



## **Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy: Between East and West ...**

**Kamal Makili-Aliyev**

### **Abstract**

Azerbaijan is at the crossroads between East and West. Its geopolitical location is both its challenge and its major asset. This paper analyses the general state of relations of Azerbaijan with its largest and geopolitically most important neighbours as well as with other international players in order to see how Azerbaijan is able to maintain a balanced approach in foreign policy, manoeuvring politically between the clashing geopolitical interests and ambitions of the different states in the South Caucasus. It is argued that due to its choices in foreign policy and strong focus on the effective development of its economy, Azerbaijan vies to maintain an independent course.

**Keywords:** *Azerbaijan / Foreign policy / South Caucasus / Russia / Iran / USA / Israel / NATO / European Union*

---

## Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy: Between East and West ...

by Kamal Makili-Aliyev\*

### Introduction

Azerbaijan's foreign policy, a state that regained its independence only twenty-one years ago, has several distinguishing features. For a predominantly Muslim country with a post-Soviet history, yet one that is on the political map of Europe, but has a neighbourhood that includes Russia, Iran and Turkey, effective foreign policy is not just an international relations instrument - it is a survival tool. At the same time, such a geopolitical location provides many opportunities. Located at the crossroads of the major trade and energy routes between East and West and maintaining the secularity of a state with a Muslim heritage, Azerbaijan is a natural bridge between Europe and Asia, the Muslim and Christian worlds and a gateway to energy and transportation corridors for the entire region in which it is located. This makes Azerbaijan one of the most strategic states of the former Soviet Union in terms of both regional and international security. Moreover, when it comes to economic integration, Azerbaijan's role in the transit of hydrocarbons from the Caspian basin also has to be taken into account.

Being a part of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan ultimately is a part of the geopolitical area where regional powers such as Russia, Turkey and Iran have critical economic and political interests. In addition, this region is a place where such international players as the US and the EU are also engaged in the exercise of their influence. When referring to the engagement of regional and international players, Dr. Frederick Starr claims that their respective impact "will be different on Azerbaijan, the country with by far the largest economy in the region" as opposed to other countries in the South Caucasus.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when it comes to foreign policy strategy, such differences in possible impact cannot be overlooked. Hence, there is a clear understanding in Azerbaijan that different approaches of the aforementioned regional and global powers may result in clashes of interests, calling upon Azerbaijan to develop a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy.

It is only logical that the foreign policy strategy of Azerbaijan, when analysed, reveals a number of principles that form its core and serve as guidelines for any action taken regionally and internationally. One of those principles is the need to transform possible threats in the region into strategic partnerships and opportunities. Azerbaijan's relations

---

Paper prepared for the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 25 January 2013. Revised version of a paper presented at the seminar on "Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Priorities: Regional and European Dimension", Rome, 8 November 2012.

\* Kamal Makili-Aliyev is Leading Research Fellow at the Center for Strategic Studies (SAM), Baku.

<sup>1</sup> S. Frederick Starr, "The Caucasus: Freed from Illusions, Freed to Seize Opportunities", in Fariz Ismailzade and Glen E. Howard (eds.), *The South Caucasus 2021. Oil, Democracy and Geopolitics*, Washington, The Jamestown Foundation, 2012, p. xiii.

---

with Russia can be taken as a good example of this principle and will be discussed further in this article.

Another such principle is that of projecting the image of Azerbaijan as a responsible partner in all its international relations. For a country seeking a balanced foreign policy, it is very important to maintain a stable position on global and regional issues. A related principle is thus that of being a “responsible partner” in its foreign relations. Indeed to achieve an effective and balanced foreign policy, Azerbaijan needs to act as a stable and predictable actor. Emotional and impulsive reactions have to be excluded from foreign policy making. A predictable foreign policy eliminates the “surprise” factor in bilateral and multilateral relations and ensures the credibility of the state as a partner on several levels of inter-state relations. Indeed, states are much more likely to trust a partner with a straight and stable foreign policy record, without zigzags, sudden turns or changes of mind.

Another obvious principle is that of building a strong and competitive economy that will enable the country to be independent in decisions concerning its resource management. It is challenging to be surrounded by great states with huge economies and remain independent or outside of their economic orbit. Strengthening one's own economy to the point of being able to at least diversify dependencies is thus crucial for a pragmatic and independent foreign policy.

