

Foreign Policy of Azerbaijan in 25 Years of Independence: Priorities, Principles and Achievements

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This year marks Azerbaijan's 25th anniversary of post-Soviet independence. During this time, it has emerged as a leading country in the South Caucasus in terms of economy, military and population. Over the past quarter-century, Azerbaijani foreign policy has been strongly influenced and shaped by the challenges and opportunities that have arisen as a result of its geography. An independent foreign policy has always been a guiding principle of Azerbaijan's international relations, viewed as a central pillar of national security. Azerbaijan has pursued a balanced foreign policy, avoiding undue external influences and maintaining opportunities for cooperation with all regional and international actors. This strategy was aimed at advancing its national interest. Azerbaijan's foreign policy also has a very strong regional focus: the country attaches major importance to relations with neighboring countries (including trilateral partnerships), which are also considered a geopolitical necessity. Along with the above-mentioned key characteristics and principles, the restoration of territorial integrity remains a major priority for Azerbaijan's foreign policy.



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Introduction

2016 marks 25 years since Azerbaijan re-gained its independence. Today, Azerbaijan is both more powerful and more experienced than it was in 25 years ago and is accepted as the leading country in the South Caucasus in terms of economy, military, and population. Many regional projects begin in Azerbaijan, pass through its territory, or otherwise, depend on its involvement. Azerbaijan has initiated many regionally and globally important projects, which in return strengthened its independence and sovereignty. However, given the country's complex location, the realization of these projects requires Baku to take geopolitics very seriously. Thus, both its domestic and foreign policies have been significantly influenced by its geographical location; decision makers have had to consider geographical realities. Geographical location has a dual effect on Azerbaijan foreign policy. On the one hand, it is a landlocked country surrounded by more powerful regional actors and an unpredictable, irredentist neighbor (Armenia). On the other hand, the country is located at the crossroads of east-west and north-south transport routes, which it has leveraged to overcome the difficulties created by the former. Under the vision of Heydar Aliyev, the country has transformed itself from a geographically landlocked country into a transit country. This policy has been further advanced by Ilham Aliyev, who has incorporated principles of independence and proactivity into the country's foreign policy. The strategy is aimed at securing the economic development via strong economic relations with powerful neighbors, and accordingly, at minimizing the tensions and opening up new opportunities for regional and global cooperation.

Nevertheless, the military occupation of Azerbaijan's territories by Armenia for the past 25 years and the international community's continued silence on this issue despite several international resolutions make Azerbaijan more cautious in its approach to regional politics, and more concerned with geopolitical realities. This paper thus elaborates the dynamics between Azerbaijan's peaceful relations with its neighbors and the existential and geopolitical threat posed by Armenia's continuing occupation and military hostility.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section focuses on the geopolitical characteristics of Azerbaijan, trying to shed light on how geography influences and shapes the country's foreign policy. The second section examines Baku's regional policy and evaluates its effectiveness in relation to the country's geopolitical needs. The next chapter evaluates the restoration of territorial integrity as the key priority of the foreign policy of the country. Baku's balanced foreign policy, an important principle of the country's foreign policy for more than two decades, is examined in the fourth section of the article. The fifth section highlights the importance of an independent foreign policy in regard to the global and regional framework for Azerbaijan's national security. The final section of the article discusses the development of trilateral partnerships with regional neighbors as an important element of Azerbaijan foreign policy strategy.

Geopolitical characteristics and foreign policy identity

It is often said that geography defines the destiny of a country and this cannot be escaped. This has long been posited by scholars such as Friederich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellen, Sir Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, Alfred Mahan, and Nicholas J. Spykman and etc. The point is that geographical factors influence the relations of power units within the international system. Azerbaijan is a landlocked country, surrounded by territorial states and an internal sea which is also surrounded by land, leaving the Volga-Don Canal as the only route out to international waters. The Canal is under the sovereign control of Russia. This geographical location creates ontological vulnerabilities for Azerbaijan. This has forced Azerbaijan to make efforts to access the infrastructure and facilities of neighboring states in order, for instance, to export its goods through the territories of other states to participate in international trade. This has put serious constraints on Azerbaijan's foreign policy options and its ability to maneuver. It was, in fact, these very circumstances that led President Ilham Aliyev to state in the Munich Security Conference in 2014 that:

