

SDA Policy Spotlight

# Azerbaijan's View of the Security Situation in the Southern Caucasus



Representation of the State of Baden Württemberg to the EU, Brussels



SECURITY & DEFENCE AGENDA

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Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan  
to the Kingdom of Belgium

## SDA POLICY SPOTLIGHT

# View of the Security Situation in the Southern Caucasus

The Southern Caucasus is a region of burgeoning geo-strategic importance. As a result, the US and EU are increasingly interested in local developments, while Russia maintains a high level of influence over the former Soviet republics. Azerbaijan has emerged as a key regional actor, bordering Russia to the North and Iran to the south, as well as Georgia and Armenia. The security situation remains fragile, not least due to the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Furthermore, increased regional oil production and the unresolved legal status of the Caspian Sea contribute to potential causes of instability.

**Amb. Araz Azimov**

**Deputy Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan**

**Responsible for political-military affairs, conflict resolution and  
Euroatlantic cooperation since 1994**

He detailed how Azerbaijan, as one of NATO's Partners for Peace, views the current regional security situation. How does Azerbaijan plan to react to challenges like energy security and non-proliferation, given its proximity to Iran? How should the EU respond to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict? After Moscow touted the radar base at Qabala as an alternative to the US-led missile shield, what is Baku's present role in global geo-strategic dialogue? Given Azerbaijan's recent Chairmanship of the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, where next for regional co-operation?

## SDA Profile: Azerbaijan

Since declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan, located to the west of the Caspian Sea, has become a key actor in the South Caucasus region. Endowed with substantial energy reserves, the state has sought to develop its oil and gas industry, as well as its pipeline network. In recent years, Azerbaijan has enjoyed one of the world's highest economic growth rates as a result of this development.

Azerbaijan's energy reserves are destined to play a key role in Europe's energy security strategy. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline are already operational and provide an important contribution to the diversification of energy supplies and delivery routes. Currently the potential role of Azerbaijan in the proposed Nabucco Pipeline project, which will initially stretch from Turkey to Vienna, is being discussed.

With Russia to the north and Iran to the south, Azerbaijan is located in a key strategic position. The majority of the population of the country are Shiite Muslim. Though fears of Islamic extremism have been raised in recent years, Azerbaijan remains a modern secular state.

Azerbaijan is an active participant in the NATO Partnership for Peace programme and has deployed peacekeeping forces to Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2007, the Soviet-era radar base at Gabala was touted as a possible site for a joint US-Russia missile shield system. However, after visiting the facility, US officials deemed the base as unsuitable.

The conflict in and around the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, located in south-western Azerbaijan, remains unresolved to date. Ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh attempted to break away from Azerbaijan following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, leading to a war that cost around 25,000 lives. Those of Azeri descent fled the region while Armenian forces took de facto control of the province and its adjacent areas.

Despite a ceasefire achieved in 1994 and peace talks launched in 1992 under the OSCE aegis, the final settlement of the conflict has not been achieved so far.

In November 2007, the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (France, Russia and the United States) presented a draft paper to both sides on Basic Principles for talks, though these have yet to be ratified by either Armenia or Azerbaijan. This draft was discussed by the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia at their recent meeting in Saint-Petersburg on June 6, 2008.

March 2008 saw the worst ceasefire violations in recent times, with 16 soldiers and 2 civilians killed. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia have continued to develop their military capabilities, stoking fears that full-scale conflict will resume.

## Azerbaijan in Figures\*

<b>Population:</b>	8.2 million (90% Azeri)
<b>Estimated GDP Growth Rate 2007:</b>	31% (The world's highest)
<b>Military Spending:</b>	3.6% GDP (2006)**

\*CIA World Factbook

\*\*SIPRI Database on Military Expenditure



Map adapted by the SDA from Map No.3761, Rev. 7, United Nations Dept. Field Support, Cartographic Section, February 2008.

Boundaries, names and designations shown are for illustrative purposes only, are not necessarily authoritative, and do not imply acceptance or endorsement by the SDA.

## Introduction

Keynote speaker **Araz Azimov**, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, has served in his post since 1994. An experienced and distinguished diplomat, he is responsible for political-military affairs, conflict resolution and Euroatlantic cooperation within the ministry. As a result, he is well-placed to assess Azerbaijan's regional and geopolitical role, and can offer a significant insight into how Baku views the EU and NATO.