Moreover, based on a multi-vector approach, Azerbaijan is committed to the principle of maintaining a secure 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 guideline for Azerbaijan in formulating its foreign policy strategy.

Thus, taking all the aforementioned principles into account, this paper tackles the layers of Azerbaijan's foreign policy at both the regional and international levels. It explains how the aim of maintaining a balanced foreign policy approach is reflected in Azerbaijan's relations with its regional neighbours, Russia, Iran and Turkey, as well as with international players and global institutions, the US, Israel, the EU and NATO. It will also cover the number one item on Azerbaijan's foreign policy agenda as well as the primary security threat to the state: the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia.

Azerbaijan's pragmatic approach is sometimes misunderstood or mistaken for passivity induced by the country's geopolitical location and *realpolitik*. Some experts, for instance, believe that Azerbaijanis “understanding of their lack of choices resigns them to pragmatism”.<sup>2</sup> This paper argues otherwise, showing that it is not a lack of choices but rather a careful consideration of the national interests that lie at the heart of Azerbaijan's foreign policy pragmatism.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Goodrich and Peter Zeihan, *A Crucible of Nations. The Geopolitics of the Caucasus*, Austin, Stratfor, 2011, p. 71.

## 1. Regional framework

As mentioned above, after re-establishing its independence, Azerbaijan found itself in a very complicated geopolitical regional framework. Engaged in the international armed conflict with Armenia, Azerbaijan's fate depended a lot on its larger neighbours, namely Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as on the handling of the conflict itself. Foreign policies towards each of these states took their share in shaping the Azerbaijani state in its present form.

Today, Azerbaijan's number one strategic partner is undoubtedly Turkey. Turkish-Azerbaijani relations have thrived since Turkey recognized newly independent Azerbaijan in 1991, the first state to do so. Turkey and Azerbaijan are currently linked by projects that span the political, military, economic, cultural and social spheres, while ties between the two peoples are captured by the dictum: "One nation, two states".

Energy cooperation in Azerbaijan-Turkey relations is essential. Two pipelines that deliver oil and gas link Azerbaijan with Turkey via Georgia. Thus, Turkey plays an essential role in the transit of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea towards European markets. Ties in energy cooperation are so close that experts point out that they are moving from classic "low politics" relations to "high politics".<sup>3</sup> The supremacy of energy cooperation in relations with Turkey can be challenged only by relations in the military field. Turkey first closed its border with Armenia after the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, supporting Azerbaijan in establishing a semi-blockade of Armenia. Since then it has assisted Azerbaijan in bolstering its military capacity. Thousands of Azerbaijani military officers and non-commissioned officers have acquired their military training in Turkey. Being a NATO member, Turkey assists Azerbaijan in the development of its armed forces to the highest standards promoted by the Alliance, thus creating a favourable atmosphere for Azerbaijan's relations with NATO.

At the same time, in virtue of their links to Georgia, both Azerbaijan and Turkey are interested in developing regional projects and maintaining energy security in the region. It is worth mentioning that Turkey's interest in becoming a regional energy hub is largely supported by Azerbaijan. Energy projects and close cooperation in developing economy-friendly energy policies are the trademarks of Azerbaijan-Turkey relations. Azerbaijan also provides Turkey with a link to Central Asia, to which ethnic Turks are tied both culturally and historically. As Azerbaijan remains a part of the post-Soviet space, it can facilitate such cooperation. In addition, in security issues, Azerbaijan is dedicated to supporting Turkey in its fight against the PKK, which is one of the highest priorities on the Turkish national security agenda.

Azerbaijan has also worked towards the progressive improvement of relations with its largest neighbour, Russia. In the 1990s bilateral relations were negative, if not hostile. Since the early 2000s, ties have improved towards the establishment of a firm strategic partnership. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of the post-Soviet space

---

<sup>3</sup> For example see, Gulmira Rzayeva, "Azərbaycan-Türkiyə enerji münasibətləri: çağırışlar və perspektivlər" (Azerbaijan-Turkey energy relations: challenges and perspectives), in *Azərbaycan-Türkiyə əlaqələri son 20 ildə: uğurlar və imkanlar* (Azerbaijan-Turkey relations in last 20 years: successes and opportunities), Baku, Center for Strategic Studies (SAM) and Azerbaijan-Turkey Business Association (ATİB), 2011, p. 83.

