Statement by Mr. Samad Bashirli
Deputy Minister, Ministry of Economy and CAREC National Focal Point, Azerbaijan

25th Ministerial Conference
Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program
29 September 2026, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Dear Mr. Yang,
Excellencies,
Distinguished colleagues,

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of Mongolia, the Asian Development Bank and the CAREC Secretariat for hosting this important anniversary Ministerial Conference.

As we mark 25 years of CAREC, this is an opportunity not only to recognize what has been achieved, but also to reflect on how regional cooperation has translated into practical results for our countries and our people.

Azerbaijan has been part of the CAREC Program since 2003. Over more than two decades, our cooperation has expanded across transport, trade, energy and many other areas. Azerbaijan has also had the honor of chairing the Program three times — in 2008, 2011 and 2021 — reflecting our long-standing commitment to regional cooperation.

Looking back at this period, I would highlight regional connectivity as one of the most significant impacts of CAREC for Azerbaijan. The Program has helped us approach connectivity not simply as the development of national infrastructure, but as part of a wider regional economic integration agenda.

The development of Azerbaijan's trade relations with CAREC countries demonstrates the scale of this growing regional integration. In 2003, when Azerbaijan joined the CAREC Program, our trade turnover with CAREC countries amounted to approximately 300 million US dollars, representing 5.8 percent of Azerbaijan's total foreign trade turnover. By 2025, this figure had reached more than 7.5 billion US dollars, with the share of CAREC countries rising to 15.3 percent of our total foreign trade turnover. This represents an increase of more than 25 times in trade turnover over this period and reflects the significant strengthening of Azerbaijan's economic ties with the CAREC region.

For Azerbaijan, located at the intersection of major international transport routes, this process has particular significance. CAREC Corridor 2, together with the broader Middle Corridor, strengthens connectivity between Central Asia and Europe through Azerbaijan, reinforcing our role as an important transport and logistics link across Eurasia. Investments in roads, railways and border infrastructure become much more valuable when they form part of interconnected regional networks supported by efficient trade procedures and close cooperation among countries. Between 2003 and 2025, 66 regional technical assistance projects involving Azerbaijan were completed under the CAREC framework, with a total value of more than 76 million US dollars. This reflects the breadth of Azerbaijan's engagement in regional cooperation through the Program.

One concrete project demonstrates particularly well how CAREC cooperation can produce tangible results.

The East–West Highway Improvement Project, part of CAREC Corridor 2, supported the modernization of one of Azerbaijan's most important international transport routes. The project reconstructed approximately 94 kilometers of highway, including sections between Gazakh and the Georgian border and between Yevlakh and Ganja, and also supported improvements in customs facilities along the Georgian border.

The impact went well beyond physical infrastructure. Improved connectivity provided communities in western part of Azerbaijan with easier access to markets, jobs and social services. Travel time was substantially reduced, and a project survey identified 56 new small and medium-sized commercial enterprises along the Gazakh–Georgia border section. These results demonstrate how regional infrastructure can support not only transit, but also local economic activity and opportunities for people and businesses.

This experience also illustrates an important lesson from CAREC's first 25 years: connectivity creates the greatest value when regional corridors generate opportunities along the entire route. Infrastructure should not only move goods across borders. It should connect businesses to markets, communities to economic centers and our economies more closely with one another.

CAREC's contribution therefore goes beyond individual investment projects. Over the years, the Program has developed into a trusted regional platform combining investment, policy dialogue, technical assistance, knowledge sharing and institutional cooperation. This integrated approach has enabled member countries and development partners to work together around common regional priorities and translate them into practical initiatives.

Looking ahead, Azerbaijan supports the vision of a more focused, integrated and results-oriented CAREC Program. We believe the next phase of cooperation should strengthen regional ownership, promote greater coordination across sectors, advance regional public goods, and respond effectively to shared challenges such as climate change, digital transformation and economic resilience. By bringing together infrastructure, trade, energy, human development and other priorities within a more integrated framework, CAREC can ensure that regional cooperation delivers stronger and more tangible outcomes for our countries and our people.

At this important milestone, I would like to express our sincere appreciation to the Asian Development Bank and the CAREC Secretariat for their significant contribution and dedicated work over the past 25 years. Their continued support in bringing countries and development partners together, advancing regional initiatives and supporting practical cooperation has been instrumental to the development of the CAREC Program.

The experience of the past 25 years has demonstrated that regional cooperation can transform geography into opportunity. Our task now is to build on this legacy — transforming connectivity into greater trade and investment, strengthening economic integration, and ensuring that regional cooperation continues to deliver tangible benefits for our people.

Azerbaijan remains committed to working closely with all CAREC member countries and development partners toward this common objective.

Thank you for your attention.