

WALKING A TIGHTROPE: AZERBAIJAN'S FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

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Existing theories on small state¹ foreign policy predict that domestic and international constraints limit to a considerable extent their foreign policy options, forcing them to concentrate on their physical security and to focus on regional issues. If applied in the context of Azerbaijan, which can be classified as a small state, the theory would expect Azerbaijan to pursue a rather modest foreign policy with a neutral position on many international and regional issues. The military aggression of neighboring Armenia, internal political instability, economic hardships and other challenges, which marred the early years of Azerbaijan's independence, further exacerbated international and domestic constraints on its foreign policy and would be expected to force the country to bandwagon with more powerful states or to seek membership in collective defence blocs at a price of surrendering at least part of its sovereignty to provide for its security.

The emerging pattern of the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, however, reveals considerable activism in its foreign policy behaviour.

Despite the domestic problems and external pressures, after the election of Heydar Aliyev as President in 1993, Azerbaijan was successful in implementing its strategic path aimed at consolidating its sovereignty and political independence, which are prerequisites for the sustainable development of the country and prosperity of its people.

Today, Azerbaijan is a rapidly developing young democracy with the fastest growing economy in the world and a stable political system. Azerbaijan instrumentally uses its economic and political assets with a view to the realization of its national interests and consolidating its global and regional position.

In order to understand the risks and challenges for Azerbaijan we must take a look at some influential factors.

Factors Affecting the Foreign Policy Choices of Azerbaijan

The global processes, the aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan, the strategic geographic location on the Black Sea-Caspian Sea isthmus, ample natural resources, as well as contemporary security threats and risks can be listed as the key factors shaping the foreign policy options and having an impact upon the strategic choices of Azerbaijan.

Global processes

Since Azerbaijan regained its independence in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the whole international relations system has undergone dramatic changes. First of all, the very structure of the international relations system has changed. Non-state actors such as international organizations, NGO's, trans-national corporations and other entities have started to play an increasingly active role in world politics and to influence decisions with global reach.

In addition, the process of globalization and the rapid development of information technologies have become factors that affect and most probably will continue to affect international relations for decades to come. They have changed the whole notion of internal affairs; it is now almost impossible to stay out of touch. The global economic and social integration processes have created opportunities, while persisting economic disparities between the developed and developing countries may generate tensions and conflicts.

Among the key issues of contemporary world affairs – global warming and food security - heavily influence foreign policy agendas. Small nations, affected by these two issues, can not effectively deal with them without concerted international efforts, which in its turn require an effective international system.

Returning to traditional international affairs, the past decades indicate that the system is still intrinsically competitive. States are pursuing divergent and at times conflicting foreign policy goals. The on-going theoretical debates about the structure of the post-Cold War world order lead to different interpretations of the change in international politics, which influence to a large extent the behavior of states. Polarized perceptions of the contemporary world manifested in juxtaposition of the "bipolarity" and "multi-polarity" concepts have revitalized competition for political and economic influence in different parts of the world. This competition, if sustained, will

¹ No satisfactory definition of a "small state" has been developed yet. However, almost all existing definitions mention the small size of the territory, population and the relative economic and political power as distinctive features of a "small state".

have negative repercussions on the global and regional security environment.

Aggression of Armenia

The ambiguous reaction of the international community to either secessionist or irredentist claims while addressing regional crises and conflicts also contributes to the growing perception of notorious double standards in international politics and the existence of a selective approach to the application of the generally accepted norms and principles of international law. These alarming trends will serve to generate mutual suspicion and mistrust, reinforcing perceptions of the centrality of military strength in international relations and revitalizing the old-style balance-of-power concept in world politics. There is no room for the alien international law policies of soft partition and other similar practices.

Developments of the last decade indicate that the termination of the East-West bloc confrontation after the end of the Cold War did not fulfill the promise of making the international system more stable. The aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan, including military occupation and notorious ethnic cleansing of the vast part of the country, indicates that the illegal use of force for the acquisition of lands have not been removed from the context of international relations. The military invasion by Armenia remains the major determinant of the country's security environment and is a key factor affecting the formulation of our foreign and security policy.

