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Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy in Transition

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AZERBAIJAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN TRANSITION

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Following the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Azerbaijan is redefining its foreign policy priorities and agency in the South Caucasus and beyond. The most decisive factor in this transformation is the end of the occupation of the Karabakh region and the restoration of the country's territorial integrity.

Although the ceasefire brokered by Russia between Azerbaijan and Armenia on November 10, 2020, has created the necessary conditions for signing a peace agreement, negotiations between the two countries are still ongoing. While bilateral talks continue and third parties occasionally take encouraging steps, it is Azerbaijan's demands and preferences that determine the dynamics and pace of the process.

On the other hand, while peace negotiations with Armenia continue, Azerbaijan, in its effort to redefine its foreign policy, has been calibrating its threat perception, strategic alliances, and regional positioning. Azerbaijan's foreign policy is evolving from the single-level balancing it has pursued for a long time, after independence, between Russia, Iran, and Türkiye/West, to a multidimensional, assertive, and pragmatic approach that emphasizes strategic partnerships, prioritizes national interests, and addresses its diverse identities.



Following Abulfaz Elchibey's foreign policy, which could be summarized simply as "anti-Russia, anti-Iran, and pro-Türkiye" during the early years of Azerbaijani independence, Heydar Aliyev, who came to power in 1993, pursued a what was termed "balanced foreign policy", essentially envisioning well-adjusted relations with Azerbaijan's three major neighbors. The İlham Aliyev administration, following the passing of Heydar Aliyev, continued this policy until recently. This was, in practice, meant constructive pragmatism in foreign policy.

Considering that Azerbaijan's top priority in domestic and foreign policy until 2020 was ending the occupation of Karabakh and regions beyond, its most significant security concern and perceived threat in that period stemmed from the failure to ensure its territorial integrity and the violation of the inviolability of its borders. In other words, the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding

regions led to a deep sense of insecurity and a single-issue focus in Azerbaijan's domestic and international engagements. While additional threats were perceived from Iran and Russia, they were also linked to the Karabakh issue.

Following the 2020 victory, however, these threat perceptions have shifted, and Azerbaijan's foreign policy discourse has begun to evolve from the previously simple, single-level, three-way balance policy to a multi-actor and multidimensional structure, now referred to as "multi-vectorial foreign policy" in Azerbaijan.

This shift in Azerbaijan's foreign policy redefines its position in its immediate environment and its foreign policy actorness in the international arena. Three factors have become decisive in its redefinition of its international presence: ethnicity, historical experience, and geography.

The emphasis on Turkishness as a fundamental element of identity has become increasingly visible in Azerbaijan's domestic and foreign policy discourses. Although the national identity is still officially defined as "Azerbaijani", the support Türkiye provided before, during, and after the Second Karabakh War, as well as the contacts established between Turks and Azerbaijanis through various means over the years, have begun to influence Azerbaijan's new domestic identity discussion and the governing elite's foreign policy discourse.

Türkiye has undoubtedly held a special, exceptional, and privileged place in the eyes of the Azerbaijani people since the country's independence. The motto

"one nation, two states," defining bilateral relations on a broader scale, has been widely embraced by political elites and public opinion in both countries. Going beyond the motto, partnerships in energy and transportation projects, driven by economic interests, are now supported by strategic and security alignment.

The two countries are defined as allies in the "Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Türkiye and the Republic of Azerbaijan", signed by Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and İlham Aliyev on June 15, 2021. The most striking article of the declaration emphasizes the determination of Türkiye and Azerbaijan to act jointly if "a threat or attack against the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of internationally recognized borders, or security of either party" occurs.

On the other hand, an important, though not explicitly stated, aspect of the two countries' interaction is that Azerbaijan has ceased to be a "learning" country in the relationship. As noted above, while Türkiye remains an essential and exceptional country for Azerbaijan, it is no longer the sole and dominant determining actor. In this context, Azerbaijan defines itself as an "equal and independent stakeholder" and Türkiye as a "strategic alliance partner." While the overlapping interests of the two countries are evident, relations are being framed within a pragmatic agenda based on interests rather than emotional ties. This is reflected in practice in the adoption of a common approach on many issues concerning foreign and security policies, while simultaneously

stating that it is “normal” to act independently or separately from Türkiye, when deemed necessary (in other words, when Azerbaijan's national interest requires it), even on issues that concern and/or are carried out in cooperation with Türkiye.

