

AZERBAIJAN - RUSSIA RELATIONS: IS THE FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY OF AZERBAIJAN CHANGING?

In the historical course of Azerbaijan, Russia has always been perceived as an invader, while Russia considered Azerbaijan as both an opportunity and a threat – an opportunity in the sense that it is a bridge in the region, and a threat as this can also be utilized by other states. As a small and newly independent country, Azerbaijan has not been able to determine its own foreign policy course, but instead tries to balance the foreign powers' demands. If Russia uses the powerful vehicles and tools available to it, not only Azerbaijan's but the stakes of other regional players' stakes will also be under threat.

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Considering both the historical process and current developments, Azerbaijan's relations with Russia are of great significance. The progress in relations between the two nations not only affects the destiny of the two countries but also that of the Caucasus and Central Asia. For Azerbaijan, relations with Russia have most frequently been defined by an effort to protect its independence. Russia on the other hand instrumentalizes Azerbaijan in its foreign policy towards Russia's regional and global targets.

After the Cold War, Azerbaijan was in a position to lead the settlement of the Western world, particularly United States, in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Due to the fact that the interests of the Western world contradicted the Russian strategy to reach the south, Russia paid great attention to keeping control over Azerbaijan. Recent developments that occurred in the Caucasus in 2008 (especially the Russian occupation of Georgia, the developments in relations between Turkey and Armenia, and the continuation of the deadlock of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) led to the assumption that Azerbaijan is now more "intimate" in its relations with Russia. This article explores whether this assumption is grounded.

Azerbaijan - Russia Relations Following Independence

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Russia and Azerbaijan came to the world stage as two independent states again. However, these two states meant different things to each other. For Russia, Azerbaijan has been strategically important in the Caucasus region, which is relevant for Russia's global power claims for the following reasons:

- As a short cut to the south of the Caucasus and opening out to the warm waters.
- To keep Turkey and Iran from gaining much influence along the borders of Russia and to protect Russian territorial integrity by preventing secessionist attempts by ethnic groups in the North Caucasus.
- To prevent or at least limit the alternative source of hydrocarbon supplies to key markets in order to increase dependence of customers on Russian energy supplies.
- To limit the possibility of the West, especially the USA, from reaching out to Turkistan through the Caucasus.
- Military deployments in the Caucasus
- Psychological factor of the imperial past and to become a global power,
- To protect Russia's coastal areas on the Caspian and Black Sea.

During its independence struggle and in the first years of independence, most Azerbaijanis held a negative opinion of Russia (as, for example, ‘the successor of Empire’, threat to independence, invader, and advocate of Armenia).

In 1991, Russia resisted to establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent Azerbaijan and refused the Friendship and Cooperation Treaty proposed by Azerbaijan. This was despite the fact that pro-Russian Ayaz Mutalibov was leading Azerbaijan at the time.¹ April 1992, on the other hand, brought change. On 3 April 1992 Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Kozirev visited Baku for the first time and Russia recognized the independence of Azerbaijan on 4 April 1992. As a result, diplomatic relations were established between the two countries.² There were at the time differences between the legislative and the executive of Azerbaijan in their approach to Russia- the parliament, for example, did not accept to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), established under the leadership of Russia.

In 1992, the Azerbaijan Popular Front, led by Ebulfez Elchibey, took power. This movement prioritized independence of Azerbaijan. Though Elchibey officially visited Russia and numerous agreements between the two parties were signed, tensions continued. There was anti-Russia propaganda in Azerbaijan and no shares were allocated to Russian companies in petroleum agreements, which greatly disturbed Russia. Companies of Western origin became active in Azerbaijan and this ran contrary to the consolidation of Russian interests. Furthermore, during Elchibey’s rule, certain policies were adopted to discharge Russian troops from the region. As a consequence, a coup occurred in June 1993, and Elchibey was toppled.³

Azerbaijan - Russia Relations during the Presidency of Heydar Aliyev

Heydar Aliyev was invited to Baku on 15 June 1993 and elected Speaker of the Parliament, and then President. His rhetoric about Russia was softer and more moderate than Elchibey’s had been. In a similar vein, the actions of Western originated companies in Azerbaijan were halted on 22 June 1993, and even the bank accounts of these companies were frozen.⁴ In the summer of 1993, Aliyev, with the intention of ceasing Armenia’s invasion (with the assistance of Russia) of

¹ Nazim Cafersoy, *Eyalet-Merkez Düzeyinden Eşit Statüye; Azerbaycan-Rusya İlişkileri [From Provincial-Center Level to Equal Status: Azerbaijan-Russia Relations]* (Ankara: ASAM Publishing Co, 2000), p. 9.