Strategic geographic location and natural resources

Azerbaijan's geographic location is strategic in many senses. It is in the middle between Europe, Russia, larger Central Asia and the greater Middle East. This offers not only many advantages and no less challenges, but also tremendous opportunities to benefit from the former and tackle the latter. The position of the country at the intersection of the major trade routes along the emerging East-West and North-South transport and energy corridors provide an important asset to turn the country into an energy and infrastructure hub. At the same time, transnational crime, trafficking of all kinds, terrorism and WMD proliferation are issues which pose serious dangers. To address such issues carefully is crucial for ensuring a central role for the country.

The rich natural resources of Azerbaijan not only open perspectives for the country's prosperity and national welfare, but also constitute a valuable asset strengthening national security, political independence and sovereignty of Azerbaijan. Exploration and transportation to world markets of the vast hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian Sea became a key element of what later became known as Azerbaijan's oil strategy, which was a cornerstone of Azerbaijan's foreign policy designed by the national leader Heydar Aliyev and consistently implemented by President Ilham Aliyev.

The complex nature of the contemporary threats and risks

The activities of such non-state actors on the international arena as international terrorist groups, militant separatist movements and ethnic and religious extremism, organized crime networks as well as illegal migration, drug and human trafficking, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the risk of sabotage on critical energy and transport infrastructure and the more recent phenomenon - cyber attacks - affect the global and regional security environment. These challenges, commonly referred to as the "new threats", require adjusting foreign policy concepts and tools with a view to eliminating these threats and risks and minimizing their negative impact on the overall security of Azerbaijan. There is a common understanding that 21st century international affairs will be conducted under the heavy impact of the 9/11 attacks.

On-going protracted regional conflicts in the immediate neighborhood and elsewhere have a spill-over potential, harm international and regional security and stability and slow down the economic and social development of the regional countries.

Responsibility

The history of Azerbaijan is by and large the history of the battle between different regional powers and a constant struggle for real independence. This "heritage" requires Azerbaijan to be an active and responsible member of the international community in order to contribute to the strengthening of international mechanisms, which would ensure sovereignty and the rights of small nations.

This responsibility also takes its roots from the very nature of Azerbaijan, which has always been a place of coexistence and tolerance between different faiths, ethnic groups and philosophies. It is rather an exception nowadays, especially in our region. Therefore, we feel responsible for the promotion of these values for the good of the international community.

Foreign Policy Guidelines and Priorities

During the 3rd conference of the heads of Azerbaijani diplomatic missions on July 7, 2008, the President of Azerbaijan H.E. Mr. Ilham Aliyev has said that "...Our foreign policy tactics should be proactive...."

Azerbaijan pursues an independent foreign policy based on the principle of sovereign equality of all states engaging in the international relations system regardless of their size, military power and economic might.

Transparency and predictability are the key features of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Azerbaijan has a keen interest in fostering peaceful coexistence and a good neighborhood in its region and beyond by developing friendly, mutually advantageous bilateral and multilateral relations with all countries.

Our country conducts its foreign policy based on the norms and principles of international law, which is a cornerstone of the existing international security system. Respecting the sovereignty, territorial integrity of all states and non-interference in their internal affairs are the guiding principles of Azerbaijan's interaction with other countries.

Restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity

The settlement of the conflict with Armenia stands out as the immediate security concern and remains a number one priority of our foreign policy.

Azerbaijan's conflict settlement position has remained unchanged from the first days of the talks. We see no other way but withdrawal of the Armenian armed forces from all the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, restoration of the sovereign rights of Azerbaijan in these territories, return of the forcibly displaced population to their places of origin, establishment of conditions for restoring the communications and socio-economic growth of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan in the framework of the overall economic development of the country and elaboration within the framework of a lawful and democratic process, which would ensure the peaceful coexistence of the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and its autonomy within the Republic of Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh's self-determination is possible only after the return of ethnically cleansed Azerbaijanis and only within Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Azerbaijan will never, under any circumstances, negotiate its territorial integrity. This point should be very clear to all parties.

The legal and political grounds for the settlement of the conflict are based upon the norms and principles of international law as reflected in the UN Charter, Helsinki Final Act, the United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884, resolution A/RES/62/243 of the UN General Assembly adopted in 2008, as well as the appropriate documents and decisions of the OSCE and the Council of Europe. All these documents affirm the sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is committed to the peaceful settlement in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. However, the success of the peace process depends on a similar commitment and constructive approach on the part of Armenia, as well as on the active contribution of all OSCE member states, especially those represented in the Minsk Group and its Co-Chairmen. Azerbaijan will continue working with its partners and global and regional international organizations with a view to boost the mediation efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group and mobilizing support for the just and lasting settlement of the conflict on the basis of norms and principles of international law.