Azimov said he was “extremely keen to cooperate and collaborate with his Embassy in Brussels and the SDA to put together a security spotlight, and shine it on the political and security situation not only in Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh but the whole Caspian Region.”

He noted the existence of a “post-Bucharest Summit” mood, arguing that the NATO meeting had not produced more than “renewed tensions” in his region.

Moderator **Giles Merritt**, SDA Director, asked Azimov to begin by giving those present an overview of “where things stand”.

## Keynote

Azimov began the debate by saying that dialogue between the states of the South Caucasus and Brussels is in the interest of both parties. He said he had observed an upswing in European concern about South Caucasian affairs.

“Interest is growing as the importance of the region is growing,” he said, noting the multi-faceted nature of discussions of the South Caucasus. The region is economically and politically significant, he argued, being beset with hydrocarbon reserves as well as considerable human capital.



**Araz Azimov**, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan

“Interest is growing as the importance of the region is growing”.

”  
**Araz Azimov**

However, Azimov conceded that there is also an increased interest in threats emanating from the South Caucasus. There is therefore great potential in the region, though in both “positive and negative” ways. Nevertheless, he contended that South Caucasian states also pay great interest to EU affairs, and they themselves see both positive and negative developments within the EU. The level of mutual interest has therefore increased on both sides.

Azimov then discussed Azerbaijan's strategic role in the region. Azerbaijan's energy policy is viewed differently in the East and the West, he claimed, with the prevailing “projection of power over the region” heavily affecting Azerbaijani (as well

as Georgian) considerations. He noted how Azerbaijan has expanded regional pipeline networks, and is now “heavily linked” to Georgia via energy transport routes. Similarly, he discussed how both oil and gas are now flowing “full swing” to European markets and how Azerbaijan is “opening the region” to integration. Azerbaijan, he argues, “contributes to EU security and the free development of the region” through a framework of “openness”.

Despite this positive influence, Azimov admitted that the conflicts in Azerbaijan and Georgia threaten constructive developments. He rejected the idea that the conflicts (Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia) are “frozen.”

“These conflicts are not frozen, they are going on,” he argued, “continuously influencing and impacting on the security agendas and policies of both Azerbaijan and Georgia.” The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, he continued, offered “new opportunities” to those who want to confront Azerbaijani policies.

“These conflicts are not frozen, they are going on”.

Araz Azimov

### A “testing of approaches”

At present, Azimov said, how the EU will approach the region remains an “important question.” There are new possibilities for integration and a new partnership between the EU and the South Caucasus. However, he argued that any discussion of the South Caucasian states joining the EU or NATO was misplaced: the “realities are tougher and heavier; it is not simply an issue of

membership.” The current conflicts have “challenged” integration – at the Bucharest Summit, NATO states postponed the issuing of a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia due to “concern” at recent developments in conflict areas. These developments must be understood, so that both South Caucasian and European states are not “caught by circumstances in a surprise attack.”

### Nagorno-Karabakh

Azerbaijan “understands the nature of the conflict it faces,” Azimov said. He denied that Nagorno-Karabakh is an inter-ethnic conflict, claiming that when given the chance to live together, people in the province will choose to live in “bi-communal harmony” within the framework of Azerbaijan. However, right now the conflict is having an adverse effect on regional relations, particularly those between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Nagorno-Karabakh issue is an obstacle standing in the way of a regional accord: “What would happen,” Azimov asked, “if there were no conflict at all? The region would be an example for regional development.” He cited current Azerbaijani-Georgian cooperation as a “model” for this – with no conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, possibilities for regional growth would increase.

However, Azimov argued, Azerbaijan is currently confronted by the “extreme assertiveness” of those who want to increase pressure over Nagorno-Karabakh. The community there, he asserted, is “living under the gun”, isolated by minefields and trenches. Azerbaijanis are physically unable to move back to the region due to the minefields, and the minefields cannot be removed until “difficult discussions” are conducted with the Armenian side. Azerbaijan, he contended, “must address these issues with maximum determination”, as solving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is



“in the interest of regional progress and development.”

There are, as he sees it, two options for Nagorno-Karabakh. First is a solution in keeping with the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, second is a “step into uncertainty for the region.” The latter outcome, he posited, “may be in the interest of some.” However, he asserted, it is in the interests of all to mount a serious effort to resolve the crisis.

