is rooted in a shared understanding of Turkic brotherhood and presented as opposition to global hegemony, it simultaneously seeks to establish its own form of regional dominance, stretching from one end of the Silk Road region to the other and down into the Middle East.

Azerbaijan's aspirations to become a hub for energy, transportation, and diplomacy are complemented by Türkiye's position as a significant regional actor with sway in Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. For at least the past 20 years, Türkiye has pursued a multifaceted, multilateral foreign policy.

By integrating both regionalism and minilateralism (a blended strategy, so to speak), Türkiye not only strengthens its geopolitical

Azerbaijan aims to serve as a connector between the North and South, acting as a mediator in conflict resolution.

leverage but also reduces its dependence on traditional global powers, thereby increasing its autonomy in international affairs.

To support this vision, Türkiye has launched several geopolitical initiatives and regional openings—including increased engagement in Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific. These efforts reflect Ankara's broader ambition to become a more influential and self-reliant actor on the global stage.

On the one hand, regionalism—which promotes a common identity and collaboration based on cultural, ideological, or geographic links—is the foundation upon which Türkiye builds its relations with certain other states. On the other hand, it bases its relationship development with other countries via a minilateralist approach, which stresses practical cooperation based on shared interests. By combining these two ideas, Türkiye aims to enhance its global standing and reduce its reliance on powerful nations. Türkiye initiated a number of geographic openings in an effort to broaden its foreign policy options and elevate its standing internationally.

Moreover, Azerbaijan aims to serve as a connector between the North and South, acting as a mediator in conflict resolution—a role that is further supported by Türkiye's engagement with countries in the Global South. First, in an effort to counteract the damaging effects of major powers' actions in various parts of the world, Türkiye has been working to establish regional stability axes in those areas. It has been pursuing an inclusive, cooperative, and non-sectarian approach in all areas to achieve this goal. In order to avoid "otherizing" any regional state, Ankara is adamant and cautious. It seeks to work as closely as possible with all countries in a given region, which in turn is designed to enable it to strengthen ties with all of them. Türkiye also aims to be a leader in resolving regional conflicts.

Hence, in addition to signing on to Türkiye's determination to advance South-South cooperation, it led to the establishment of the D-8 to advance a national diplomatic strategy that prioritizes solidarity among developing states. This approach aligns with Azerbaijan's

longstanding vision, which also aims to contribute to deepening intra-developing world economic and political discourse, enhance its position in the Global South, and advocate for the interests of emerging economies on various international platforms. Azerbaijan has indicated its willingness to facilitate dialogue within the developing world and to strengthen its role as a facilitator. To that end,

the D-8 can serve as a platform to offer Azerbaijan an opportunity to enhance its diplomatic relations with other developing countries, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—but also to act as a bridge between East and West.

Unique Position

The D-8 presents Azerbaijan with an additional platform to foster closer cultural and religious ties with leading states in the Muslim world. One of the key directions of Azerbaijan's broader foreign policy approach is to emphasize its unique position as a democratic, secular, and Muslim-majority country. In that sense, the D-8 can be seen as a platform presenting a

Baku's D-8 membership can help shift popular perceptions around the world that are increasingly characterized by Islamophobic populism.

model of governance that balances modernity with traditional Muslim values. To that end, Baku's D-8 membership can help shift popular perceptions around the world that are increasingly characterized by Islamophobic populism.

Azerbaijan's membership in the D-8 also opens up new prospects for trade, investment, and economic cooperation with other member states, including Pakistan. As transport and regional connectivity represent another key aspect of Azerbaijan-Pakistan collaboration, D-8 membership can help to expand collaboration in this field. Azerbaijan has notably improved its transit infrastructure along both the North-South and East-West routes, establishing itself as a central hub for regional commerce. In turn, Pakistan is seeking to align its connectivity initiatives with Azerbaijan's existing transit systems to benefit from the expanding trade and transport networks.

The 28 May 2025 trilateral summit in Lachin, involving the presidents of Azerbaijan and Türkiye and the Prime Minister of Pakistan, marked an important milestone in the strategic alliance between the three countries. With a significant emphasis on strengthening cooperation in regional security, economic integration,

transportation connectivity, and sustainable development, this historic meeting highlighted growing bilateral and trilateral connections. Along with examining new opportunities for cooperative projects in the areas of energy, trade, and strategic infrastructure, the leaders of the three countries reiterated their shared commitment to advancing peace and prosperity across the greater Silk Road region.

The summit also focused on two major transport initiatives: the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) and the International North-South Transport Corridor. These routes create a strategic network connecting China, India, the Silk Road region, and Europe. The Middle Corridor is particularly important as an alternative route between China and Europe, connecting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The leaders discussed opportunities for cooperation in key areas, including the economy, trade, investment, energy security, transportation, and other potential sectors.