Promotion of international peace and stability

Both traditional and new threats and challenges require active international efforts to solve and they can not be eliminated unilaterally.

Azerbaijan is actively engaged in international cooperation within multilateral fora and bilaterally on fighting international terrorism and WMD proliferation. As a party to all international legal documents against terrorism, our country constantly shares information and provides required reports and our peacekeepers stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other responsible members of international community in fighting terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Iraq. Participation in international peace operations also assists in bringing stability to the regions. Assistance and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan by Azerbaijani government and companies create opportunities for an otherwise desperate population.

Azerbaijan tackles non-proliferation both in the framework of the NPT (Non- Proliferation Treaty) and in cooperation with other countries through export control and border security arrangements. Azerbaijan stands for the strengthening of the international non-proliferation regime and will continue to cooperate with the world community and the relevant organizations for the imposition of adequate controls.

Fighting transnational crime and trafficking is on the agenda of our relations with regional countries and within other frameworks, including the UN, OSCE and other international organizations.

The link between stability in the South Caucasus and international security in general is obvious. The unresolved, protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus is of particular concern for regional countries and for the international community at large, because it undermines regional security and stability, hinders economic and political development of the regional countries and prevents genuine regional cooperation.

The Promotion of an effective multilateral international relations system

Proceeding from the firm belief that international peace can be best achieved through an effective multilateral international relations system, Azerbaijan acknowledges the indispensable role of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security in general and in our part of the world in particular. The norms and principles of international law enshrined in the United Nations Charter constitute a cornerstone of the existing international security system. Azerbaijan supports the reforms within the United Nations system aimed at increasing its operational capabilities, including strengthening the international law system and enforcing the adopted decisions with a view to responding more effectively to the challenges and threats of the 21st century.

Cooperation with the OSCE takes a prominent place in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan. The OSCE Helsinki Final Act and other documents set the norms and principles regulating the relations between the countries on the European continent and provide the basis for maintaining collective security. As with the United Nations, the OSCE needs to increase its efficacy through the delivery of tangible results based on its overarching documents and mechanisms.

Azerbaijan deems regional multilateral cooperation as very important, and as a founding father of GUAM we contribute to better and more stable regional affairs.

Azerbaijan's unique nature of belonging to both European and Muslim cultures presents opportunities to play an important role to overcome ignorance and intolerance. As chairman of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers last year, Azerbaijan spared no effort to further strengthen the Organization of Islamic Conference's (OIC) structures and functions and to create cooperation mechanisms with European organizations. Azerbaijan actively contributes to the dialogue among civilizations and was amongst the first countries to contribute to this cause. It is noteworthy to mention that the efforts of Azerbaijan are led by First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva. Moreover, three major international events on intercultural dialogue were organized in Baku with the involvement of major thinkers and practitioners.

The Development of good and mutually advantageous bilateral relations

Azerbaijan views regional cooperation as an indispensable factor for maintaining peace and stability in the region and has established mutually advantageous friendly relations with its immediate neighbors, except Armenia, for the abovementioned reasons. Further development of relations with neighboring countries will allow finding mutually acceptable solutions to the outstanding regional problems.

A trilateral strategic partnership and deepening cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey has developed into a factor of stability in the region. Relations with Russia have reached the level of strategic partnership and continue to expand. Azerbaijan conducts its dialogue with Iran in a progressive and forward looking manner and is developing its relations with the Central Asian states in an effort to bridge the Caspian Sea and the region with Europe.

The global nature of contemporary threats, as well as the globalization of the world market and the growing interdependence between states have created additional incentives for Azerbaijan to engage in cooperation with countries beyond its immediate neighborhood.

Azerbaijan cooperates with the USA, its strategic partner, in bilateral and multilateral formats aimed at combating global challenges and threats emanating from international terrorism, separatism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, trans-national organized crime, illegal drug, arms and human trafficking and other threats. Azerbaijan is a part of the US-led anti-terror coalition, fully supports the combat of the international community against terrorism and undertook a number of significant steps to that end. We are also working on expansion of our cooperation with the USA in the economic sphere, energy security and promotion of democratic development.