experienced a period of mutual mistrust and concern in relations with Russia. For Azerbaijan, the experience of the active phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia resulted in a number of stereotypes that made it difficult for effective bilateral relations to develop. However, positive changes in Russia's foreign policy orientation in the beginning of the 2000s, combined with the increased number of high-level mutual visits have marked a new era in bilateral relations and cooperation that has led to several agreements establishing and then reaffirming friendship and strategic partnership.<sup>4</sup>

Azerbaijan's bilateral relations with Russia presently include a variety of spheres including close cooperation in economic and military areas. Azerbaijan is Russia's number one trade partner in the South Caucasus and Russia's direct investment in Azerbaijan has grown almost seventeen times with respect to the 1990s. In turn, Russia is Azerbaijan's number one trade partner in the non-oil sector. Military cooperation between the two countries includes not only educational and training activities, but also arms trade and military support. Regional security is another point on the bilateral agenda of these states, in that close cooperation of the countries' security and police forces contributes to the maintenance of a safe regional environment. There is also close cooperation on Caspian Sea basin issues. After Azerbaijan and Russia reached an agreement on their respective sectors of the basin in 2002-03,<sup>5</sup> the barriers to effective partnership in this area were essentially lifted.

Generally, Azerbaijan's foreign policy toward Russia reflects its commitment to developing strategic partnerships spanning across political, economic, social and cultural sphere. Azerbaijan remains in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), without however furthering integration in its extended format, not least due to the membership of Armenia in the same organization. Azerbaijan's stance on the integration projects promoted by Russia (customs union, Eurasian Union, etc.) remains neutral. This is due to the balanced approach that Azerbaijan maintains in its foreign policy and also to Russia's position on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (military-political union with Armenia).

Azerbaijan's foreign relations with Iran are as complicated as the situation around Iran's nuclear programme. Since independence, Azerbaijan's relations with its Islamic neighbour have always suffered from a certain level of tension, unnerving both states, which share much common history and culture. Both Azerbaijan and Iran, however, have made considerable efforts to overcome these tensions and come up with common points of understanding and cooperation. In certain cases, such as cultural and trade relations, they have even been rather successful.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Yevgeniy V. Bahrevsky, "20 лет политических взаимоотношений России и Азербайджана. История и основные проблемы" (20 years of political relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. History and basic problems), in *Российско-Азербайджанские отношения за 20 лет. История и перспективы* (Russia-Azerbaijan Relations During 20 Years: History and Perspectives), Baku, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) and Center for Strategic Studies (SAM), 2011, p. 9, <http://sam.gov.az/en/publications/books/20111102104123758.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See Efim I. Pivovarov, *Российско-Азербайджанские отношения. Конец XX-начало XXI века* (Russian-Azerbaijani relations. End of XX-beginning of XXI century), Moscow, Kremlin Multimedia, 2012, p. 133.

The presence of a large minority (at least 16% of the total population<sup>6</sup>) of ethnic origin Azerbaijanis who live in Iran represents a constant concern for the Iranian regime, which sees Azerbaijan as possible kin-state and fears separatist movements in its northern provinces closest to Azerbaijan. The fact that Azerbaijan has tried to distance itself from such notions seems not to have had a reassuring effect on Iran. At the same time, secular Azerbaijan is very concerned about Iran trying to exercise its influence over the religious sectors of the Azerbaijani population through the expansion of religious teachings among Shia Muslim groups. That kind of behaviour is treated with suspicion and considered a “veiled” threat in Azerbaijan. Very close and strategically warm relations between Iran and Armenia also fuel tensions in Azerbaijan-Iran ties. There is a certain level of reciprocity in Iran’s attitude, as the regime is very concerned about Azerbaijan’s close cooperation with the West, namely the US, the EU, NATO and Israel. Furthermore, differences between the two states have not yet been settled in the Caspian basin, due to lack of agreement on where their respective naval borders lie.