Another theme increasingly emphasized in Azerbaijan's evolving foreign policy is the institutionalization of the Turkic Council as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and the strengthening of cooperation within the Turkic world. While the meaning and emphasis placed on Turkic identity differ in Azerbaijan, Central Asian countries, and Türkiye, it is observable in Azerbaijan that the denominator of Turkishness and the idea of unity with the Turkic world have recently been upgraded in its domestic politics and foreign policy discourse.

In this context, many of our interviewees stated that Azerbaijan views itself as central to efforts to strengthen the OTS within the framework of the *Turkic World 2040 Vision Document* and believed it had the potential to be a driving force behind this initiative. They also stated that, due to its shared Soviet heritage with Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan has the potential to facilitate relations between Türkiye and the regional countries.

This assertive position can be interpreted as a reflection of the self-confidence and self-awareness gained following the victory, as well as the strengthened spirit of nation-state building. The fact that almost all interviewees expressed a similar emphasis indicates that this approach reflects a shift in official policy direction

and possibly related rhetoric being disseminated centrally. Within this new framework, Azerbaijan positions itself as a regional actor (in the region extending from the Caucasus to Central Asia) and assertively defines its agency in its international relations.

In addition to Azerbaijan's claim to be a regional actor in the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia, the Middle East has also been mentioned as a region it is part of. While relations with Israel are stated to be an essential fulcrum here, connections to Syria and Gaza are mentioned as brought to the agenda by Türkiye's facilitation. The caveat is that, although Azerbaijan is now involved in these issues due to its connection with Türkiye, they are not sufficiently important for Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, the emphasis on Azerbaijan's claim to its agency remains visible beneath the surface.

To further emphasize Azerbaijan's agency, it is argued that Azerbaijan is designing its relations with the US and Israel independently of Türkiye, and these “partnerships” should be viewed as part of its multidimensional balancing policy. Bringing the US back to the Caucasus through linking it to the Azerbaijan-Armenia peace process, following the recent trip to Washington by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia, is presented as a strategy aimed at leveraging specific influences that Türkiye and Azerbaijan currently lack to persuade Armenia. On the other hand, to balance this move, it is argued that, just as Azerbaijan is a key country between East and West, it can also serve as a direct link between Russia and Iran.

Historically and geographically, Azerbaijan's relations with Russia undoubtedly rank among its most important connections. The long-standing balancing policy, which focused on avoiding Russia's reactions, began to shift with Russia's withdrawal of support from Armenia in the Karabakh conflict. The current tensions with Russia, which remains in the region despite the Ukraine War, can be characterized as designed to strengthen Azerbaijan's relations with the West (e.g., the lifting of US sanctions, enticing the EU to pursue a balanced policy between Armenia and Azerbaijan, etc.), rather than a long-term estrangement and conflict. This reaffirms Azerbaijan's balanced policy and cautious distance from Russia. As such, Azerbaijan is positioned neither for nor against Russia; instead, it is portrayed as a key element of a multidimensional balancing policy.

Moreover, while the perceptions of Russia as an enemy and threat are preserved in historical memory, efforts are being made to expand Azerbaijan's maneuverability by reinforcing its strengthened position and independent status in regional affairs, thereby preventing the balance from shifting in Russia's favor. One of the most recent indicators of this is the cooperation documents signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Washington, which were witnessed by US President Trump, paving the way for the US's return to the South Caucasus. Additionally, Azerbaijan's recent decision to align its military with NATO standards goes beyond a simple training and structural change; it signifies a shift from the Soviet/Russian doctrinal framework to NATO in terms of strategy, tactics, and armament.

Undoubtedly, the peace treaty expected to be signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia will be decisive for both bilateral relations and regional cooperation opportunities in the coming period. Azerbaijan, relieved by the end of the occupation, will continue to determine the content, frequency, and pace of the talks. In this context, the recent state-controlled dialogue between representatives of civil society and think tanks from both countries, aimed at identifying measures to increase societal support for normalization, can be considered the first step toward an inter-societal dialogue.