² Azerbaijan’s independence was recognized in November 1991 by the Turkish Republic, and in December 1991 by U.S. and Iran.

³ Russia provided military, diplomatic and political support to Armenia to occupy the Azerbaijani territories during the presidency of Elchibey, supported separatist movements in north and south of Azerbaijan, and supplied arms to Suret Huseynov, an Azerbaijani Colonel who was trying to topple Elchibey.

⁴ Cafersoy (2000), p. 23.

Azerbaijani territory, and reclaiming the occupied territories, visited Russia. Aliyev wanted to establish good relations, and showed his willingness to participate in the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Azerbaijani Parliament approved the Membership Agreement to Commonwealth of Independent States on 20 September 1993 and Aliyev signed the relevant agreements in Moscow, on 24 September 1993.⁵

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While Mutalibov paid the price of his clear pro-Russian approaches, Elchibey paid the penalty for his anti-Russian approaches. Moreover, as a result of “imbalanced” policies, Azerbaijani territories were invaded by Armenia and the country was on the verge of separation due to ethnic divisions. There is no doubt that one reason Russia supported Armenia was to punish the Azeri government, while the other was to pursue strategic objectives. Aliyev, keeping in mind the memories of former presidents, hesitated to react against Russia during the first six

months of his presidency. Though the tone of Heydar Aliyev’s speeches and acts reflected a pro-Russian attitude, Armenia’s occupation continued. Moreover, Azerbaijan lost a great chunk of its territory within the first six months of Aliyev’s Presidency.⁶

In 1994, the Aliyev government initiated relations with the Western world. Eager to profit from the opportunities provided by Western companies, Aliyev restarted the negotiation process with Western companies. Following this period, a new framework for Azerbaijan-Russian relations and what is commonly referred to as “balanced foreign policy” was adopted.

Although Russia did not seem willing to accept the energy agreements of Azerbaijan with foreign companies, the Russian energy lobby lead by Russia’s then Prime Minister Victor Cernomirdin put effort into establishing good relations with Azerbaijan. The agreement entitled “The Contract of the Century” was signed in Baku,

⁵ Nesib Nesibli, “Azerbaycan ve Moskova-Erivan-Tahran İttifakının Jeopolitik Kuşatması [The Geopolitical Seige of Azerbaijan and the Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran Alliance]”, *Stratejik Analiz*, Vol. 1, No. 4, (August 2000), p. 65.

⁶ Araz Aslanlı, “Denge Politikasının Doğal Sonucu: Aliyev’in Moskova Ziyareti [The Natural Result of Balance Policy: Aliyev’s Visit to Russia]”, *Stratejik Analiz*, Vol. 2, No. 23, (March 2002), p. 49.

on 20 September 1994 by which the Russian company Lukoil was allocated ten percent of shares.⁷ Although Russia was against Azerbaijan's energy deals with foreign companies, Russia added more nuance to its stance in time, particularly under the rule of Vladimir Putin.

Another issue which exacerbated relations between Azerbaijan and Russia was the "Chechnya question". The Chechnya question began during the Chechnya-Russia War which took place between 1994 and 1996. Russia claimed that rebel forces in Chechnya were aided by Azerbaijan but Azerbaijan did not accept these claims. Russia, maintaining its ardent position, imposed an economic embargo on Azerbaijan for 3 years. This was a heavy blow given 70 percent of Azerbaijan's trade had been Russia bound.⁸

The Chechnya issue was partially overcome as a result of the Hasavyurt Treaty signed between Russia and Chechnya in 1996, and Russia's economic embargo on Azerbaijan was incrementally lifted. However, when Chechnian troops attacked Daghestan in August 1999, Russia, in retaliation, attacked Chechnya on 1 October 1999, and a Russian plane bombed the Gimir Village of the Zakatala region, in north Azerbaijan.⁹ Although Lieutenant General Anatoli Kornukov, the Commander of Russian Air Forces dismissed information about Russian forces taking part in this event, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Baku, Aleksandr Blokhin stated that "they lost the bomb."¹⁰

Once Putin became President, Azerbaijan restricted the actions of the Chechnians more diligently. Some Chechnians in Azerbaijan have been accordingly arrested and deported back to Russia.

The Putin Period: Mutual Visits

From 1991 until 2001 none of the Russian presidents visited Azerbaijan. The first visit to Azerbaijan by a Russian president came on 9 January 2001 by President Putin. The two-day visit was planned to take place in 2000 but was delayed due to several reasons. However, a large delegation led by President Putin finally visited Baku on 9 January 2001.¹¹

⁷ Nesib Nesibli, *Azerbaycan Jeopolitiği ve Petrol [Geopolitics of Azerbaijan and Oil]* (Baku: Khazar University Publications, 2000), p. 27.