Despite all the tensions in bilateral relations with Iran, Azerbaijan has been trying to maintain good neighbourly cooperation. It has taken a constructive approach in talks over delimitation of respective sectors and borderlines on Caspian Sea, has remained neutral over the nuclear file and has provided numerous assurances that Azerbaijan’s territory will never be used against Iran, in line with the 2005 non-aggression pact.<sup>7</sup> These efforts notwithstanding Iran has recently upped its rhetoric against Azerbaijan, “start[ing] an information war against Azerbaijan in its media, following attempts to assassinate Israelis on the Azerbaijani soil by specially trained armed groups”.<sup>8</sup> As a result, bilateral relations remain chilly.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains the number one topic on Azerbaijan’s foreign policy agenda. As the of the 1991-94 war, the former territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast as well as seven other regions of Azerbaijan remain under Armenian occupation. Presently, Armenia maintains a non-recognized regime in the occupied territories, which depends financially and administratively on Armenia, while promoting international recognition of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” which Armenia itself fails to recognize. Not a single state in the world has recognized this entity, while Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity continues to be internationally upheld.

In 1993, the UN Security Council adopted four resolutions (822, 853, 874, 884)<sup>9</sup> that demanded unconditional withdrawal of occupying forces from Azerbaijan. None of these resolutions has been implemented or enforced. Moreover, both the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament have adopted respective resolutions that condemn the occupation of Azerbaijani territories,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> CIA, “Iran: People and Society”, in *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See Stephen Blank, “New Military Trends in the Caspian”, in *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, Vol. 6, No. 11 (1 June 2005), p. 10-11, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/files/20050601Analyst.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Reshad Karimov, Kamal Makili-Aliyev and Hüsrev Tabak, “Is Time Running Out for Iran?”, in *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Resolutions are available at <http://www.un.org/docs/scres/1993/scres93.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> See Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, *Resolution 1416 (2005): The conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Conference*, 25 January 2005, <http://assembly.coe.int/documents/adoptedtext/ta05/eres1416.htm>; European Parliament, *The need for an EU strategy for the South Caucasus (P7\_TA(2010)0193)*, 20 May 2010,

yet their adoption has not led to any sanctions either. The peace process and negotiations on the conflict are led by the Minsk Group established under the auspices of the Council for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, now the Organization - OSCE) in 1994, after the cease fire-agreement was reached between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In 1997, a "triple" co-chairmanship was introduced into the format of the Minsk Group, made up of Russia, France and the US.<sup>11</sup> To date, the mediation of the Minsk Group has not led to any meaningful result or resolution of the conflict.

Through all stages of the conflict Azerbaijan adopted a constructive and pragmatic stance and has never invoked its right to self-defence provided by UN Charter Article 51. Within the negotiations, it has sought to reconcile notions of territorial integrity and self-determination by proposing the largest possible autonomous status for Nagorno-Karabakh within the territorial confines of Azerbaijan, an approach which continues to meet Armenian resistance. Demanding more from Azerbaijan would mean the breach of the principle of territorial integrity that was laid down in the core of the negotiations by the international community itself. Within the Minsk Group, Azerbaijan struggles to persuade the co-chairs, all of which host the largest Armenian Diasporas in the world, to exert pressure on Armenia to relinquish control of Azerbaijani territories. These Diasporas influence the decision-making in their countries very effectively, thus hampering the will of these co-chair states to facilitate a prompt resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

## 2. International framework

While deeply engaged in regional development and local neighbourhood policies, Azerbaijan has also made considerable steps in establishing itself in the international arena. Here Azerbaijan's relations with international players such as the US and Israel and with organizations such as NATO and the EU have played a considerable (if not, in some instances, crucial) role. The interests of these actors in the South Caucasus, and particularly in Azerbaijan, have defined Azerbaijan's levels of cooperation and partnership with the "Western world".

The US opened an embassy, thus establishing diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan, only months after the country re-established its independence. The US saw the potential and geopolitical importance of relations with a country that is located at the nexus between Russia, Iran and Turkey. In addition, the hydrocarbon wealth of the Caspian Sea and possible transportation routes only fuelled this interest.

Therefore, what started during the Bush Senior administration with projects to build the initial energy infrastructure, rapidly developed and intensified into full-scale military and economic cooperation during the Clinton and Bush Junior administrations. As the US was getting more involved in cooperation with Azerbaijan, its concerns about security and energy in the region were growing rapidly as well. This meant growing US interests in countering both Russia's efforts to re-establish its "umbrella" over South Caucasian

---

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2010-0193+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

<sup>11</sup> Kamal Makili-Aliyev, *Enforcement of International Law in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, Tbilisi, Universal, 2008, p. 22-23.