### **Bucharest Summit**

Azimov called the Bucharest Summit “remarkable” in that it put the issue of the settlement of regional crises (including those in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova) high on the agenda. He then turned to the issue of future Azerbaijani membership of NATO: “it is not a simple issue of member or non-member for Azerbaijan”, he said. He noted Azerbaijan’s existing membership of the NATO Partnership for Peace (PFP) programme but said that the scheme had changed since Azerbaijan’s 1994 accession: “The PFP framework of 1994 has been left behind”, he argued, though further options for the development of NATO-Azerbaijan ties exist. He reiterated that NATO members have ongoing concerns that should South Caucasian states be fully admitted to the organisation, they may be forced to invoke Article 5 [which dictates that any attack on a Member State will be viewed as an attack on all Members] due to developments in one of the conflict regions. “Would Article 5 be tested?” he asked, “This is an issue for collective consideration.”

“The PFP framework of 1994 has been left behind”.

Araz Azimov

### **Azerbaijan’s Multilateral Approach**

Azimov then turned to Azerbaijan’s engagement in the region. It is an “active” partner of NATO, an “interested” associate of the EU, and maintains relations with both its “northern neighbour [Russia]”, and “southern neighbour [Iran].” The situation around the latter state, however, gives Baku cause for concern. Azimov noted continuing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) anxiety over Tehran’s nuclear ambitions, and commented on the “3,500 centrifuges” that Iran reportedly possesses. This, at least, is enough to engender “contingency concerns” in Azerbaijan. Azimov noted that Azerbaijan’s multilateral approach to its neighbours has not always proved popular in the region, as “outside powers have conflicting opinions on the issues” at hand.

## Question and Answer Session

### Azerbaijan's "shopping list"

Giles Merritt posed the first question, asking what "shopping list" Ambassador Azimov brings when he travels to Brussels. In addition, he asked how Azerbaijan balances its relations with the EU, the US and Russia – "What are the geopolitical sympathies of Azerbaijan?" and how Baku views the EU, as a significant actor or a "political pygmy"?

Azimov responded that his trips to Brussels were not "shopping" trips, as such, as he expected to receive responses from the EU "post delivery," i.e. in the future. He expressed hope that the EU will "not be considered a political pygmy because of the issues on the table," though he conceded that the EU lacks "room for manoeuvre" due to a scarcity of "space and time." Nonetheless, he expects South Caucasian states to engage with the EU, the US and Russia in equal measure, despite the way that "old concepts" maintain their sway in the region. Now, he continued, there is a well-established reform process with regard to democratisation, Security Sector Reform (SSR) and frameworks for regional cooperation.

"One thing is clear," he said, "the region is no longer in the old past, and will not return to it, but that does not mean that everyone has left the past behind."

He maintained that "instability is a major challenge," and expressed a desire for "pre-engagement": an effort on the part of all to ensure that the risk of instability in the region is "zero, or less than zero."

Returning to the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azimov said that the EU, the US and Russia are all engaged in the settlement process as part of the Minsk Group. He said that the framework for reaching an

"One thing is clear, the region is not in the old past".

Araz Azimov

agreement between these parties is in place, but questioned whether the format for settlement "was being used." "I don't see this in reality," he remarked.

### Transnational Threats

From the floor, **Fariz Ismailzade** from the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy asked what kind of transnational threats the South Caucasus is currently faced with, and how can Azerbaijan deal with them. Further, he asked whether Azerbaijan can be seen as a role model to the Islamic world.

Azimov replied that Azerbaijan is, "in terms of tolerance, not just a model for Muslim states." It is a secular state, with all major religions represented. "Azerbaijan's example can enrich not only its eastern neighbours, but western neighbours as well." He argued that more can be done to encourage multilateral engagement with Central Asian states, be it through the EU or the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, GUAM.

With regard to transnational threats, Azimov contended that all threats can become transnational – i.e. that all threats can transcend state borders. He again raised the issue of Iran, noting that the potential for threats arising from migration and arms shipments means that Azerbaijan "must know what is happening in Iran." Baku is trying to confront transnational threats – its border force is, unlike some in the region "purely national, with no external state supervision." Again, he asserted that given the nature of the South Caucasus region's "limited geography, all



Participants during the question and answer session.

threats become transnational.”