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have routes of transportation. We started to build gas pipelines, which connected the Caspian Sea with the Black Sea and with Mediterranean for the first time in the history.”¹

On the other hand, again from a geopolitical perspective, Azerbaijan’s vulnerability has wider regional implications – for instance, the Central Asian states rely on Azerbaijan for their sole secure (and profitable) export route to the Western markets and advanced and energy-consuming economies. If Azerbaijan’s independence were compromised, the Turkic countries could lose their direct land connection with the Western markets.² As described by Turkey’s former PM Ahmet Davutoğlu, Azerbaijan has a ‘labyrinth’ position between Russia, Turkey, and Iran.³

Thirdly, Azerbaijan’s geopolitical location and identity are intertwined. Azerbaijan has a complex and multilayered geopolitical identity that includes geographical, historical, religious and cultural components.⁴ Geographically, Azerbaijan is located in Europe and joined the Council of Europe in 2001.⁵ Culturally speaking, Azerbaijan is part of the Islamic world, though it is a secular member of this group. Azerbaijan joined the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1991. It has initiated several OIC projects in education, culture, and tourism. In May 2017, Baku hosted the Islamic Solidarity Games, and 2017 was declared the ‘Year of Islamic Solidarity’. In terms of different religious groups, 65% of the Azerbaijanis are Shia and 35% are Sunni. In this regard, Azerbaijan presents a model for the peaceful co-existence of two different confessions. Linguistically and ethnically speaking, Azerbaijan is a part of the Turkic World. It is a founding member of the Turkic Council, established in 2009 in Nakhchivan. Within the framework of the Turkic Council, and with its geographical location in the heartland of the Turkic countries, Azerbaijan cooperates

1 President.az (2015), Ilham Aliyev attended “Diversification strategies” roundtable of the Munich Security Conference. Available at: <http://en.president.az/articles/14264> (Accessed: 06 February 2015).

2 Brzezinski Z. (1997), *The Grand Chessboard, American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New-York. Basic Books. PP. 46-47.

3 A. Davudoğlu (2009), *Stratejik Derinlik*, 34-cü Çap. İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, s. 317.

4 Mammadov Farhad, (2017) ‘Azerbaijan’s Geopolitical Identity in the Context of the 21th Century Challenges and Prospects’, *Valdai Papers*, No 62.

5 Mammadov Farhad, (2017) ‘Azerbaijan’s Geopolitical Identity in the Context of the 21th Century Challenges and Prospects’, *Valdai Papers*, No 62.

closely with other member states in terms of economic and transportation links.

Though the overwhelming majority of the population of Azerbaijan are Muslim, while the country, constitutionally and practically, is a secular state. One of the oldest mosques in Azerbaijan was built in 743 in Shamakhi city. One of oldest churches representing Azerbaijan's Christian past and heritage of Alban period still stands in Sheky city of Azerbaijan. One can find Armenian Church at the center of Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan. Near to Baku city, there is an 'Atasgah Temple' - a holy place of ancient fire worshipers. All holy places are under the financial and spiritual protection of the government of Azerbaijan.⁶ Azerbaijan organized World Religious Leaders Summit in Baku in 2010. In October 2016, Pope Francis visited Azerbaijan where he praised the country for religious tolerance environment.⁷ In December 2016, during a visit to Azerbaijan, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu highlighted that "Israel-Azerbaijan ties is a beacon of tolerance and hope between Judaism and Islam."⁸ To sum up, Azerbaijan represents a model where all ethnic and religious groups co-exist together for centuries in harmony and with the respect to each other.

Thus, while Azerbaijan's geography poses certain challenges, it also provides a number of opportunities.

Effective regional policy as a geopolitical necessity

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6 Vestnikkavkaza (2015), Azerbaijan to warm Georgian and Armenian churches, Available at: <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/articles/Azerbaijan-to-warm-Georgian-and-Armenian-churches.html>, (Accessed: October 2015).