---

Azerbaijan and possible security threats from Iran.<sup>12</sup> Add to this the US's understanding of the importance of Azerbaijan as a crucial link in the energy transit route connecting the South Caucasus with Central Asia, while bypassing Russia and Iran, and the picture becomes clear.

On its side, Azerbaijan welcomed the US as a partner in energy projects and all forms of economic cooperation. Recognizing the importance of the flow of energy to Western markets for accruing wealth and maintaining sustainable development, Azerbaijan readily engaged in many projects with the US, taking active part in them. Besides, the development of relations between the two distant countries has also led to cultural and social cooperation and educational programmes in many areas. Being a country with many security concerns, Azerbaijan is also engaged in broad military cooperation with the US and has acquired defence equipment, services and training. At the same time, Azerbaijan is concerned that many US policies are hampered by the Armenian Diaspora's efforts. One such example still stands: Section 907 of the US Freedom Support Act,<sup>13</sup> though a waiver is in place. Azerbaijan sees the US as a solid strategic partner and somewhat of a model for development, however the shift in policies (towards rapprochement with Russia) during the first term of the Obama administration left Azerbaijan with the feeling that the US is backing away from further active development of relations with it.

One of the most important US allies - Israel, also recognizes Azerbaijan as a key strategic and trading partner. Being a country with a predominantly Muslim population, Azerbaijan is currently the country in the Muslim world closest to Israel. Strong ties to Israel have resulted in that country's large investments in Azerbaijan's markets and infrastructure. Israel is also one of the major importers of Azerbaijan's oil. Constantly expanding relations between these states are not only limited to what some authors refer to as "cooperation in trade and security matters as well as cultural and educational exchanges".<sup>14</sup> They extend far beyond that, penetrating practically all levels of cooperation between the two states, including common policies in increasing people-to-people contacts. It is also no secret that for Israel the importance of maintaining Azerbaijan as a close friend has seriously increased after the "cool down" in relations with Turkey since 2010.

For Azerbaijan, developing its strategic and political relations with Israel is a key foreign policy priority. On the one hand, the military cooperation that started early in the 1990s during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, when Israel was one of the major suppliers of arms and military equipment, has already turned into full-scale security-based cooperation. Such cooperation includes information and data exchange, training of security, intelligence and armed forces and support for the modernization of the armed

---

<sup>12</sup> Ariel Cohen, "Azerbaijan and U.S. interests in the South Caucasus twenty years after independence", in *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 28-29.

<sup>13</sup> See U.S. Public Law No. 102-511, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.uscongress/legislation.102hr4547>. Section 907 practically bans any kind of direct US aid to the Azerbaijani government, however the waiver is being introduced by the President of the US every year since 2001.

<sup>14</sup> See Soner Cagaptay and Alexander Murinson, "Good Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel: A Model for Other Muslim States in Eurasia?", in *PolicyWatch* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), No. 982 (30 March 2005), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/good-relations-between-azerbaijan-and-israel-a-model-for-other-muslim-state>.



forces with the supply of battlefield equipment and ammunition.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the Jewish communities have always had strong ties with Azerbaijan and there has not been a single episode of anti-Semitism in the history of Azerbaijan. Recognizing that, the Israeli Knesset hosted a ceremony marking the Azerbaijan's Republic Day in 2007.<sup>16</sup>

Political cooperation with Israel also brings about important advantages to Azerbaijan in its relations with the US, through the support of the Israel lobby particularly in Congress. At the same time, Azerbaijan recognizes the state of Palestine which may seem to cast a shadow on bilateral relations. Nevertheless, there seems to be an understanding in Israel that Azerbaijan is part of the Muslim world and cannot be alienated from it by blindly supporting Israeli policies. Reflecting on the aforementioned, it can safely be said that Azerbaijan is interested in further deepening the partnership and cooperation with Israel, while the latter is strategically interested in the development of its South Caucasian friend.