### Azerbaijan-US Cooperation

**Tim Shephard**, European Vice President for Northrop Grumman, mentioned how he had met with the United States European Command (EUCOM) and heard how they maintain a dialogue with Azerbaijan. He asked how that dialogue was working and whether the Ambassador saw his experience of dealing with the US military as positive.

Azimov responded that EUCOM continues to interact with Azerbaijan, but that “all US programmes accredited by Azerbaijan have one qualification – we accept assistance only to enhance national capacity. We do not accept third countries into our territory.” He added that Azerbaijan is “thankful for those programmes that expand capacity”. When asked about the Caspian Guard Initiative, for example, through which the US aimed to enable the Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan governments to better protect their coastal borders, Azimov remarked that it is “so far not active.”

Turning to the issue of the non-proliferation of weapons of mass

destruction (WMD), Azimov said that the Azerbaijani border forces are “engaged” in preventing the spread of such weapons and do get assistance (e.g. in building radar capacity) from other states. However, he asserted that Azerbaijan patrols its borders using domestic capacity – “there is no trans-Caspian radar yet,” he said. Furthermore, Azimov said that Azerbaijan “opposes regional groupings” for purposes other than for information sharing and confidence building, as the Caspian region is “too small for a regional force”, which would be “unrealistic.”

### Azerbaijan-Russia Relations

**Richard Werly**, from Switzerland’s *Le Temps*, asked two questions. First, is Azerbaijan “feeling the heat” from drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan? Second, how does the Ambassador view Dmitry Medvedev, the new Russian President?

Azimov replied that he did not expect “too much change” in Moscow, but instead anticipated a “continuous growth in pragmatism.” However, he argued that Russia’s “growing economic strength might take this pragmatism in a particular direction.” Russia also gains strength from

its energy reserves, and “political capital is linked to that strength.” He empathised with the Russian position, claiming that “we would also like to be powerful and influential,” and conceded that Russia’s hard-line stance was sometimes “justified”. He then linked this to the ongoing issue of European energy security, urging Europe to “diversify” its energy sources, both in its own interest and that of Russia. “No one would win from monopolisation,” he said.

He admitted that Azerbaijan is “challenged” by the issue of drug trafficking, especially given its proximity to Afghanistan – only Iran separates the two states. He maintained, however, that Azerbaijani border forces incorporate anti-trafficking measures into their broader security operations both at sea and on land.

### Azerbaijan's Defence Spending

Rainer Ruge from the Council of the European Union returned to Nagorno-Karabakh, asking what solution Azimov envisaged, and what tools other than the Minsk Group framework can be employed. In addition, he enquired as to whether Azerbaijan, due to its high level of defence spending, viewed a “window of opportunity” for a peaceful solution closing.

In reply, the Deputy Minister said that there was only one possible resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – the restoration of Azerbaijan’s “territorial integrity.” “There is no other option,” Azimov said, but within that, there is flexibility. He noted similarities with Georgia and Moldova [where the region of Trans-Dniester declared independence in 1990 but remains unrecognised] but said that in Moldova, the situation is “less charged” militarily. Azimov argued that because there are no longer any Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh, “ethnic cleansing” has occurred which has to be “turned back.” Indeed, the “land is

occupied,” necessitating a withdrawal of foreign forces. “You cannot enter the room without opening the doors,” he added.

He conceded that Azerbaijan has developed and increased its military capabilities, but claimed “we are the last ones who want a war.” He suggested that Azerbaijani expansion has been exaggerated by Armenia for political gain: “We’ve had increases in all areas,” he said, “spending \$1 billion on education and \$800 million on the military, which includes salaries, expanded housing and social care for military personnel. It takes money to provide human resources for an army.”

“We are the last ones who want a war”.

Araz Azimov

Azerbaijan spends 3.6% of GDP on defence, while Armenia spends 4.3%, he continued. In addition, Azerbaijan does not benefit from low arms export tariffs from the Russian Federation in the same way that Armenia does (as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation). Overall, Azimov argued, “The facts are different”.

He rejected the notion that Azerbaijan was preparing for armed conflict. “We try to get issues solved by peaceful means,” he said, before reiterating that there is only one way to resolve the crisis is by “respecting territorial integrity.” He implored the EU to help Azerbaijan gain access to Nagorno-Karabakh, saying that “ethnic cleansing should not be supported by the EU.” If Nagorno-Karabakh is left in isolation, Azimov said, the potential for a worse outcome will increase.

