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<p>Sunday, 11 February 2007</p>	<p>Home / News and Current Affairs / Security Watch / Mr Aliyev goes to Washington</p>	<p>Contact / Jobs @ ISN</p>
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Characterizing their discussion as both "really interesting" and "candid" - the latter often a diplomatic code word for "contentious" - Bush emphasized the strategic relationship with Azerbaijan, a secular Muslim country that occupies a critical geographic position in the South Caucasus.</p> <p>Apart from energy, Bush said, the two leaders discussed democracy and the Iranian situation. "We obviously talked about Iran," said Bush. "I assured the president of my desire to solve this problem diplomatically and peacefully."</p> <p>The discussion of Iran may have been disappointing for Bush, however, due to a major policy announcement by Aliyev during a question-and-answer session on Wednesday last week at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington. President Aliyev stressed that his country would "not be engaged in any kind of potential operations against Iran" - a statement that appeared to close the door on Azerbaijan's assistance to the US in any coming military confrontation.</p> <p>Major issues</p> <p>Bush's principal concerns, and his reasons for inviting Aliyev, include America's diminishing position on Russia's southern flank, the availability of oil from outside the Middle East, and fears that Iran, which shares a long border with Azerbaijan, is determined to produce atomic weapons.</p> <p>Due to the increasingly discouraging strategic picture in the region for the US and the presence of large reserves of oil, the development of democracy in Azerbaijan occupies a lower priority for Washington than in other former Soviet republics - something that has not gone unnoticed by the political opposition here.</p> <p>Aliyev brought with him a different set of priorities, not all of which mesh seamlessly with Washington's. Firstly, the trip - sought by Aliyev since taking over the office of president in 2003 from his father, Heydar Aliyev - has been trumpeted by the Azerbaijani government and the pro-government press as an acknowledgment of the strategic partnership between the two countries.</p> <p>More importantly, the visit looks very much like an American endorsement of Aliyev's foreign and domestic policies, despite harsh criticism by groups such as Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, and even the US State Department of Azerbaijan's human rights record and its endemic corruption.</p> <p>But above all, the single most important priority for Azerbaijan is a settlement of the long and painful Nagorno-Karabakh war - a topic that was raised by the Azerbaijani president in his talks at the White House.</p> <p>No other issue approaches the central position that resolving the conflict has for the Azerbaijani government and people, and the Azerbaijan media constantly remind the population of the grievous losses in land and casualties suffered during the 1992-1994 war.</p> <p>While Azeris usually blame Russia for sponsoring Armenia and being the guarantor of its success in driving out Azerbaijani forces from the ethnic Armenian enclave, there is also growing dissatisfaction with the mediation efforts of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).</p> <p>The recent summit meeting in Rambouillet, France, between Aliyev and Armenian President Robert Kocharian only added to the sense of frustration in Azerbaijan. The two sides have engaged in increasingly sharp rhetoric since Rambouillet, and Aliyev has sought to highlight his country's willingness to resort to war if necessary and its spiraling defense budget, which dwarfs Armenia's.</p> <p>International relations professor Alpay Ahmadow of Baku Slavian University speculated that the Karabakh and Iran issues were interlinked and provided the core of discussion between the presidents.</p> <p>"Most likely Washington will make such proposals that could meet the national interests of Baku" in solving the Karabakh impasse, he told ISN Security Watch.</p> <p>"The territory of Azerbaijan is of strategic importance for the US, whatever hostilities they will conduct: air warfare or launching ground operations. But it doesn't mean that Washington has already made a final decision to resort to military force," the professor said.</p> <p>However, if the two presidents were expecting some kind of quid pro quo, it evidently failed to materialize.</p> <p>Washington's strategic setbacks</p> <p>Only a year ago, the US appeared to have replaced an increasingly autocratic Russia as the dominant power in Russia's "near abroad" - the countries surrounding Russia and considered to be in its traditional sphere of influence.</p>	<p>Search</p> <p><input type="text"/></p> <p>ISN Website <input type="button" value="GO"/></p> <p>» Tell me more about ISN LASE</p> <p>» Comment on this story</p> <p>» Printer-friendly version</p> <p>» Forward this story to a friend</p> <p> Perspectives is a weekly column written by our Security Watch readers. To contribute, follow the instructions at the bottom of the OpEd column published by Security Watch staff every Wednesday or subscribe to the ISN Security Watch newsletter. 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Even without large petroleum and natural gas deposits in countries such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, stability in the region has ramifications for the spread of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and the ongoing struggle over Afghanistan's future.

"Color revolutions" in both Georgia and the Ukraine had enhanced the US' power and influence in the former USSR, and the unexpected "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan seemed to only prove that this trend was unstoppable.

But since the summer, the US has been ousted from its important air base in Uzbekistan, whose government has grown much closer to both Russia and China since the Andijan massacre roughly a year ago and the resultant condemnation by the US and the EU.

Kazakhstan's proposed participation in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline threatens to further weaken Russia's ability to control energy supplies to Europe.

However, the Russian government has recently objected on environmental grounds to a proposed "trans-Caspian pipeline", which would carry Kazakh oil to Baku and then to Europe via the BTC.

During a visit to Moscow in April, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev agreed to increase shipments of Kazakh oil to Russia substantially. US Vice President Dick Cheney was scheduled to visit Kazakhstan this week in order to discuss US-Kazakh relations with Nazarbaev.