NATO's security interests in the South Caucasus and particularly in Azerbaijan are on the rise since the beginning of 2000s. As NATO members have become increasingly engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq, the broader security concerns prompted the Alliance to engage with possible partners, one of them being Azerbaijan. NATO is engaged with Azerbaijan in the framework of an Individual Partnership agreement that focuses on military reform, establishment of effective state institutions in the military and security fields, as well as on some democratization goals.<sup>17</sup> Understanding that Azerbaijan maintains the strongest military force in the region, NATO is interested in cooperation with Azerbaijan on a variety of security issues and in providing the necessary assistance to develop Azerbaijan's armed forces. Azerbaijan also plays a very important role in the Northern Distribution Network<sup>18</sup>, critical for the Alliance's military efforts in Afghanistan, especially now that the southern route is frequently compromised.

Azerbaijan is experiencing growth not only in the economy, but also, and related, in the military area. For a country faced with multiple security concerns, this is unsurprising. Hence, Azerbaijan's interest in close cooperation with NATO lies in the development of its armed and security forces. Azerbaijan aims at reaching the Alliance's standards. Azerbaijan recognizes that it requires NATO assistance to modernize and restructure its armed forces. The importance of cooperation with NATO was even reaffirmed by the National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2007.<sup>19</sup> At the same time,

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> "Israeli Parliament marks Azerbaijan Republic Day", in *Today.az*, 25 May 2007, <http://www.today.az/news/politics/41356.html>.

<sup>17</sup> See, Uwe Halbach, "The Southern Caucasus' Integration with NATO and EU: Current Developments and Future Perspectives", in Fariz Ismailzade and Glen E. Howard (eds.), *The South Caucasus 2021. Oil, Democracy and Geopolitics*, Washington, The Jamestown Foundation, 2012, p. 299.

<sup>18</sup> Northern Distribution Network as part of NATO logistics in Afghanistan includes several routes one of which starts at Poti, Georgia on the Black Sea and continues to Baku, Azerbaijan where the goods are transferred to barges and ferried across the Caspian Sea. Supplies land in Turkmenistan and then move by rail through Uzbekistan before arriving at the Afghan border.

<sup>19</sup> *National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 2007, available at <http://merln.ndu.edu/whitepapers/Azerbaijan2007.pdf>.

Azerbaijan's entry into the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011<sup>20</sup> has sent a clear message that it does not see cooperation with NATO as a prelude to joining the Alliance in future. Rather, Azerbaijan is dedicated to pragmatic and mutually beneficial cooperation with any responsible partner in the field of security, without commitments to join any kind of military alliance or organization. Azerbaijan will thus stay active in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme and continue to intensify both its cooperation with the Alliance and its reforms of the armed forces. However, maintaining its balanced approach and military neutrality will remain equally important for Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan's relations with the EU are in constant development as well. After the latest EU enlargement in 2007, the Union started relocating its attention to its eastern neighbourhood, including the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan firmly remains on the political map of Europe and thus lies within the political scope of the EU neighbourhood. For the European Union, Azerbaijan can be considered the last "European outpost". Azerbaijan is both Europe's link to the wider Caspian region as well as its connection to the Muslim world and the larger Middle East. Azerbaijan plays a huge role in Europe's energy security, and is even considered by some experts the "key partner on Caspian regional energy projects".<sup>21</sup> In 2006, the EU signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Azerbaijan which was followed in 2011 by the Joint Declaration on the South Corridor as both sides sought to reaffirm their commitments on energy projects.

From its side, Azerbaijan is a dedicated partner in the Eastern Partnership framework, the regional extension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. That Partnership develops cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU to many areas including energy security, economic cooperation, border security, institutional capacity-building, as well as some rule of law and democratization issues. Again, Azerbaijan is dedicated to development in all these areas and to productive cooperation with the EU that can lead to the implementation of European standards in Azerbaijan and bring it even closer to the "European space". However, integration into the EU is not the ultimate goal for Azerbaijan. As is the case with NATO, Azerbaijan is very interested in raising its standards so as to reflect the values and common policies of the EU. But Baku does not seek membership of the EU but rather considers the establishment of an ever stronger strategic partnership as the current end goal. Azerbaijan also welcomes the EU's concern with regional security,<sup>22</sup> but expects greater EU commitment to the development of stronger bilateral and regional relations.