7 Reuters (2016), No more violence in God's name, Pope says on visit to mosque, Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-azerbaijan-idUSKCN1220BV>, (Accessed: October 2, 2016).

8 Netanyahu: 'Israel-Azerbaijan ties, a beacon of tolerance and hope between Judaism and Islam' available at: <https://www.tv7israelnews.com/netanyahu-israel-azerbaijan-ties-is-a-beacon-of-tolerance-and-hope-between-judaism-and-islam/>, (Accessed: december 14, 2016).

of the relationship between power and geography. President İlham Aliyev furthered this by prioritizing the maintaining of good relations with neighboring countries, rooted in an awareness of the country's geopolitical vulnerabilities. This is confirmed by his statement that "Relations with neighbors is a priority for us. The safety of neighbors is our safety".⁹

This has been proven correct. Without regional cooperation, Azerbaijan would not have been able to realize the regional and global projects that are vital for its security, sovereignty, and independence. These projects have transformed Azerbaijan from a landlocked state to a bridge state. Without successful cooperation with Georgia and Turkey, the BTC, BTE pipelines, or BTK railway projects would not have been realized. These projects are all crucial to the increasing geopolitical importance of Azerbaijan. Equally, without successful cooperation with Russia and Iran, it would not have been possible to build North-South railway, which further enhances Azerbaijan's importance as a transportation route. Azerbaijan's global foreign policy is, in fact, a continuation of its regional foreign policy. The effective regional policy is not just an international relations instrument; it is also a survival tool.

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As a result of the successful realization of all these projects, Azerbaijan's economy has witnessed massive growth. Since İlham Aliyev came to power, Azerbaijan's GDP has increased 8.5 times, budget revenues have increased by a factor of 14 times, and the military budget has grown 10-fold (from \$454 thousand in 2003 to \$4.8 billion 2015). Azerbaijan has always supported the peaceful resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and advancing military capabilities is intended to bring Armenia to the negotiating table and compel Yerevan to accept a peace agreement.¹⁰

9 President.az (2016), Respublika Gününə münasibətilə rəsmi qəbulda İlham Əliyevin nitqi, Available at: <http://www.president.az/articles/19986> (Accessed: 27 may 2017)

10 Seputyte, Milda and Ummelas, Ott. (2016), 'Oil Riches Help Azerbaijan Outgun Armenia in Military Spending', Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-06/oil-riches-help-azerbaijan-outgun-armenia-in-military-spending>

Table 1: *Main economic indicators during Ilham Aliyev's presidency*

	2003	2016	Growth
GDP (billion USD)	7.15	60.4	8.5 times
Foreign Trade turnover (billion USD)	5.2	17.7	3.4 times
Budget incomes (billion USD)	1.22	17.5	14 times
Budget expenditures (billion USD)	1.23	17.78	14.5 times

Source: *The State Statistics Committee*

Table 2: *Military spending of Azerbaijan*

Year	Dollars spent	GDP %
2003	\$454.000.000	2.4 %
2004	\$550.000.000	2.6%
2005	\$644.000.000	2.3%
2006	\$1.322.000.000	3.4%
2007	\$1.438.000.000	2.9%
2008	\$1.936.000.000	3.3%
2009	\$1.708.000.000	3.3%
2010	\$1.618.000.000	2.8%
2011	\$3.079.000.000	4.9%
2012	\$3.078.000.000	4.6%
2013	\$3.600.000.000	4.85%
2014	\$3.800.000.000	5.1%
2015	\$4.800.000.000	9%
2016	\$1.200.000.000	3.2%

Source: <http://en.apa.az/azerbaijan-economy/finance-news/azerbaijan-to-increase-defense-spending-in-2016.html>, <http://militarybudget.org/azerbaijan/>

Azerbaijan's endeavor to transform itself into a strategic transit country and the land bridge between east-west and north-south have played a huge role in driving economic growth. Accordingly, as of today, Azerbaijan is at the center of three major regional and global energy and transportation projects: EU's TRACECA, China's Great Silk Road Project, and North-South corridor between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran. Azerbaijan is both an active participant and investor in the East-West