And in Kyrgyzstan, President Kurmanbek Bakiev is demanding that the US increase its rent payment for leasing an airbase at Manas or face eviction by 1 June. Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Alikbek Jekshenkulov has reportedly specified a rent increase "by one hundred fold" if the Americans want to continue using the base. The current leasing arrangement calls for an annual payment of US\$2 million a year. The Russian government pays no rent for its military base at nearby Kant, and Bakiev's trip to Moscow last week was widely interpreted as a signal that President Vladimir Putin is Kyrgyzstan's patron - the Tulip Revolution notwithstanding.

In view of these setbacks and the increasingly tense Iranian situation, the US needs Azerbaijan more than ever, no doubt more than Azerbaijan needs the US. And the Russian president's recent three-day visit here was noticed in Washington.

During his visit, Putin tweaked the US by publicly touting the so-called CASFOR, a regional security force for the Caspian Sea countries that would be far more ambitious than America's comparatively modest "Caspian Guard" program. CASFOR would entail the use of military assets to interdict the flow of drugs and WMD materiel, prevent terrorist activities, and protect the economic interests of the five Caspian Sea states: Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.

The Iranian government has backed CASFOR, which if implemented would involve all five Caspian states and coordinate activities between the Caspian's two major naval powers: Russia and Iran.

Aliyev has yet to accept or decline Putin's invitation to join CASFOR.

Can Azerbaijan play a constructive role?

Meanwhile, southern Azerbaijan is swelling with Iranian immigrants, fearful of a coming war.

Tahir Taghi-zadeh, director of the Press and Information Policy Department for the Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told ISN Security Watch he doubted that the US had plans for a military solution anytime soon due to its engagements in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Iran is, said Taghi-zadeh, in "full compliance" with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). "Any country has a right to develop a nuclear research program. They have never said that they are developing weapons."

The diplomatic option, which Bush stressed in the photo-op with Aliyev, is "far from exhausted".

At the Council on Foreign Relations, Aliyev ruled out Azerbaijan joining a US-led coalition against Iran, saying: "I think that...it's time to stop speculating on this issue."

Referring to the recently signed non-aggression pact with Iran, Aliyev reminded the audience that it "clearly says that the territories of our countries cannot be used for any danger towards each other".

What the Azerbaijani president did not say was more tantalizing. First, while dismissing operations against Iran, he did not address the ongoing issue of whether a US military base might be established in Azerbaijan, something the US has desired for years.

Aliyev has been unambiguous on this issue in the past, and last summer he attempted to quash persistent rumors that establishment of a US base might be in the offing. "I have said this before, and I repeat: Azerbaijan will not host American military bases on its territory," he declared.

US ambassador Reno Harnish also told the Azerbaijani press that the US would "not locate our military bases in the territory of Azerbaijan" - a development that would violate provisions in Azerbaijan's constitution that prohibit foreign bases on Azerbaijani soil.

However, US Undersecretary of State Daniel Fried seemed to undercut this assurance by the ambassador when he told a large audience at Baku State University in October that the US would not seek to establish "a large, Cold War style base" in Azerbaijan, an answer that prompted many analysts to deconstruct the terms "large" and "base".

With respect to a possible US-Iranian conflict, what the Azerbaijani government has hinted at in recent days is the possibility of acting as a facilitator in any possible negotiations between the two sides.

"This is an issue where we can play a positive role," said Taghi-zadeh. "We have a strategic partnership with the United States and we have neighborly relations with Iran."

While Taghi-zadeh was reluctant to use the term "mediator", he stressed that "generally, our intention is to facilitate discussion" between the US and Iran.

Azerbaijan's offer to assist the two nations comes amid heightened tension in its relations with Iran. A public

spat between Azerbaijan and Iran emerged during the Second World Congress of Azerbaijanis held in Baku in March, when some of the delegates discussed the "reunification" of Azerbaijan with northern Iran, where millions of ethnic Azeris live.

The diplomatic furor that ensued between the Iranian ambassador and Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry was almost amusing at times, with the ambassador questioning the nationality of one of Azerbaijan's most revered poets. But the dispute revealed a simmering, low-level tension between the two Shi'ite Muslim neighbors that has existed for many years.

This row was followed by press reports of remarks by Ali Larijani, director of Iran's National Security Council, who alleged that US reconnaissance units were "operating in Azerbaijan, and their activity is directed against the Islamic Republic of Iran".

In the event of war with the US, Iran would reserve the right to attack the BTC pipeline, Larijani warned - a threat that Taghi-zadeh found hard to take seriously. "I don't believe that Iran is remotely close to considering this," he told ISN Security Watch.

The emphasis for now is still on diplomacy and the good offers that Azerbaijan might extend to both sides. Even the Iranian defense minister seemed to have such a role for Azerbaijan in mind during a visit to Baku on 19 April, when, referring to the Aliyev-Bush talks in Washington, he told the press that "Ilham Aliyev can convince the United States to understand Iran's position properly".

Whether Azerbaijan can now play the role of go-between will become clearer in the coming weeks.

Karl Rahder has taught US foreign policy and international history at colleges and universities in the US and Azerbaijan. In 2004, he was a Visiting Faculty Fellow in Azerbaijan with the Civic Education Project, an academic program funded by the Soros Foundations and the US Department of State. He is currently based in Baku.

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