Meanwhile, while intimidating threats continue to be delivered to Armenia, albeit less frequently than during the immediate aftermath of the war (for example, the meetings on Western Azerbaijan will continue to be held in Istanbul and then in Baku), these remain on the agenda primarily for the purpose of sending a message, rather than indicating an intention to act. More to the point, the current Azerbaijani strategy regarding Armenia is to monitor the situation in that country until the elections to be held in the summer of 2026 and to support those favoring normalization of relations with Azerbaijan with reversible concessions (such as allowing trucks from Kazakhstan or trains from Russia to pass through Azerbaijan to Armenia) that can be withdrawn if a negative situation arises. The signing of a peace treaty, however, will be evaluated based on the situation following the elections. Similar recommendations are being made to Türkiye on this point.

Consequently, as of 2025, Azerbaijan's foreign policy is being reframed as a "national foreign policy." Pragmatism is at the forefront of this new political balance, prioritizing national interests and preferences, demonstrating high maneuverability, and diversifying cooperation, alliance partners, and areas of focus. The emphasis on a national identity embracing multiculturalism, secularism, and tolerance, frequently voiced in domestic policy discourse and on international platforms, is a key element of Azerbaijan's current nation branding. Foreign policy, too, is becoming an essential dimension of this branding with newly defined actorness.

Within this framework, Azerbaijan's potential as a facilitator in the post-Soviet space, due to its shared historical past and experience of coexistence, is emphasized; its key position in energy and transportation connectivity is highlighted; and its potential to play a bridge role between Asia and Europe is underlined.

Different components of national identity are also being utilized as foreign policy tools, with the Turkic dimension being emphasized in defining foreign policy actorness and instrumentalized to strengthen and effectively implement cooperation within the OTS. At the same time, the lack of sectarian distinctions in defining national identity, the anti-sectarian rhetoric of the ruling elite, and their opposition to religious fundamentalism are used to reinforce the image of a secular country. Thus, Azerbaijan conveys the message that it is a "key country" that will facilitate connections from China to Europe through the balances it maintains in its international

relations, thereby contributing to the prosperity of Azerbaijan, regional countries, China, and the EU.

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The Black Sea region has long been a focal point of geopolitical competition, shaped by historical rivalries, strategic interests, and evolving security dynamics. In recent years, the region has witnessed growing instability due to escalating tensions, hybrid threats, and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. These developments have not only disrupted regional security but have also posed broader challenges to the European and transatlantic security order. Given NATO's strategic interest in the region, a comprehensive reassessment of security frameworks is necessary to address emerging threats and enhance regional stability.

SecureBlackSea seeks to examine and propose a future security architecture for the wider Black Sea region, aligning with NATO's evolving strategic priorities. Through an in-depth analysis of existing security structures, regional conflicts, and cooperation mechanisms, it aims to provide evidence-based insights into key threats and potential policy responses. A particular focus will be placed on the intersection of conventional military threats, hybrid warfare, economic security, and geopolitical rivalries, recognizing the complex and multi-dimensional nature of regional security challenges.

The project activities include expert workshops, field research, and data-driven assessments. It will evaluate the effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks and NATO's role in shaping stability in the region. In collaboration with policymakers, security experts, and academic institutions, the project team will facilitate policy dialogues and strategic foresight discussions to identify pathways for strengthening regional security cooperation. These efforts will result in the development of comprehensive policy recommendations aimed at enhancing institutional resilience and fostering a more cooperative security environment.

The expected outcomes of this initiative include a thorough assessment of regional security threats, a set of actionable policy recommendations, and strengthened dialogue between NATO and regional stakeholders. By producing analytical reports and policy briefs, the project will contribute to an informed security discourse and provide practical solutions for mitigating risks in the region. By fostering collaboration between academic and policy communities, it will support long-term strategic planning and resilience-building efforts.

SecureBlackSea aspires to provide a timely and in-depth examination of the evolving security landscape in the Black Sea region. It will offer insights that can guide NATO's strategic engagement in the region. Thus, it aims to contribute to a more stable, secure, and cooperative Black Sea security environment in the face of emerging geopolitical complexities.