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transport corridor, which will revitalize the historic Silk Road, and the North-South railroad corridor connecting Southeast Asia with the Black Sea region. The North-South corridor provides the shortest alternative route connecting southeast Asia and the Black Sea regions. Azerbaijan reacted positively when China announced its ambitions to promote the One Belt and One Road (OBOR) initiative in 2013. In December 2015, President Ilham Aliyev visited China and signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on the Silk Road Economic Belt.¹¹

Azerbaijan is committed to the principle of regional cooperation, and to securing a corridor between Europe and Asia for the free flow of trade, people, energy, resources, technology, and communications. Ensuring its openness in both directions in Eurasia is a crucial principle in terms of formulating its regional and global foreign policy strategy.¹²

Restoring territorial integrity as the key priority of the foreign policy

Before regaining of independence, Azerbaijan faced military aggression by Armenia, leading to the occupation of 20% of its territory. The National Security Concept of Azerbaijan lists the restoration of 'territorial integrity' as the first and foremost national security goal. In the last decade alone, the irredentist and further expansionist claims of Armenia led Azerbaijan to spend more than 25 billion USD on defense and security, primarily due to the ongoing Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh War.¹³ The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been a significant factor in bilateral and multilateral relations. The lack of international attention to the occupation often damages Azerbaijan's relations with its counterparts, adversely affecting Azerbaijan's security, economy, and bilateral relations.

Azerbaijan has long proposed plans for resolution of the

11 Xinhuanet (2015), China, Azerbaijan sign deals on silk road cooperation, Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/11/c_134904736.htm (Accessed: 11 april 2017)

12 Shaffer, Brenda, (2010), 'Foreign Policies of the States of the Caucasus: Evolution in the Post-Soviet Period', *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Volume 7, No 26 P.54.

13 Azerbaijan military budget, Available at: <http://militarybudget.org/azerbaijan/> (Accessed: 20.10.2016). Armenian military budget, Available at: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/armenia/budget.htm> (Accessed: 20.10.2016).

conflict. The latest one entails resolving the problem step-by-step, suggesting that Armenian forces must withdraw from the adjacent regions of Nagorno-Karabakh, followed by discussions on the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan accepts autonomous status for Nagorno-Karabakh, similar to Nakhchivan.

The mediation efforts of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs' are seen as inadequate by Azerbaijan. Baku tries to bring the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict onto the agenda of other international organizations such as the European Council, Islamic Cooperation Council, Non-aligned Movement, UN, and Turkic Council. One of Azerbaijan's main aims in international organizations is to raise international awareness of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. A range of international organizations including the UN Security Council, UN General Assembly, Council of Europe, European Parliament, Organization for Islamic Cooperation, Non-aligned Movement, and International Court of Justice have adopted many resolutions confirming that Azerbaijan's territories are under illegal occupation by Armenia, and that the conflict must be resolved in a way that restores the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, international powers are not as engaged with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as with the other conflicts in the region.

Thus the Azerbaijani authorities do not believe that relying on international law is sufficient in this sense; accordingly, they attempt to put pressure on Armenia in different ways in order to force Yerevan to adopt a peace agreement. One mechanism is isolating Armenia from regional projects like the BTC, BTE, BTK, and North-South corridor. Secondly, Azerbaijan works to keep the borders between Turkey and Armenia closed as long as the occupation continues. Thirdly, Azerbaijan continues to strengthen its military power and change the military balance of power in its favor across the region. Azerbaijan has established good military relations with Russia, Turkey, Israel, Belarus, and Ukraine, and has begun developing its own military industry.¹⁴ Azerbaijan is also dedicated to modernizing its Armed Forces;

¹⁴ Shiriyev, Zaur (2016), 'Azerbaijan Looks to Greater Reliance on Domestically Produced Weapons', Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/80891> (Accessed: 31 may 2017)

the Five Day War in April 2016 demonstrated that Azerbaijan has successfully built up its military capacity.