To this end, the D-8 platform adds depth to the trilateral format of cooperation among Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Türkiye. Ankara has been a longstanding partner of Islamabad, and in recent years, Baku and Islamabad have

strengthened their ties through a series of visits and agreements. The Azerbaijani and Turkish presidents have both expressed their support for Pakistan amid its recent military conflict with its longtime adversary, India. At the Lachin trilateral, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif stated that "confident that our time-tested relationship would not only be beneficial for the wellbeing of our own people but also contribute to peace and prosperity in the region and beyond. [...] This trilateral format is both very timely and of great importance and [...] gives us the necessary political ownership and the impetus to move forward collectively and in unison in all spheres of our common interest."

Also in Lachin, Aliyev said that Azerbaijan had already contributed more than \$20 billion to the Turkish economy. A \$2 billion investment package is also planned for Pakistan. Development in the areas of energy, industry, trade, digital transformation, and agriculture will be the focus of these monies. The establishment of new financial institutions, reciprocal visits by investment delegations,

and cooperative economic forums were also on the agenda. This is in keeping with one of the D-8's primary goals, which is to improve member states' standing in the global economy, diversify, and open up new trade relations opportunities. To this end, D-8 membership can strengthen diversifying strategic partnerships by investing in mutually beneficial avenues.

For his part, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underscored that the three D-8 countries have a combined population of almost 350 million and a \$1.5 trillion economy. "I would like to particularly emphasize that we stand behind each and every step toward transforming our relations into a strategic partnership," he said. "Our foreign ministers will carry out the required work to institutionalize our trilateral cooperation, and they will prepare a strong framework that reflects the common vision of our countries, particularly in the fields that shape our common agenda such as trade, investments, transportation, energy, defense, industry, and the fight against terrorism," he added. Erdoğan also noted that Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and

Azerbaijan's D-8 membership aligns with President Aliyev's vision of turning Azerbaijan into a center for regional collaboration, innovation, and sustainability.

Pakistan would institutionalize their cooperation by holding regular trilaterals at various levels.

Five Policy Implications

As part of a broader strategic plan to deepen its economic ties and establish itself as a major actor, Azerbaijan's D-8 membership aligns with President Aliyev's vision of turning Azerbaijan into a center for regional collaboration, innovation, and sustainability. This opens up new geopolitical and geo-economic opportunities in several areas.

First, Azerbaijan's membership in the D-8 could help balance its geopolitical interests, especially in interactions with neighboring countries like Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, given its advantageous location between Europe and Asia. Azerbaijan's diplomatic adaptability and regional impact could be increased by fortifying its relations with other Muslim-majority and developing countries. However, the ability to resolve any political or economic disagreements within the group and the alignment of economic objectives would be necessary for such a partnership to succeed.

Second, Azerbaijan's membership can improve its global standing,

particularly in the Global South as a whole. Azerbaijan may take center stage in international economic debates in the developing world and contribute to addressing developmental objectives and challenges. Azerbaijan may be able to advocate for the interests of emerging economies by associating itself with an increasingly vocal voice in international trade discussions and negotiations as a member of the D-8. Relatedly, the D-8's connectivity objectives could be further reinforced by Azerbaijan's uniquely advantageous position in the Silk Road region.

Third, the D-8 platform will help Azerbaijan diversify its economic alliances and lessen its excessive dependence on any foreign country, including Russia. Additionally, Azerbaijan can increase foreign direct investments from D-8 member states, which are eager to invest in infrastructure, renewables, and other sectors. Azerbaijan could also benefit from reduced tariffs and non-tariff barriers in D-8 member states, encouraging exports and economic diversification.

Fourth, Azerbaijan's D-8 membership strengthens its ties with other countries, especially Pakistan and Türkiye. These countries have a long history of cooperation and mutual support, and the addition

of Azerbaijan opens up new opportunities for regional projects and collaboration. Pakistan sees the admission of Azerbaijan as a step toward promoting economic cooperation and improving regional connectivity. Both countries share a vision of regional prosperity and have continuously promoted multilateralism. The D-8 platform presents additional opportunities to build on these common objectives, especially in the areas of commerce, technology, and sustainable development. Another important ally, Türkiye, welcomes Azerbaijan's involvement as a continuation of their long-standing alliance. The organization's general cohesiveness is strengthened by this addition, which also increases its collective voice on the international scene.

Fifth, Azerbaijan's membership in the D-8 not only enhances its

bilateral and multilateral ties with fellow Muslim-majority countries but also reinforces its strategic vision of regional leadership and cooperation. By aligning with Pakistan and Türkiye through both bilateral engagements and trilateral formats, Azerbaijan is capitalizing on the D-8 as a driver for economic integration, political solidarity, and cultural diplomacy. The platform serves as a means to project Azerbaijan's model of secular governance within the Muslim world while simultaneously advancing shared goals in connectivity, trade, energy, and security. As regional dynamics evolve, the D-8 is likely to play an increasingly pivotal role in boosting Azerbaijan's international standing and fostering a collective framework for peace, prosperity, and strategic growth among its member states. **BD**

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