## Conclusion

Azerbaijan aims at keeping its foreign policy diversified, avoiding one-sided approaches in both its bilateral and multilateral relations and equally in regional as well

<sup>20</sup> Paul Goble, "Azerbaijan Joins the Non-Aligned Movement", in *Azerbaijan in the World. ADA Biweekly Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 11 (1 June 2011), <http://biweekly.ada.edu.az/issues/vol4no11/20110610060101177.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Amanda Paul and Gulmira Rzayeva, "Azerbaijan. The key to EU energy security", in *EPC Commentary*, 24 October 2011, p. 2, [http://www.epc.eu/pub\\_details.php?cat\\_id=4&pub\\_id=1357&year=2011](http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=4&pub_id=1357&year=2011).

<sup>22</sup> European Council, *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy*, Brussels, 12 December 2003, p. 8, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>.

as in international frameworks. Indeed, as Joshua Walker suggests Azerbaijan “is a junction of powerful cultural forces where old empires overlap and modern states compete, of ambition and energy, both figuratively and literally”.<sup>23</sup> One can only imagine what kind of policy headache such a competition may create for any state. For Azerbaijan, this also defines an interest in maintaining a fine balancing act in such competition, thus avoiding being pulled into one of the great powers’ orbits and pursuing an independent foreign policy.

There are not many states that can simultaneously and effectively sustain active membership in the CIS and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation while being dedicated to certain levels of Euro-Atlantic integration. For many states, these different “integration plans” would be seen as contradicting and even self-excluding. For Azerbaijan they are a reality and the result of its particular foreign policy vision.

Due to its pragmatism, Azerbaijan has been able to maintain a high level of cooperation with its largest neighbours, minimizing the threats around it and building strategic partnerships that can work for mutual benefit. Cooperating openly in trade, energy and security with its regional partners, Azerbaijan has been able to prove itself a responsible partner with a stable non-impulsive approach in its foreign relations. Azerbaijan’s relations with Turkey in the energy and military fields go alongside its close ties with Russia for instance, without giving rise to clashes or major problems. The same can be said about Iran.

At the same time, Azerbaijan is eager to implement the standards promoted by Western integration policies in areas ranging from energy and security to culture and public administration. Nonetheless, Azerbaijan’s interest in cooperation with Transatlantic structures and powers is not intended to create tensions in the region or apply pressure to any local players. Beyond Russia and the West, Azerbaijan is also seeking to develop ties with partners further afield in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

Contrary to the view mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Azerbaijan has and has always had a choice. Its choice has been determined by its national interests, opting for pragmatism over ideology. Instead of adopting the strict ideology of “Euro-Atlantic integration at all costs”, or the ideology of “Russia’s supremacy”, or even the “Islamic ideology”, Azerbaijan is seeking to combine and implement the best practices of all these approaches through a unique mix that reflects its national interests. Azerbaijan has chosen its own way that has so far aided the country in overcoming many of the challenges that it faces. Hence, although “we are entering an age that sees a shift in the global center of gravity from West to East”,<sup>24</sup> Azerbaijan has chosen to stay right in the middle.

*Updated: 25 January 2013*

<sup>23</sup> Joshua W. Walker, “Eurasia’s Hinge: Azerbaijan’s Triangular Balancing Act”, in *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 2012), p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Is the West turning its back on Turkey?” (Colloquy), in *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 22.

---

## References

Yevgeniy V. Bahrevsky, "20 лет политических взаимоотношений России и Азербайджана. История и основные проблемы" (20 years of political relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. History and basic problems), in *Российско-Азербайджанские отношения за 20 лет. История и перспективы* (Russia-Azerbaijan Relations During 20 Years: History and Perspectives), Baku, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) and Center for Strategic Studies (SAM), 2011, p. 7-30, <http://sam.gov.az/en/publications/books/20111102104123758.html>

Stephen Blank, "New Military Trends in the Caspian", in *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, Vol. 6, No. 11 (1 June 2005), p. 10-11, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/files/20050601Analyst.pdf>

Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Is the West turning its back on Turkey?" (Colloquy), in *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 19-24

Soner Cagaptay and Alexander Murinson, "Good Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel: A Model for Other Muslim States in Eurasia?", in *PolicyWatch* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), No. 982 (30 March 2005), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/good-relations-between-azerbaijan-and-israel-a-model-for-other-muslim-state>

Ariel Cohen, "Azerbaijan and U.S. interests in the South Caucasus twenty years after independence", in *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 25-51

Paul Goble, "Azerbaijan Joins the Non-Aligned Movement", in *Azerbaijan in the World. ADA Biweekly Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 11 (1 June 2011), <http://biweekly.ada.edu.az/issues/vol4no11/20110610060101177.html>.