Balanced foreign policy as the key principle of the foreign policy

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The development of a balanced foreign policy was another priority in Heydar Aliyev's geopolitical thinking, and Ilham Aliyev has continued in the same vein. According to Novruz Mammadov, Assistant to the President for Foreign Policy Issues, pursuing a balanced foreign policy means finding a sustainable reconciliation point between global and regional actors, and between their opposing interests. The goal is to establish equal relations with all sides, and its main principle is to be open to all sides for cooperation and to formulate bilateral relations via diplomatic means.¹⁵ Azerbaijan tries to maintain good relations with all regional and global players. Accordingly, Azerbaijan has been an active participant of NATO's Partnership for Peace program since 1994 and has an advanced IPAP with the alliance. Azerbaijan supported ISAF operations in Afghanistan. At the same time, Azerbaijan cooperates with Russia on security and military industry issues. Russia has supplied Azerbaijan \$4 billion of military equipment based on agreements signed between 2009 and 2011.

An equally balanced policy is followed with the country's relations with another neighboring power, Turkey. Turkey was the first state to recognize Azerbaijan's independence. It is not only identity and culture but also state interests that bind these two states. Both sides identify bilateral relations as strategic. Energy pipelines such as BTC, BTE, and TANAP are already built, and the both countries are dedicated to successfully completing the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which is the central component of East-West transportation corridor. Turkey has provided valuable support in terms of strengthening Azerbaijan's Armed Forces. Since 1992, Azerbaijan and Turkey have signed more than 100 military protocols. Turkey also strongly

¹⁵ Məmmədov, Novruz (2013), *Xarici Siyasət: Reallıqlar və Gələcəyə Baxış*, Qanun Nəşriyyatı, Bakı. S. 77.

supports Azerbaijan's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and due to this has closed its borders with Armenia. In return, Azerbaijan has supported Ankara in numerous domestic and international cases and causes, including after the failed coup in July 2016.

In addition, Azerbaijan cooperates with the EU within the framework of many regional projects. In particular, the transportation project TRACECA and the energy initiative INOGATE have played a vital role in bilateral relations. On 7 November 2006, Azerbaijan and the EU signed a MoU on energy supply for the diversification the EU's energy resources, via the export of Azerbaijani energy resources to Europe.¹⁶ In February 2017, during President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Brussels, Azerbaijan started negotiations on a new strategic partnership agreement with the EU. Also, after following the successful implementation of an agreement to simplify visa regimes, Azerbaijan requested an action plan for a visa-free regime with Europe. Both sides have also launched negotiations on this issue.

Finally, Azerbaijan has also been careful to pursue a balanced policy towards Iran. As Baku's southern neighbor and providing a connection to the Middle East, Iran offers an alternative means for Azerbaijan to export its oil. Azerbaijan and Iran signed an agreement stating that neither country will allow third parties use their territories against one another. During the crisis between the West and Iran over Iran's nuclear program, for instance, Azerbaijan did not support the sanctions against Iran, and strongly opposed any military escalation in the region. However, Azerbaijan also strongly welcomed Iran-West nuclear deal and has tried to develop energy, economic and transportation relations with Iran in the post-sanction period. Azerbaijan has offered good opportunities for Iran to export its gas to Europe and to connect with Russia and Europe via rail. In this sense, two countries have signed an agreement on the North-South railway.

16 "President Barroso and the President of Azerbaijan sign a Memorandum of Understanding on energy partnership", European Commission, Available at: europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-06-1516_en.htm (Accessed: 31 may 2017)

An independent foreign policy entails three key principles for

Azerbaijan. Firstly, an independent foreign policy aims to prevent foreign interventions into domestic politics. Secondly, an independent foreign policy means avoiding membership of any regional military blocs that may limit sovereignty. Thirdly, via independent foreign policy, Azerbaijan can maintain good relations with both of the sides of any regional conflict, and thus prevent external involvement in its foreign relations.