### Shared Interests?

Giles Merritt asked the Ambassador to turn to broader issues, such as globalisation, developments in the Balkans and the potential for shared interests between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

“We may have shared interests,” Azimov began, “but geography is inescapable.” Both states, he continued, could share the benefits of a peaceful neighbourhood. “The Armenians are maintaining a position which is self-limiting. They are perhaps encouraged by hope or a feeling of impunity, but the sooner they understand that their perceptions are wrong, the better,” he added.

“We may have shared interests [with Armenia] but geography is inescapable”.

Araz Azimov

### NATO Expansion

Vladimir Muzychenko of the Russian Mission to NATO asked if there is any linkage between Kosovo [which declared independence in February 2008, despite Serbian protests] and Nagorno-Karabakh, and whether the possible accession of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO could create a new dividing line in the South Caucasus region.

Azimov’s response was unequivocal – “[What happened in] Kosovo is an absolute breach of international law,” he said, “I am a bit pessimistic about the Kosovo situation.” He noted that some states, including Russia and EU members with their own separatist regions (e.g. Spain), were

“I am a bit pessimistic about the Kosovo situation”.

Araz Azimov

quick to reject Kosovo’s declaration. Azimov speculated as to whether Russia’s stance stemmed from a perceived loss of influence in the Balkans or Chechnya: if the latter is true, then surely Russia must “be in favour of maintaining territorial integrity in the South Caucasus.”

With regard to NATO enlargement, Azimov concluded that “Russia sees NATO enlargement as a threat to its national interests, while NATO says that is not the case”. The issue, Azimov argued, is “how far is the limit for the Russian Federation?” What would happen if NATO expansion continued?

### Missile Defence

Azimov continued by turning to the issue of missile defence. He admitted that he had difficulty seeing “the logic” of the programme, especially as opinion is divided within the European states where missile systems would be placed. He felt that the programme could disrupt the US-Russia balance which, in his opinion, is a key factor in the South Caucasus, even for resolving issues such as Nagorno-Karabakh.

### EU Black Sea Synergy Project

Robert Soltik of the European Commission asked whether the EU’s Black Sea Synergy project, which aims to increase cooperation between states in the Black Sea region, was a “good approach?”

Azimov stressed that with regard to

cooperation, rhetoric was less important than results. For Azimov, “the substance matters.” Furthermore, he added that good relations could be achieved without a formal framework. Drawing on the example of some post-communist states, he questioned whether membership of NATO or the EU should be viewed as a “panacea” for state problems. It was now the “fashion”, he argued, to discuss membership, but it is unclear whether it is actually necessary for states to become NATO or EU members. Azerbaijan, he posited is a “self-sufficient state today,” with no real need to join either organisation.

### An EU Standard Economy

The aim for Azerbaijan now, Azimov said, was to reach the European standard of economic development and seeks integration in terms of trade, labour migration, education and law enforcement. Azerbaijan wants the “practical fulfilment of its relationship with the EU”, but “we are not begging at all.” He reiterated that there is a “mutual interest” between Baku and Brussels in stability.

“Azerbaijan is a self-sufficient state today”.

Araz Azimov

**Michael Ruoff**, an independent policy advisor, asked what role Turkey could play in the South Caucasus. Azimov replied that Turkey, as a powerful economic state “ethnically and culturally linked to both Azerbaijan and Georgia” is an important partner. Indeed, it was Turkey, through its NATO membership, that brought NATO

ideas to the region. Furthermore, Turkey, as a member of the Minsk Group, has a potentially large role to play in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

To conclude, Giles Merritt said that the afternoon’s discussion underlined just how important it is that states within the EU’s neighbourhood visit Brussels more to express their opinion. Given that the EU is determined to play a greater role in places like the South Caucasus, it is increasingly important that states like Azerbaijan connect with EU public opinion.

## List of Participants

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North Atlantic Treaty Organisation  
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*Second Secretary*  
Delegation of Romania to NATO





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The Security & Defence Agenda (SDA) is the only specialist Brussels-based think-tank where EU institutions, NATO, national governments, industry, specialised and international media, think tanks, academia and NGOs gather to discuss the future of European and transatlantic security and defence policies in Europe and worldwide.

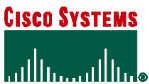
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Ministry of National Defence, Turkey

Permanent Representation of Italy to the EU

Centre for Studies in Security and Diplomacy (University of Birmingham)



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