⁸ Hasan Kuliyyev, "Rusya'nın Azerbaycan Stratejisi [Russia's Azerbaijan Strategy]", *Avrasya Dosyası*, Vol. 3, No. 4, (Winter 1996), p. 202.

⁹ "Azerbaijan Protests Russian Missile Strike", RFE/RL, 7 October 1999, <http://origin.rferl.org/content/article/1142008.html>, *Interfaks*, 2 October 1999, www.interfax.ru

¹⁰ *Azadlıq*, 2-4 October 1999.

¹¹ Sinan Oğan-Hasan Kanbolat, "Kafkasya Terazisinde Yeni Dengeler: Putin'in Azerbaycan Ziyareti [New Balances in the Caucasian Scale: Putin's Visit to Azerbaijan]", *Stratejik Analiz*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (February 2001), p. 34.

Putin's visit took place in a relaxed environment. Although the Gebele base, a controversial issue in Azerbaijan which is of great significance for Russia, was taken up, no conclusion was reached. On the other hand, a consensus was reached on cooperation of security forces in the Caspian Sea.¹²

The second stage of the Putin-Aliyev negotiations began with Aliyev's "state visit"¹³ to Russia 24-26 January 2002.

A meeting was arranged between the two presidents on 25 January 2002 in the Kremlin. Putin announced that for the first time, military cooperation would be established between Azerbaijan and Russia, while Aliyev emphasized that relations between the two nations developed especially after President Putin.¹⁴ The following agreements were signed between Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation:

- The Status and Benefiting Principles of Gebele Radio Location Station (Gebele RLS, or in Russian Derial RLS);
- Long term economic cooperation agreement between Russian Federation and Azerbaijan Republic until the year 2010;
- The common declaration of the President of the Russian Federation, President Vladimir Vladimirovic Putin and President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev.

In addition to this agreement, other agreements were signed between the relevant authorities. These agreements aimed to establish principles of economic cooperation between the two countries, establish cooperation for preventing fiscal evasion and provide cooperation on the issue of border security.¹⁵

Change of Leadership

While Ilham Aliyev continued to preside over Azerbaijan, Medvedev became the new president of Russia. Despite this change in presidency, no serious alterations were experienced in either the policies of Azerbaijan or Russia.

Mutual visits continued at the highest level but conflicts also occurred on an occasional basis. For example, throughout late 2002 and early 2003, there were ten-

¹² Sinan Ođan-Hasan Kanbolat, "Kafkasya Terazisinde Yeni Dengeler: Putin'in Azerbaycan Ziyareti [New Balances in the Caucasian Scale: Putin's Visit to Azerbaijan]", *Stratejik Analiz*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (February 2001), p. 36.

¹³ Azerbaijani President Aliyev stressed this on a "state visit" to Moscow at Bene Airport. He pointed out that he had visited only the U.S. previously and that his visit to Russia was the second state visit of the Azerbaijani president. The visit was televised on AZ TV1, on 26 January 2002.

¹⁴ Speech made in Azerbaijan, on 29-30 January 2002.

¹⁵ Ibid

sions on four major issues, namely, energy agreements, espionage accusations, claims of Azerbaijani aid to Chechnya, and actions against the Azerbaijan citizens residing in Russia.¹⁶

A rise in anti-Western attitudes in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan was observed following the visit of Abdullah Gül, President of the Turkish Republic, to Yerevan to watch the national football match and meet Armenian President Serj Sarkisyan in September 2008.¹⁷ Azerbaijan demonstrated its displeasure through a few steps: When tension arose between Turkey and Azerbaijan in energy related negotiations, Azerbaijan signed a natural gas agreement with the Russian Federation. Azerbaijan also signed the the “Moscow Declaration”,¹⁸ on 2 November 2008, against the use of military power in resolving the Karabakh conflict. Finally, Azerbaijan participated in the Nabucco agreement ceremony in Ankara with only a minister.