Independent foreign policy as a global and regional framework for national security

The National Security Strategy of Azerbaijan, adopted in 2007, indicates that any kind of military or economic dependence is a national security threat.¹⁷ President Ilham Aliyev has affirmed that an independent foreign policy entails three key principles for Azerbaijan.¹⁸ Firstly, an independent foreign policy aims to prevent foreign interventions into domestic politics. As seen during the recent elections, some foreign countries have attempted to influence Azerbaijan's domestic policies, including on energy and security. Secondly, an independent foreign policy means avoiding membership of any regional military blocs that may limit sovereignty. Thirdly, via independent foreign policy, Azerbaijan can maintain good relations with both of the sides of any regional conflict, and thus prevent external involvement in its foreign relations. For example, Baku has cooperative relations with neighboring Tehran but has also developed good relations with both Israel and

Saudi Arabia. It was this policy that resulted in, for instance, hosting the meeting of the US Chief of General Staff and his Russian counterpart in Azerbaijan to discuss the Syrian crisis. Moreover, in accordance with this policy, during the Russian-Georgian war, Azerbaijan purchased Georgian goods despite Russian sanctions, as well as increased exports of natural gas to Georgia. As a result of this strategy, Azerbaijan has gained a reputation of a reliable partner in the region.

Since regaining independence, Azerbaijan's independent foreign policy has faced some challenges. Many states both within the region and externally hardly digested Azerbaijan's independent foreign policy. In that regard, they tried to adversely influence Azerbaijan's attempts to integrate with international organizations such as NATO and the CSTO. Azerbaijan has,

17 (2007) National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154917/Azerbaijan2007.pdf> (Accessed: 31 may 2017.)

18 Chatham House (2009) Aliyev, Ilham, 'Foreign Policy challenges for Azerbaijan', Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/14383_130709aliyev.pdf, (Accessed: 31 may 2017)

however, resisted these efforts. As a result, it is now the only country in the South Caucasus that has evaded direct control by outside countries. By contrast, Armenia has chosen to form a military alliance with Russia, and Moscow has a military base in Armenian territory and the two countries share a unified air defense system. Georgia has chosen to ally itself with the US. Azerbaijan, however, has adopted a balanced and independent policy between the global and regional powers, meaning that it can follow a more independent policy than other regional states.¹⁹

Moreover, Azerbaijan has avoided becoming embroiled in regional geopolitical competition between global powers. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, Azerbaijan is not happy with the position of either the CSTO or NATO on the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.²⁰ Azerbaijan left the CSTO in 1999 when Russia supplied \$1 billion worth weapons to Armenia. Baku also criticizes the Western states following their inconsistent positions on Georgian, Ukrainian, and Azerbaijani territorial integrity in regard to the conflicts. Secondly, membership in these military blocs entails dependence and limitations on sovereignty.

Accordingly, Azerbaijan joined the non-aligned movement in 2011, which helped Azerbaijan in three respects: (i) avoiding the pressures of regional organizations in the geopolitical struggle in the South Caucasus, and maintaining a balanced foreign policy; (ii) putting an end to the rumors about possibilities of Azerbaijani membership in either NATO or the CSTO; and (iii) making Turkey and Pakistan as its two main partners in terms of security and military relations.

Trilateral cooperation in Azerbaijan's foreign policy

Complementary to and within the scope of Azerbaijan's

19 Shaffer, Brenda, (2010), 'Foreign Policies of the States of the Caucasus: Evolution in the Post-Soviet Period', *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Volume 7, No 26 P. 53.

20 Azertag (2016) Prezident İlham Əliyevin sərezident İlham Əliyevin setinin 2016-cı ilin sosial-iqtisadi inkişafının yekunlarına vətənin 2016-cı ilin sosial-iqtisadi inkişafının yekunları Available at: http://azertag.az/xeber/Prezident_Ilham_Aliyevin_sedrliyi_ile_Nazirler_Kabinetinin_2016_ci_ilin_sosial_iqtisadi_inkisafinin_yekunlarina_ve_qarsida_duran_vezifelere_hesr_olunan_iclasi_kechirilib_YENILANIB_VIDEO-1025304 (Accessed: 01 June 2017)