Geographically located at the crossroads of the West and East, Azerbaijan provides a natural outlet for the goods and services of the European countries to the rapidly growing Asian markets and vice versa. In this context, relations with the Middle Eastern and Asian countries occupy an important place in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan. These regions with emerging political power centers and rapidly growing economies open prospects of mutually beneficial cooperation in economic, telecommunications and other spheres.

Integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures

Azerbaijan shares values with the European and Euro-Atlantic community, and developing Trans-Atlantic multilateral security cooperation schemes contributes to the security and stability of the European continent and beyond. Azerbaijan was one of the first countries to join NATO's "Partnership for Peace" program in 1994 and fully utilizes available partnership mechanisms with NATO through the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and other instruments. Azerbaijan has successfully completed the first cycle of the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP)

and has just started to implement the second IPAP cycle, which will guide NATO-Azerbaijan relations for the years to come.

Azerbaijan's cooperation with the EU goes beyond the country's security needs and expands into economic, political and social spheres. The EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan adopted in 2006 within the "European Neighborhood Policy" strengthens political dialogue between Azerbaijan and the EU, develops cooperation in the sphere of political, economic and institutional reforms and creates the basis for raising cooperation to a qualitatively new level. Implementation of the EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan will help further reinforce the political and economic interdependence between the EU and Azerbaijan. We welcome the Polish-Swedish initiative on Eastern partnership and expect it to provide a serious boost to our cooperation with the EU.

Cooperation with the EU in the effective implementation of the domestic political, economic and institutional reforms, advancing the progress of Azerbaijani legislation, norms and standards to those of the European Union will also contribute to sustainable economic development by attracting foreign investments into non-oil sectors of the Azerbaijani economy and will enhance trade, investment and growth.

Sustainable development and development of the Eurasian energy and transport corridor

The development of the oil sector of Azerbaijan, including the construction of oil and gas pipelines and other relevant infrastructure, already contribute to the development of the economy of Azerbaijan and generate additional incentives for regional cooperation. This cooperation, resulting in successful implementation of the regional infrastructure projects such as Baku-Supsa, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan export oil pipelines and South Caucasus gas pipeline has increased the importance of the South Caucasus region, contributed to European and global energy security and laid the foundations for a new, vital and secure energy source for Europe. Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon resources coupled with the strategic geographic location transform the country into an important energy source and an integral part of the international energy supply system. Azerbaijan is increasingly viewed as a pivotal player in the region and an important actor beyond the region.

The location of the country creates opportunities to diversify Azerbaijan's access to world markets. The development of the international transportation and communication corridors through the South Caucasus region and the strengthening of the transit capabilities of Azerbaijan are key elements of the strategy aimed at the diversification of our economy and the growth of non-oil sectors. In this context, Azerbaijan is actively engaged in implementation of the "Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia" (TRACECA) project as well as the North-South transport corridor. Azerbaijan is also cooperating with Turkey and Georgia in promoting the geo-strategically important Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway link project, realization of which will be an important step in fostering and expanding regional cooperation and at the same time will create new regional opportunities with global impact.

The international environment, characterized by the competition for markets and foreign investments as well as the need to engage in existing international commercial networks, with a view to coordinating fiscal and monetary policies, requires pursuing an active foreign economic policy. Azerbaijan is interested in developing relations with regional and non-regional countries to ensure unimpeded access for domestic products to international markets. Azerbaijan's philosophy on economic development is simple – prosperity of neighbors is mutually beneficial.

Conclusion

As President Ilham Aliyev stated at a recent conference of the heads of diplomatic missions, our foreign policy has been successful in all aspects and our success will continue into the future.

The foreign policy strategy of Azerbaijan over the past seventeen years of independence proved to be successful because the country not only adapted to the constantly shifting international environment, but also managed to generate global influence so as to transform the country into the regional leader.

The prominent feature of Azerbaijan's foreign policy is a delicate balance between the multi-vectored proactive foreign policy strategy aimed at realization of its national interests, strengthening its independence and sovereignty, restoration of territorial integrity, as well as the flexibility allowing it to find a *modus vivendi* with regional and non-regional actors which pursue their own, sometimes divergent, policies.