Lauren Goodrich and Peter Zeihan, *A Crucible of Nations. The Geopolitics of the Caucasus*, Austin, Stratfor, 2011

Uwe Halbach, "The Southern Caucasus' Integration with NATO and EU: Current Developments and Future Perspectives", in Fariz Ismailzade and Glen E. Howard (eds.), *The South Caucasus 2021. Oil, Democracy and Geopolitics*, Washington, The Jamestown Foundation, 2012, p. 295-312

Reshad Karimov, Kamal Makili-Aliyev and Hüsrev Tabak, "Is Time Running Out for Iran?", in *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 111-128

Kamal Makili-Aliyev, *Enforcement of International Law in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, Tbilisi, Universal, 2008

Amanda Paul and Gulmira Rzayeva, "Azerbaijan. The key to EU energy security", in *EPC Commentary*, 24 October 2011, [http://www.epc.eu/pub\\_details.php?cat\\_id=4&pub\\_id=1357&year=2011](http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=4&pub_id=1357&year=2011).

Efim I. Pivovarov, *Российско-Азербайджанские отношения. Конец XX-начало XXI века* (Russian-Azerbaijani relations. End of XX-beginning of XXI century), Moscow, Kremlin Multimedia, 2012

Gulmira Rzayeva, "Azərbaycan-Türkiyə enerji münasibətləri: çağırışlar və perspektivlər" (Azerbaijan-Turkey energy relations: challenges and perspectives), in *Azərbaycan-Türkiyə əlaqələri son 20 ildə: uğurlar və imkanlar* (Azerbaijan-Turkey Relations in the Last 20 Years: Successes and Opportunities), Baku, Center for Strategic Studies (SAM) and Azerbaijan-Turkey Business Association (ATİB), 2011

S. Frederick Starr, "The Caucasus: Freed from Illusions, Freed to Seize Opportunities", in Fariz Ismailzade and Glen E. Howard (eds.), *The South Caucasus 2021. Oil, Democracy and Geopolitics*, Washington, The Jamestown Foundation, 2012, p. i- xvii

Joshua W. Walker, "Eurasia's Hinge: Azerbaijan's Triangular Balancing Act", in *Caucasus International*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 2012), p. 27-35



**Latest IAI Working Papers**

Series editor: Nathalie Tocci

- 13 | 04 A.M. Gentili, Lessons Learned from the Mozambican Peace Process
- 13 | 03 N. Sartori, The European Commission vs. Gazprom: An Issue of Fair Competition or a Foreign Policy Quarrel?
- 13 | 02 T. Kunstein and W. Wessels, The New Governance of the Economic and Monetary Union: Adapted Institutions and Innovative Instruments
- 13 | 01 C.E. Sottilotta, Political Stability in Authoritarian Regimes: Lessons from the Arab Uprisings
- 12 | 30 S. Menegazzi, China Reinterprets the Liberal Peace
- 12 | 29 F. Prota and G. Viesti, 1930s or 2020s? A European Growth Strategy
- 12 | 28 V. Miranda, N. Pirozzi, K. Schäfer, Towards a Stronger Africa-EU Cooperation on Peace and Security: The Role of African Regional Organizations and Civil Society
- 12 | 27 A. Marrone, Defence Spending in Europe in Light of the Economic Crisis
- 12 | 26 C. Committeri, When Domestic Factors Prevail Upon Foreign Ambitions: Russia's Strategic Game in Syria
- 12 | 25 S. Cavasola, The Informal Europeanization of EU Member State Immigration Policies
- 12 | 24 A.R. Ungaro, Developments in and Obstacles to the US Pivot to Asia: What Alternatives for Europe?
- 12 | 23 A. Bultrini, The Future of the European Convention on Human Rights after the Brighton Conference

**The Institute**

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffariInternazionali*), two series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Papers*) and an Italian foreign policy yearbook (*La politica estera dell'Italia*).

**Istituto Affari Internazionali**

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 00186 Roma  
Tel.: +39/06/3224360 Fax: + 39/06/3224363  
E-mail: [iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it) - website: <http://www.iai.it>  
Send orders to: [iai\\_library@iai.it](mailto:iai_library@iai.it)