These trilateral alignments are platforms for the realization of common energy, communication, and transportation projects, further aimed at establishing trust and deepening cooperation.

focus on maintaining good relations with neighboring countries, the country has also developed trilateral relations, with a specific purpose for each ‘triangle’. These trilateral relation formats include Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey (the product of the 1990s and the implementation of the grand projects such as the BTC and BTE pipelines); Azerbaijan-Iran-Russia (a result of the North-South railway connection); and Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Turkey and Azerbaijan-Iran-Turkey (to resolve different issues via diplomatic means). These trilateral alignments are platforms for the realization of common energy, communication, and transportation projects, further aimed at establishing trust and deepening cooperation.

The Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey relationship is the only institutionalized trilateral format in the region. The fact that Azerbaijan and Georgia are aligned with Turkey’s vision eliminates whatever concerns may arise regarding the realization of this axis. The results of the specific projects and activities that the three countries collectively developed throughout the 1990s have become visible during the 2000s. In accordance with the increasing opportunities and capabilities of Turkey and Azerbaijan, the development of a trilateral strategic alliance supported by shared experiences stimulates the implementation of regional projects and the expectation of a common future. After more than 20 years of independence, Azerbaijan and Georgia have overcome challenges to become an integral element of the international economic and political system by transforming themselves into active members of international institutions.²¹ Officials from all three countries have been meeting since the second half of the 1990s, but the first official trilateral meeting was in 2012. Since then, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense, Economy, and Presidents have come together several times. New security circumstances and projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and Southern Gas Corridor have deepened the relations between these three countries.

²¹ Valiyev, Javid (2015), ‘Azerbaijan-Georgian-Turkey Triangle: The Main Features of Cooperation’, Caucasus International, Vol. 5, No: 3, Winter. pp. 27-44.

The Azerbaijan-Turkey-Turkmenistan trilateral relationship is another successful example of Azerbaijani foreign policy. This partnership seeks to minimize the political and economic disagreements between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. In particular, good relations between leaders of the three states have helped to minimize problems. The first trilateral meeting among the Foreign Ministers of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan took place in Baku on 26 May 2014. The “Baku Statement” was released after the meeting, expressing the three countries’ determination to develop trilateral relations in various fields, particularly in energy, trade, transportation through joint projects and cooperation initiatives. In the energy field, Azerbaijan and Turkey are interested in bringing Turkmenistan onboard as part of the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP) project.²² Azerbaijan-Turkey-Turkmenistan has also cooperated in the transportation sector: Azerbaijan’s Alyat International Port, Turkmenistan’s Turkmenbashi port, and Turkey’s Samsun port have been declared sister ports. There is a ferry connection between Turkmenbashi and Baku port which carries passengers as well as trucks and other vehicles.²³

The trilateral talks involving the foreign ministers of Turkey, Azerbaijani, and Iran first took place in Istanbul on the margins of the Economic Cooperation Organization meeting in December 2010. This meeting occurred at a time when relations between Azerbaijan and Iran were tense.²⁴ The first official meeting between the Azerbaijani, Iranian, and Turkish Ministers of Foreign Affairs took place in Urmia on 16 April 2011,²⁵ in the shadow of tensions between Iran and Turkey on

22 Hurriyetdailynews (2014), Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan mull Eurasia benefits, Available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-turkmenistan-azerbaijan-mull-eurasia-benefits-----.aspx?pageID=238&nID=67006&NewsCatID=338> (Accessed: 26.05.2017)

23 Trend (2015), Turkmenistan’s new ferry to make voyage to Baku, Available at: <http://en.trend.az/casia/turkmenistan/2353063.html> (Accessed: 14.04.2017)

24 Hurriyetdailynews (2011) Turkey seeks thaw in Iran-Azeri ties, Available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=turkey-seeks-thaw-in-iran-azerbaycan-ties-2011-04-12> (Accessed: 26 april 2017)

25 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2014), Van Statement of the Third Trilateral Meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey, Available at: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/van-statement-of-the-third-trilateral-meeting-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan_-the-islamic-rep.en.mfa, (Accessed: 01 june 2017).

the future of Syria. Iran plays an important role for Azerbaijan as a bridge to the exclave of Nakhchivan. Moreover, Iran is an alternative transportation corridor for Azerbaijan. For instance, in 2008, the war between Georgia and Russia created security problems for Azerbaijan's energy and transportation projects. The destruction of bridges in Georgia also disrupted Azerbaijan's foreign export routes. As a result, the main export oil pipeline, BTC, stopped transporting oil and Azerbaijan sent oil to the Iranian port of Neka.