All these developments triggered discussions on alterations of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy.¹⁹ Following the visits of İlham Aliyev to France, Russia and Iran, immediately after his presidency’s onset, it was speculated that Azerbaijan ignored the balance of power in the region. However, Nevrüz Mammadov, the head of International Relations Department of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan rejected speculations that Azerbaijan had changed its foreign policy under Russian influence. He underlined that Azerbaijan maintained “balance of power” as its foreign policy’s central theme, which was established by Heydar Aliyev.²⁰ One of the most critical responses related to

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¹⁶ Araz Aslanlı, “Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti ile Rusya Federasyonu Arasındaki Gerginlik Süremektedir [The tension between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation is continuing]”, *Avsam.org*, 18 Mayıs 2003, http://www.avsam.org/haftalikanaliz/13-17_01_2003/

¹⁷ Stephen Kinzer, “Turkish-Armenian Football Diplomacy”, *The Guardian*, 3 September 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/sep/03/turkey.armenia>; “Turkish president’s football visit turns political”, *France 24*, 6 September 2008, <http://www.france24.com/en/20080906-turkey-president-football-visit-armenia-sarkisian-gul>; Dorian Jones, “Football Match Provides Opening for Healing Turkish-Armenian Relations”, *Voice of America*, 19 December 2008, <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2008-12/2008-12-19-voa26.cfm?moddate=2008-12-19>.

¹⁸ “Russia’s Medvedev hosts Nagorno-Karabakh talks”, *Reuters*, 2 November 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL2389234>.

¹⁹ “Azerbaijani-Russian Relations Hostage To Pragmatism”, *RFE/RL*, 17 September 2008 http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijani-Russian_Relations_Hostage_To_Pragmatism/1200803.html; Jim Nichol, “Azerbaijan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests”, Washington DC, *Congressional Research Service*, 4 September 2009, www.crs.gov, Sedat Laçiner, “Russia Dupes Azerbaijan?”, 7 May 2009, <http://www.usak.org.tr/EN/makale.asp?id=962>.

²⁰ Babek Bekir, “Has Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy Changed?”, *RFE/RL*, 16 February 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/reports/azerbaijan-report/2004/02/0-160204.asp>.

such criticisms of recent period was released by Nevruz Mammadov in the 2010 publication of the Azerbaijan Focus magazine published by Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Azerbaijan Republic.

“Azerbaijan’s foreign policy is now 15 years old” emphasized Nevruz Mammadov, stressing the importance of balance of power, and adding to this remark, he commented on the relations with Russia and affirmed that non-participation in the Western block²¹ was the right decision. This article aimed to confirm that “European orientation is one of the priorities for Azerbaijan and this line is still maintained,” while stressing the importance of good relations with the EU and NATO.

Actually, Azerbaijan has participated in alliances and other formations which are considered as anti-Russian establishments (excluding NATO membership) and maintained this perspective, since then.

Conclusion

By and large, within the historical course of Azerbaijan, Russia has been perceived as an invader, whereas Russia considered Azerbaijan as both an opportunity and a threat. From the Russian perspective, as a bridge in the region, Azerbaijan provides an opportunity but also poses a threat to be utilized by other states.

In the recent period, especially after Heydar Aliyev’s reign, Russia started to promote initiatives in order to maximize its interests in Azerbaijan. Though criticism voiced that Azerbaijan is getting closer to Russia are not justified, it is true that Azerbaijan is taking Russia more seriously.

The objective reasons underlying this choice roughly coincide with Russia’s reaction against the ongoing regional and global changes. Though Azerbaijan has reacted strongly to Russia providing military support to Armenia in 1997 and the 2000s, and to the move of Russian soldiers from the base it emptied in Georgia to Armenia, and though these developments led Azerbaijan to turn to the West for support, the fact that Azerbaijan’s expectations from the West have not been fulfilled, has created a contrary move, of Azerbaijan – reacting to the West and moving towards Russia.²²

²¹ Nevruz Memmedov , “Azerbaycan Xarici Siyasetinin Esas İstiqametleri Haqqında [About the Main Directions of Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy]”, *Azerbaijan Focus*, No. 2, January-March 2010, p. 19.

²² “Vafa Guluzade: “Rusya ile diplomatik ilişkileri kesmemiz gerekiyor [We need to cut diplomatic relations with Russia]”, *Türküstan*, 13 December 2009.

The recent speculation²³ over Azerbaijan signing agreements with Russia to purchase S - 300s, and the Russian military base being used to protect not only Russians but also Armenians may change the course of relations between Azerbaijan and Russia.

As a small and newly independent nation, Azerbaijan has not been able to develop an independent foreign policy. Yet, Azerbaijan's politics are not totally dependent on external powers either. While the country tries to maintain the balance of power among great nations in the region, it also benefits from the fact that these countries are in competition with each other for influence in the region.

²³ "Рособоронэкспорт' опровергает поставки С-300 в Азербайджан [Rosoboronexport denies selling Azerbaijan S-300]", *Vedomosti*, 29 July 2010, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2010/07/29/1070429>; "Russia supplies arms to Azerbaijan", *Armenia News*, 29 July 2010, <http://news.am/eng/news/26328.html>