Another trilateral format involving Azerbaijan and Iran is the Azerbaijan-Russia-Iran trilateral relationship. Although there is no annual meeting between these states, the North-South corridor connecting the Indian Ocean to Russia and the Black Sea is a key linkage. In August 2016, presidents Putin, Rouhani, and Aliyev met in Baku and signed a memorandum of understanding on the North-South route, which opened up new ways for trilateral cooperation. Azerbaijan is especially interested in this cooperation because it will also help prevent tensions between its two large neighbors. Additionally, Azerbaijan can demonstrate that Baku is capable of cooperating with both Russia and Iran.

A new platform for trilateral cooperation emerged after the Turkish-Russian jet crisis in 2015. Azerbaijan wanted to avoid a confrontation between Turkey and Russia and played a positive role in normalizing Turkey-Russia relations. Subsequently, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs proposed the establishment of a Turkey-Azerbaijan-Russia trilateral format.²⁶ During President Erdogan's visit to Russia in March 2017, he repeated this proposal. During the past five years, Azerbaijan-Russian military relations have further developed. After the normalization of Turkey-Russia relations, Turkey is pursuing a policy of balancing the West with Russia, and of developing relations with Asian countries. Russia has its own projects in relation to the Eurasian region. However, Russia's relationship with Kurdish terrorist group in Syria PYD/YPG upsets Turkey,

26 Vestnikkavkaza (2016), Ankara proposes Russia - Azerbaijan - Turkey trilateral format, Available at: <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Ankara-proposes-Russia-Azerbaijan-Turkey-trilateral-format.html> (Accessed: 26 april 2017).

while Moscow's policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh and militarization of Armenia continues to disappoint Azerbaijan.

Currently, the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan-Iran-Georgian trilateral cooperation formats are under discussion. While the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral relationship is much more developed, Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Turkey trilateral relations have to build trust. The Azerbaijan-Turkey-Iran trilateral relationship has become much more successful during the Hasan Rouhani presidency. These trilateral relationships are promising for further cooperation between Azerbaijan and its regional neighbors.

Conclusion

Geography has defined Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy for the last 25 years. The country has, accordingly, based its foreign policy on geopolitical and geo-economic concerns. This has enabled Baku to overcome certain disadvantages and focus on pursuing an independent, pro-active, and balanced foreign policy, devoting significant efforts to assuring territorial integrity, preserving good relations with regional countries, and building energy and transportation corridors. This has helped Azerbaijan to transform itself from a landlocked country to a transit country. While a balanced foreign policy made Azerbaijan capable of maintaining a balance between regional and global powers, its focus on maintaining independence means that Azerbaijan develops its own agenda based on nationally defined domestic, foreign, and security interests.

Although Azerbaijan has yet to restore its territorial integrity, there is a consensus in domestic politics that it will continue to be the principal national cause. Despite the continuing occupation, Azerbaijan has brought international recognition to the fact that Armenia is illegally occupying Azerbaijani territories. In this sense, Azerbaijan also made it clear that Azerbaijan has sufficient political will and military capabilities to restore its

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territorial integrity. Additionally, by excluding Armenia from the economic mega-projects such as BTC, BTE, and BTK, Azerbaijan has demonstrated its capacity to isolate Armenia in order to push Yerevan to a solution. Finally, the bilateral and trilateral relations Baku has developed with a diverse range of actors and its participation in several transcontinental projects prove that Azerbaijan's foreign policy has prevailed over the geographic and geopolitical traps.